

Ordination Eve Sermon
Rockdale Temple
פרשת נשא

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Cincinnati

"They Shall Link My Name with the People of Israel and I Shall Bless Them"

So, who was the greatest financier in Jewish history--and an honest one at that? The answer: Obviously it was the Biblical Noah. After all, has anyone since been able to float so much stock in the face of imminent liquidation? This Shabbat, our stock, our senior students, emerge from our protective Cincinnati ark and seek dry land on which to establish their careers as rabbis. They have flourished at our College and--in accordance with the Talmudic saying: גדיים ששהנחת נעשו תישים -- they who began their studies here as timid learners of Judaism will emerge from our midst tomorrow morning to join its teachers.

I am honored, my students and now my fellow teachers, that you have chosen to listen to me one more time before you set your feet down upon the earth outside our ark, to hear what I can say to you from within it that might guide you as you step out on hard and sometimes barren soil. So let me, this erev shabbat, speak especially to you and tell you what I would wish for your rabbinates, for your teaching to our people.

As you have learned, in Judaism there is no trinity, but there is a triad, each element of which is essential for the whole: God, Torah, and the people of

Israel. You cannot be a rabbi without a profound dedication to all three. But each confronts us with problems and with doubts. For a serious Reform Jew, certainly for a Reform rabbi, each requires a struggle that sometimes pits tradition against conscience, attachment to the past against vision for the future.

We live at a time when both fundamentalism and atheism are gaining adherents. Contrary to expectations held as long as two centuries ago, secularization has left much of our world untouched. In the Muslim East religious fanaticism flourishes with a fervor that rivals that of the medieval Almohads. Cruel punishments are exacted in accordance with the Quran and sharia law. In fundamentalist Christian circles here in the United States creationism trumps science. The Creation Museum, only a few miles away from here in neighboring Kentucky, has drawn more than half a million fervent believers in the less than two years that it has been open. In recent decades much of Jewish Orthodoxy in America has turned in the same direction: fleeing from intellectual challenge, retreating into an enclave of the faithful, and spurning cooperation with the other religious streams of Judaism. For the Fundamentalists of all religions the will of God can be read clearly and unambiguously from the sacred texts. One need only obey the written word.

Yet at the same time we are witnessing a new surge of atheism. In

Western Europe belief in God is rare. Churches are mostly empty; religion is passé. In the United States, as political prejudice against atheists finally--and fortunately--diminishes, more and more Americans declare themselves "without religion." For them God is either an illusion, as Freud had famously claimed, or, at the very least, irrelevant to their lives.

How will you as Reform rabbis speak of a God whose will for our time is not fully contained in the writings of our ancestors and yet whose presence matters ultimately in our lives? Surely, you will not all speak in the same voice. Some of you will attempt to convey to congregants your profound awareness of a personal God who has entered into a covenant with Israel, who may be found in our sorrow and our joy. Others may encounter God in our sense of right and wrong or in the very fact that there is creation and not nothingness--some in nature's beauty and others in human love; some in Bible and Talmud, others in elevated texts of our own time; some in theological discipline and others in deeds of justice or kindness. Your task is not to preach any one of these possibilities to the exclusion of others but to help those who will come to you reach their own understanding of the reality of God's presence in their lives.

There is naïve faith in God and there is chastened faith. The former is the childlike belief that sees only love and goodness in the world. But we Jews have experienced too much of evil to possess such untempered certainty. As Jews

we are forced to reach across the abyss of the Holocaust--and of all human tragedy, to ask every day whether the covenant has not been forever broken. But perhaps, in full awareness of evil, we can still say with Rabbi Leo Baeck: "Nevertheless!" Nevertheless, despite it all, despite the never to be forgotten failures of God's creatures, the imperative to goodness remains as our link to a God whose nature is shrouded in mystery but whose reality is present in our own ability to distinguish good from evil.

As rabbis, your chief instrument in teaching Jews to make that distinction between good and evil is Torah--taken in the broadest sense as the religious tradition of our people. As the Midrash tells us in Bereshit Rabba לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף את הבריות "The mitzvot were given to us for no other reason than to purify humanity." The study of Torah is intellectual, but it is also a moral experience. Many of the commandments deal with ritual, but there are also imperatives to pursue justice, mercy, and peace. As Reform rabbis you will not read and teach Torah in the manner of fundamentalists. You will question, and here and there you will also reject, for Torah is a human document, an imperfect reflection of the Divine penetrating the consciousness of our ancestors: the inspiration of God, but the writing of Israelites. You will apply to our texts all of the tools of modern research; you will weigh various possibilities. But you will not let it go at that, because for you too, as a Reform

Jew, Torah is sacred literature. Through the text you will seek transcendence of the mundane and a deeper religious and moral meaningfulness to life.

Way back at the beginning of the Reform movement, the early Reformers loved to cite a verse from the book of Psalms (119:126): עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך "It is time to act for Adonay, for they have violated Your teaching." When they cited this verse, the Reformers thought, of course, of their opponents, the rigid traditionalist rabbis who had allowed Jews to wander away from Judaism, but were now reacting with fury because the Reformers dared to suggest that a modernized form of Judaism might appeal to those who were alienated from Torah. Their rigidity was a violation of the teaching. The verse remains relevant even today. For us, as Reform Jews, an interpretation of Torah that does not allow for a progressive revelation is a severe misunderstanding of its spirit. Our sacred history is not static. We recognize that the image of God possessed by Abraham and Sarah was not quite the same as that of Isaac and Rebecca, or of Moses, of Maimonides or of Abraham Geiger and Lily Montagu. God is indeed one, but our ongoing tradition and teaching reach for ever more exalted understandings of God's will. For us Torah and historical experience are in perpetual interaction.

But if for us Torah is essentially a moral document then its violation

is not simply a failure to recognize its historicity. More severely, הפרו תורתך (they have violated Your teaching) today points us to the rejection of Torah's moral foundations across the world. As teachers of Torah, you will not only pass on our tradition, you will need to apply it. I urge you: Do not limit your sermons to pleasant but innocuous *derashot* on the weekly portion of the Torah. Tackle issues. Take unpopular positions. Reform Judaism has long and proudly called itself prophetic Judaism. You will not be true to your calling unless, as a teacher of Torah, you speak out on domestic matters: on corruption and corporate greed, on health care and economic equality. The Torah was the constitution of ancient Israel, the basis for its legal structure; it expresses values that are no less relevant to our political and social lives in America today. And the God of Torah is also the God of humankind. You cannot take your place in the generations of Jewish teachers without addressing the issues that dim the image of God in the entire world. Poverty, massacre, despotism, and cruelty remain unbearably abundant. Let your voice be among those that speak out with outrage and with courage; let your legs walk with those who act on what they preach.

Finally, there is Israel: the people, the land, and the state. The universal goals to which you aspire spring from rootedness in your particularity. As

rabbis you are not alone protagonists for a more humane society and peaceful world. You are also shepherds of your people--both in their totality and in every individual glance that meets your own. To be sure, this people has been and often still is a stiff-necked people, downright stubborn and hard to convince. Still, both individually and together, Jews are capable of greatness. In the Talmud Megilah 16a we read: -- אומה זו משולה לעפר ומשולה לכוכבים, כשהן יורדין -- עולין עד לכוכבים -- עולין עד לכוכבים "This people is comparable to dust and it is comparable to stars. When they plummet, they descend to the dust; when they rise, they ascend to the stars." Your task is to pick them up when they fall and to help them rise up to that of which they are capable. Like all human beings, Jews are precious, but as Jews they also bear a tradition whose obligations you must seek to convey.

We live in an age when the individual search for meaning and purpose is paramount, especially among the younger generation of Jews. A rabbi can and should be a guide on that journey. But you are more than counselors and advisers. You are also representatives of the people of Israel, and for many of your congregants you are also a link between them and Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, between them and Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel. Just as we do not accept every word of Torah as God's will for all

generations, so we are free to envisage the state and society in which you all spent the first year of studies as a work still in process. Surely the State of Israel is not perfect, but it is the responsibility and the hope of us all, of the entire people of Israel.

In closing, I would say to you on this eve of your ordination that tomorrow not only will you yourselves be links in the שלשלת הקבלה, in the chain of tradition, but, as rabbis, it will be your task to link God, Torah, and Israel in your rabbinates. As we read in the Torah portion for this Shabbat of your ordination: "They shall link My name with the people of Israel and I shall bless them." If you will act sincerely in accordance with this verse, if you will link God, Torah, and Israel, then you shall yourselves become links in our chain of Jewish tradition, then you and your rabbinates will indeed be blessed.

כן יהי רצון

May it be so