

# Graduation Address Excerpts 2006

New York, May 4, 2006

Blu Greenberg, Author; President and Founder,  
Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

My own story begins in the fall of 1972, in the waiting room of my dentist in Riverdale. I picked up a copy of the *Ladies Home Journal* and found a small article about Reform Judaism's HUC-JIR ordaining a woman, Sally Priesand. I had not heard of her before nor of this action, and I was shocked, stunned. Reform Judaism had crossed the line, one drawn in the sands and earth of Sinai. Reform had disconnected itself from normative Judaism.

Five years later, just as Conservative Judaism was also taking that bold step, I reached a new place in my thinking: perhaps it might even be something of value for my own Orthodox community.

In these last 35 years, Orthodoxy has raised several hundred Jewish women whose talmudic and halakhic knowledge, if measured by objective examinations, equal or exceed the requirements for male Orthodox rabbis. Furthermore, Orthodox synagogues have appointed congregational interns who function as assistant rabbis do. We have *yoatzot halakha* [halakhic advisors], who study the law and render decisions either to the rabbis or to petitioners directly; *toanot*, women pleaders who function along with the judges in the *bet din*. Thirty-three years after Sally Priesand, two or three Orthodox women have been ordained, albeit slightly beyond the mainstream.

It has been a process and I and other women in the Orthodox community – and several representatives of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance are here today to celebrate this honor that is being bestowed upon us collectively – owe a great debt of gratitude, not only to secular feminism for implanting the ethical idea of gender equality but also to liberal Judaism,

to the men and women of those denominations whose witness opened our eyes to new possibilities.

But even as we disagree or explore alternate feminist pathways, we uphold all the elements of religious pluralism: respect for one another, learning from one another, not melding into one big indistinguishable blob but remaining clearly identifiable with very strong commitments to one's own value system. Religious pluralism does not mean that anything goes. Religious pluralism means never having to say you're sorry for what you stand for, but always having to listen to what the other believes. Religious pluralism is a far more complex matter than interdenominational Jewish feminism, for it deals with core identity issues such as patrilineal descent, conversion, and Jewish divorce, issues that carry more gravitas than who lights the candles.

But religious pluralism must be inculcated into the establishment, the pace setters and leaders, rabbis and theologians of each religious movement so they will not be content with solutions that work only for one's own group. We must come together with respect, with a heartfelt desire to learn from each other, and with a will to find communal solutions that close the divide.

An open conversation and mutual respect will take us to places that will not be easy, to our denominational synagogues. We will continue to have separate synagogues, and we should consider ourselves lucky to have different denominations, for these denominations have created a place for each of us, with norms and structures and community and synagogues that enable us to live as Jews in modern times.

We have lived through so much in the last sixty years. The impact is equal to centuries of Jewish history. We should want to hug each other, or if not that, at least acknowl-



edge how precious is the other. This should move each of us farther from the language of delegitimization. We must appreciate that your sincerity and passion about being Jewish is what drives your changes, and you must appreciate that our fidelity to tradition comes out of being deeply nurtured by it as well as of our understanding of it as the word of God carried forward for thousands of years.

My final words to you who are graduating today – you who continue to be and you who will newly be teachers and rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community – are these: Go into your work with as much love in your hearts as you can find for the whole Jewish people. Stand firm for what you believe but always listen and always keep your minds open. Don't become discouraged if your overtures are rebuffed or your actions are not properly understood. In bringing this love for *Klal Yisrael* to your work, you will not only heal the rift and narrow the divide, but you will also be serving continuously as a valuable model for others in the community, a model that will surely take root, here or there, now or the day after. ■

# Graduation Address Excerpts 2006

Los Angeles, May 15, 2006

**Dr. Peter von der Osten-Sacken,**  
Director, Institute for Church and  
Judaism, Humbolt University of Berlin

The eighties of the 19th century were a very hard time for Jewish communities in Russia and Germany. The hostility also spilled over into the German army and influenced the relationship between Christian and Jewish soldiers. In this situation one of the rabbis in the army proclaimed that motto which I chose as the title for my present address: "What we need," he said, "is to get to know, to understand, and to respect each other." This motto, which I first read twenty years ago, is a helpful guideline for the relationship between Christians and Jews, and of course for the adherents of other religions as well. It is also a helpful guideline for our personal conduct in daily relationships, and for our social and political behavior. It may be especially urgent today when we are aware of a growing alienation between cultures – in a time



when even the farthest neighbor on the other side of the world is only some hours away.

Let us now ponder the issue as we have to do as students and teachers, that is, let us question the whole thesis. Is this really a generally possible guideline – to get to know, to understand, to respect each

other? Are there no situations where this movement doesn't function?

Understanding is always in the process of accepting the other person. However, there are deeds which are to be *explained* but *not* to be *understood*. I think that especially Judaism, as a religion which insists on repentance and also enables repentance, has been aware of this aspect from the beginning, as is Christianity on the basis of our common Bible.

What I am thinking of has been circumscribed by the famous Jewish religious thinker Martin Buber. He said with regard to dialogue that both sides, Jews and Christians, are centered around a mystery, which in its deepest core remains a mystery to the other one. But what we can do is to acknowledge the other one in this mystery as it is, to share what we know about the common ground and our common hope, to try to be what we should be, and to try to do what we should do.

How the 19th-century rabbi whose "Golden Rule" I have brought with me from Berlin formulated his sentence was a sign of nobleness. The hostile reactions in his time, of course, came from the majority in the army, that is, from soldiers with a Christian background. However, he didn't say: "What we need is that *you* get to know *us*," but rather: "What we need is to get to know ... *each other*." It was a similar experience of nobleness which I myself had when, after an incomparably desolate period in my own country and church, I went to Israel in 1960 for the first time. ■

Cincinnati, May 21, 2006

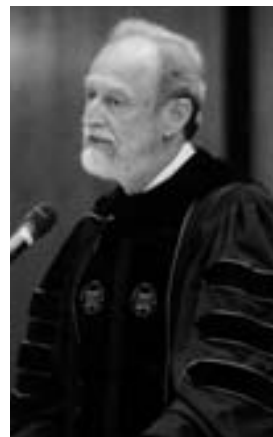
**Dr. John I. Kampen,** Academic Dean,  
Methodist Theological School

I stand today in a place for which I developed a deep affection and before respected teachers whom I to this day hold in such high esteem.

Learning to study *Talmud*, *Midrash* and *Mishnah-Tosefta* with rabbinical students was one of the distinguishing characteristics of my graduate education. Studying with these students was one of the ways in which HUC-JIR became my home, one of the means whereby I became part of a Jewish diaspora, which has led me to seek out connections with the local synagogue or temple in every community in which I lived or worked since I left "home."

Some of us in this graduate school came from non-Jewish backgrounds and had the wonderful privilege of being participants in the Jewish community associated with

HUC-JIR through our enrollment here, a significant encounter with another faith tradition and communal experience, which changed our lives. In my studies here I gained a deep understanding of a set of sacred texts, which were not my own. I also gained a deeper understanding of the community that valued those texts. No mere antiquarianism, but a deep encounter with a community and its texts. The development of these types of skills and perspectives is fundamental preparation for life in a global society.



What I learned on this campus is the central significance of text. This perspective is remarkably important as a tool for the education of persons around the globe. Texts can provide a common identity while permitting multiple interpretations, a valuable tool for educating persons of various ideologies and cultures. When students in my

present seminary classes approach me with questions concerning the validity of a certain reading of a biblical text, my first response is one I learned on this campus: Go read the text again and see if it still holds up. Such a textual tradition does not permit me to assume that I have the sole authoritative interpretation of a given text. A revolutionary concept for many people around the world. ■

# Ordination Address Excerpts 2006

New York, May 7, 2006

**Clementina Cantoni**, Aid Worker, CARE International and recipient of the 2006 Roger E. Joseph Prize

Almost a year ago exactly, my life changed dramatically, setting in motion a series of events that have somehow led me here today. After three years of living in Afghanistan as an ordinary aid worker, I suddenly became famous, when I was held hostage for twenty-four days.

When my friend Roger Karshan told me last year that he'd nominated me for an award established in memory of his grandfather, I was extremely surprised and deeply touched.

I realized that perhaps there are two categories of people to whom this award would apply – firstly, extraordinary people who achieve extraordinary things; secondly, ordinary people to whom extraordinary things happen. I clearly belong to the latter and in accepting this award I would like to highlight the extraordinary things that happened as a result of my kidnapping.

Firstly, the world finally took notice of some of the most marginalized and disenfranchised women in Afghanistan when hundreds of widows took to the streets to demand my release. Many live in precarious housing sit-

uations and some are forced to beg simply to survive.

People are often curious as to what motivates aid workers to choose a job that takes us to some of the world's most dangerous regions and sometimes puts our lives at risk. The fundamental reason for me is that I don't like the world I've inherited and I want to try and understand the causes and perhaps, in some small way, change the injustice and inequality I see around me.

I suppose the most important reason why I enjoy the work I do is that it teaches me the value of humility in a very direct way. I remember once, how I had returned from accompanying a widow to a job interview which had gone badly, because she had made up one hundred excuses as to why she couldn't do the job. Yet these are the same women who a few months later bravely screamed their indignation and rallied in my support in front of the world's press.

My greatest hope is that one day these women will demand their rights with the same dignity and strength. ■

Cincinnati, May 20, 2006

**Rabbi Samuel E. Karff**, Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Beth Israel, Houston, Texas

One of the truths I learned early in my rabbinic life is that you and I are cast as defenders of the faith. What faith are we called to defend? In this week's Torah portion, God says to the Israelites: "*Im b'chukotai tayeichu...* If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments, I will grant you rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit... But if you do not obey me and do not observe all these commandments... you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you." The message is clear: There is an order of life that cannot be violated with impunity.

In truth, even for those of us who stake our lives on the belief in God as Creator, as ultimate Source of the way we are intended to live, and as a redeeming Presence in our lives and in history – even we must declare that there is a believer and unbeliever in each of us, because *Adonai* is an invisible, elusive Presence who cannot be summoned at will.

But there is a great difference between experiencing moments of doubt within a life committed to faith and making disbelief a way of life. You have chosen to affirm transcendent meaning against the threat of meaninglessness.

Sometimes we believe because of what we experience in ordinary life and sometimes we believe in spite of what we experience. Faith is the vision and perception of a spiritual reality at the core of life. The subtext of those biblical statements is two-fold: We are not alone. We are children of *Adonai*, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Colleagues, our people may come to you in times of trouble, because they know you have committed your life to that deeper spiritual perspective on the world. They need your help to recover the sense that "nevertheless there is meaning."



**Clementina Cantoni at podium with (from left) Roger Karshan, and Jonathan and Sarah Leopold, grandchildren of Roger E. Joseph.**

# Ordination Address Excerpts 2006

Los Angeles. Sunday, May 14, 2006

Rabbi Lewis M. Barth, Dean; Professor of Midrash and Related Literature,  
HUC-JIR, Los Angeles



One of your most precious experiences as a rabbi will be the times when you hear variations of the following: “I couldn’t have gotten through this without your presence and counsel,” or “You will never know how much your words meant at that time in my life.” Or, “The meaning you gave that text made Judaism speak to my life as it never did before.” Our sages had a term for such moments. They said, *l’chach notzarta* – for such a moment as this were you created. Or, by extension, for such a moment as this were you ordained. Dear colleagues, yours will be the privilege to help your people remember that contract – that covenant – which, at the deepest level of our being, we know is the standard by which we must judge the meaning of our lives. ■

For you, the ordines, this day is unique and special. Your joy is ours – as well as the conviction that what we have done together, and what you will accomplish, will guarantee the future of liberal Jewish religious life in our community, throughout the United States, and wherever Jews live and you serve.



we can come to know each other; so that I can hear you and you can hear me.”

Our deep faith is reflected in our commitment to build people, not empires; community, not ‘stars,’ that caring, and not greed represent the true manifestation of *רוחי*, God’s spirit on earth.

Rabbis may resonate to this rabbinic statement: “if there is no flock, there is no shepherd, and if there is no shepherd, there is no universe.” Yet we know that living people, human beings, Reform Jews are not silent sheep, they are often thoughtful, creative, compassionate people who have the capacity to listen – if they are convinced that we have “the capacity to listen” to them as well, not just talk at them and expect their attention.

We all acknowledge that it is so difficult to change people’s minds, our own included. If, however, we frame our task as that of reminding people of the bonds that tie us together, the values we share, the story of changing beliefs that is our common history – in a word, *Torah* – it becomes a very different matter.

Let us attempt to see people in their uniqueness, understand their world, visit them in home and office – in order that when we reach out, when we extend a genuine invitation, we say and mean “so that

Listen to your people and they will listen to you, and to this congregation of family and friends, understand how study has transformed those whom you love into *klei kodesh*, ‘vessels of holiness;’ and to all of us present let us continue to deepen our partnership with the sacred to build a better world. ■

*Rabbi Ellenson joined Carole L. Weidman, Esq. and Ruth O. Freedlander, trustees of the Dr. Bernard Heller Foundation, to present the 2006 Dr. Bernard Heller Prize, posthumously, to Dr. Paul M. Steinberg, z”l, Vice President and Dean at HUC-JIR for over fifty years, at Graduation, New York. From Left: Rabbi Ellenson, Carole L. Weidman, Esq., Trudy Steinberg, Ruth O. Freedlander, and Alan, Amy, Natalie, and Joshua Steinberg.*





*Stuart Matlins, Publisher and Founder of Jewish Lights Publishing, recipient of the 2006 American Jewish Distinguished Service Award at Graduation, New York. His remarks are at [www.huc.edu/redirect/StuartMatlins](http://www.huc.edu/redirect/StuartMatlins)*

*Russell P. Silverman, Past Chair, Board of Trustees, Union for Reform Judaism, recipient of the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters at Graduation, New York.*



*Grace Paley, American Short Story Writer, Poet, and Political Activist, recipient of the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters at Graduation, Cincinnati.*



*The 2006 Sherut L'Am Award was presented to Paul Jeser, West Coast Regional Director, American Committee for Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem, at Graduation, Los Angeles.*



*Dr. Leo Hersbkowitz, Professor of History, Queens College, City University of New York, recipient of the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters at Graduation, Cincinnati.*



*Graduate Medallions were presented by Rabbi David Ellenson to distinguished alumni (from left) Dr. Jack Lewis, Professor Emeritus of Bible, Graduate School of Religion, Harding University, Memphis, TN; Dr. G. Hans Liebenow, Professor*

*Emeritus, The Athenaeum of Ohio, Mt. St. Mary's Seminary of the West, Cincinnati, OH; and Dr. Clyde Woods, Professor of Bible, Freed-Hardeman University, Henderson, TN, at Graduation, Cincinnati.*

## *Alumni Honorary Degree Recipients 2006*

*HUC-JIR honored distinguished alumni for their 25 years of dedicated leadership and devoted service to the Jewish people (continued on back cover)*

**New York, May 4, 2006**



*Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree recipients*



*Honorary Doctor of Music degree recipients*

**Los Angeles, May 15, 2006**



*Honorary Doctor of Divinity, Jewish Communal Service and Jewish Religious Education degree recipients*

**Cincinnati, May 21, 2006**



*Honorary Doctor of Divinity and Doctor of Music degree recipients*

# Graduation/Ordination/Investiture 2006



*The Rabbinical Class of 2006, at Central Synagogue, New York*



*The Rabbinical Class of 2006, at Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Los Angeles*



*The Rabbinical Class of 2006, at Plum Street Temple, Cincinnati*



*The New York School of Education Class of 2006, New York*



*The School of Sacred Music Class of 2006, New York*



*The Rhea Hirsch School of Education Class of 2006, Los Angeles*



*The School of Jewish Communal Service Class of 2006, Los Angeles*



*The School of Graduate Studies, Doctor of Philosophy Class of 2006, Cincinnati*



*The Doctor of Ministry Class of 2006, New York*