I wish to thank the President, the Deans, and all others involved in giving me the signal honor of delivering the Founders’ Address for a second time. I appreciate the honor, that since I am retiring at the end of this Academic Year, it gives me a way of saying farewell. I have been teaching at the College-Institute full time since October 1969 and part-time, in one capacity or another, for five or six years before that. I have enjoyed every minute. Let this Founders’ Day address be my pay-back for my pleasure.

The Founders, Isaac Mayer Wise and Stephen Samuel Wise, were wise not only by name but by achievement, not only because they founded the College and the Institute, now joyfully joined, but because they, in different ways, creatively confronted the perennial problem of Jewish life and forged different answers to it.

That problem is the problem of definition, Since it is an old problem, it needs an old language to express it. That language is known as the ‘mother language’ mama lashon, i.e. Yiddish.

And so I begin: VOS HAYST DOS YIDDISHKEIT oder VOS MAINT DOS YIDDISHKEIT? Arget sich nit kinderlech; howt nit mayreh! Dear friends, don’t get upset, don’t be frightened, my Yiddish is not good enough to deliver a Founders’ Day Address. Let me translate what I began: “What is Jewishness?” What does Jewishness mean? Yiddishkeit covers more than “Judaism” or “Jews” or “Jewish People”; it encompasses them all, but does not quite define them all. We have all played the game: what does it mean to be a Jew? Are we members of a religion? Are we members of a people? Is the religion there because of the people? Are the people there because of the religion? I will give you a clear answer: it depends! It depends on who is asking and who is answering. It depends on when the question is asked and where it is asked. It depends
on what is meant by ‘religion’ and what is meant by ‘people’! No matter how you put it, the question(s) is (are) problematic.

I will start with two exemples: if being Jewish means being part of a religion, how come only 1/3 of the Jewish population in America is affiliated with congregations? Are we a religious community of secularists, a congregation of agnostics? If being a Jew means being part of a people, now that there is a State of Israel, how come everybody, here, to say nothing of elsewhere, has not joined other members of the Jewish People and made aliyah? So why haven’t we? For the same reason that Bnai Reuven the Bnai Gad and the half tribe of Manessah did not settle in the Land; it is easier to make a living outside the Land (Nu.32). We may pray in the words of the Mishkan Tefillah, that God lead us upright to our land, but we are not helping der Aybersheeh by getting a ticket on El Al!

So takeh who are we? What are we? Where are we, in every sense of the term? These questions used to be easier to answer.

Shabbas ba-nacht, motzaay Shabbat is Purim,. We shall hear in the reading of Megillah Haman’s statement that “…there is a people, scattered among all the peoples of your kingdoms, whose laws are different from all the peoples of your kingdoms and laws of the king, they don’t keep.” Except for the last few words, what Haman said was correct. The Jews were different by law, the internal law of the Jewish community and the external law of the societies in which the Jews found themselves. Those laws made the Jews feel different, made them feel separate, made feel part of an am, a people, even though where they lived, according to the Megillah was not in the Land of Israel. It was Law, not geography, gave Jews a specific identity.
What Haman said about law to denigrate Jews would be echoed in praise of Jews by Saadia Gaon, who said, “Our nation of the Children of Israel is a nation only by virtue of its laws.”

We often forget that Jewish law was law with sanctions, not merely in the Life to Come, but here on earth: there were fines, there was whipping, there was the death penalty, and there was excommunication. Law, attributed to God, meant you did what was commanded or else! That you meant you did it! Law meant that specific behaviors could be maintained and with that the specificity of the group could be maintained. Thus law, religious law, and people were linked.

That was the case till modern times; modern times began with the French Revolution, which in theory at least, made Jews of the enfants de la Patrie. You remember the Napoleonic Sanhedrin of 1806-1807, that gathering of Jewish notables who were asked whether they would other Frenchmen as their brothers and whether they would obey French law. Obeying French law would mean that Jewish law, losing its sanctions would disappear as law, since no society could have two disparate sanction systems. Jewish practice without sanctions would become what a Jew chose to do.

When the Notables all agreed to accept French law, the commissioner sent by Napoleon to observe the gathering commented, “the Jews have ceased to be a people and are now “merely a religion.” Merely a religion” meant that Jews would be like other Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, differing only what they did on week ends and a few days during the year. “Merely a religion” meant that Jews were committed Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, but voluntary Jews.
“Merely a religion” would obtain in Western Europe wherever Jews gained the status of citizen in their respective nations. Reform Judaism is also a resultant of “merely a religion” because the new situation meant that Jews would have to be persuaded to maintain Judaism since they could no longer be compelled. Changes in Judaism would be required to deal with the new situation of Jew as citizen.

As we all know, Napoleon got to Moscow, but did not stay. There was no Napoleonic Sanhedrin for the Jews of Eastern Europe. They never became “merely a religion”, because they like other groups within the Czarist Empire, they remained a people. Whether they had separate laws did not matter, because the Czar had separate laws for them. So law, of one kind or another and language, Yiddish maintained the sense of being a people.

The Jews who came to America from German speaking lands after the failure of the 1830 and 1848 revolutions brought the model of “merely a religion.” It was for these Jews that Isaac Mayer Wise was to form the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College. Note the word “Congregation”; the temple, the religious community, would be the model of organization. The Jews who joined these congregations would form the nucleus of Reform Judaism in America. They saw themselves as American by nationality and Jewish [Hebrew or Israelite was a more acceptable term in the 19th century.]

The Jews who came to America from 1895-1923 came from Eastern Europe and saw themselves as members of a people. Here, they would scramble to learn English, but in the meanwhile, most if not all, spoke Yiddish. There were Yiddish newspapers across the entire spectrum of Jewish life from Orthodox to anarchist, atheist. All manner of
literature was translated into Yiddish. Language on the one hand and the poverty of new
comer reinforced the sense of peoplehood.

So there were two communities of Jews: the first group that came earlier, who
saw Judaism as "merely a religion" which they could modify; it was to them that Isaac
Mayer Wise, and those who would follow him, spoke and another community of Jews
who came later who had not "ceased to be a people" to whom Stephen S. Wise spoke.
For them, he founded the American Jewish Congress, fought for fair housing and labor
laws and brought them to Zionism.

The two communities have been in America for two, three, and more generations.
They have been joined in many ways; the first took on peoplehood as in the Columbus
Platform; the second took on religion and were the population of the Conservative
Movement which had been designed for them. Yet the question stands, which definition
is working, however standing alone, i.e., Jews as members of a religion, or Jews as
members of a people, or somehow mixed together is working?

Tzores! A group of Reform Rabbis has summarized our situation by a list of
Changes that has impacted the Jewish community: 1) Jews do not feel an obligation to be
Jewish as previous generations once did; 2) there is no one way to be Jewish today; 3)
denominational differences are blurring 4) Intermarriage has dramatically impacted
Jewish life 5) 20 and 30 year olds are changing the rules; they associate with everybody
6) National organizations can no longer depend on communal support for Israel.

It would seem that neither definition of Jewishness by religion or by a sense of
peoplehood is working.
A phrase in Yiddish, paradoxical as it may seem, explains it all: *Az es ist gut far Yidden, es ist shlecht fae Yidden und az es ist shlecht far yiddene, es ist gut far Yidden.*

The literal translation is: When it is good for Jews, it is bad for Jews; and when it is bad for Jews, it is good for Jews."

Know what the trouble is? It has been good for Jews! We’ve made it in America and the Jews in Israel have made it in Israel. We are not poor anymore. We can live where we want. We can go to any school or any *shul* we want. We can associate with anyone we want. We can marry anyone we want! We can criticize anyone we want, even the State of Israel. We fit in, more and more in the socio-economic class we have joined. The rabbis who made up the Six-Pointed List were worried whether present day Jews and their children would remain Jews. It will be bad for Jews, if in good times, our affluence will end our *Yiddishkeit*, however defined.

So should we hope for bad times? *Betten Gott far a pogrom* – pray for anti-Semitism? Make *aliyah* tomorrow? If up today, we have not gone, we are not going tomorrow. *Israel, baruch haShem* is there, but we are settled here. Like Jews in Canada, South America, Europe, including Germany and the FSU, we have decided to remain where we live. That congregations are being formed throughout the world and new seminary was established in Germany suggests that Jews wish to remain Jews, but as Jews by religion and as citizens of their particular nation-states.

Let us start with a new definition of what we are: Jews by religion, who live in one place and who still feel that they are linked to Jews who live in other places, however they define themselves, because of certain ideas they hold in common. Religions have to have specific ideas which characterize them. I will give you three: 1) The Messiah has
not come; the world is not redeemed, no matter what others think. [Geb a kook tzum velt]

2) Because we Jews know what it is to live in an unredeemed world, we got the idea that our business, unseerer fach, our profession, as some ‘secular Jews would have it, zu machen a bessere velt, to improve the world as. tikkun olam, to transform ethics into politics, concern with the here and now. It means getting involved, as did Stephen Wise, with matters of social justice, unions, and wage disputes, whether Glen Beck agrees or not. 3) It means believing and acting on that belief that some kind of universal ethic touches us all. Heschel pointed out that the hardest commandment to observe was v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha. I would point out the words are followed by ani Adonai; it gains its motivation by belief in the God who created all human beings. Through that belief, we realize that reacha is k'mocha ‘like you.’ That applies to us, Jews, non-Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, atheists and believers.

Ideas are held by behaviors. If we wish a connection with our past and with other Jews, we need have some similar behaviors. The kind of Jews we are can use the treasure house of Jewish observances to find behaviors to reinforce that link. Because all of us are part of “merely a religion”, we are free to choose which observances speak to us individually.

We can learn from other Jews by religion in this country. We could learn from our Orthodox brethren, how to make the congregation into a community: a lot of it has to do with eating! Communal meals would help!

We could learn from Chabad, how to do financing!

Let have innovative services that grab people with music that speaks to them.
Let's make our synagogues truly shuls, schools, for every age of member and non-member. Let's intensify the education that we provide children. I have told students the importance of Rabbis teaching Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. Let's have classes for adults, at every level and every kind.

However we define ourselves, as the song has it, *vos meer zeynen, zeynen meer ober Yidden, seynen meer*, whether members of a religion or members of a people, what will count is what we do. If we could make it in bad times, we will be able to make it in good times. *Es ist shver tzu sein a Yid*, “It is difficult to be a Jew”. It is not impossible.