

Ordination Address

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"Would That All The Lord's People Were Prophets!"

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[Ordination Sermon, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, June 5, 2004]

It is a great honor for me to be able to address you this morning. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first class that I taught in American Jewish history right here at the Hebrew Union College. It also marks the 18th anniversary – *Chai* – of my wife Ruth's ordination in this very sanctuary. It is a great joy, for both of us, to be able to be back here on such an auspicious occasion.

The Torah portion this week, from the Book of Numbers, could scarcely be more appropriate for future rabbis in Israel. We see our people's greatest rabbi ever – Moses, known in Jewish tradition as *Moshe Rabbenu* (Moses, our rabbi) – grappling with problems that rabbis continue to face even to this day: for example, we read of a difficult religious question that Moses was unable to answer on his own; he had to appeal to a Higher Authority. Then there was a key staff member, Jethro, who unexpectedly sought to resign; Moses had to persuade him to stay on. And finally, Moses confronted congregants who complained bitterly about him and gossiped about his wife behind his back. The advice that Moses received in dealing with these problems is good advice for rabbis even today: seek help. Find wise elders to share the burden of the community with you. Do not try to bear the burden alone.

This morning, I want to focus on a fascinating coda to this last story of how God appointed 70 elders to assist Moses. We are taught in our biblical portion that in addition to those elders whom God specifically invested with the Divine spirit, God's spirit also came to rest upon two other men, Eldad and Medad, who had not, so to speak, been properly ordained. Joshua was appalled: "my Lord, Moses, restrain them," he cried. Moses, however refused. "*Mi yiten kol am adonai nevi'im*" "Would," he declared, "that all the Lord's people were prophets." (Num 11:28-29)

This is a remarkable, even a revolutionary notion. Instead of prophecy being limited to a spiritual elite, Moses is opening it up to anyone upon whom God's spirit falls. We can hear, in Moses' declaration, the anticipation of a modern-day democratic ideal. As the Prophet Joel explains, in a futuristic vision: "I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; Your sons and daughters shall prophesy [prophecy is not restricted only to men] . . . I will even pour out My spirit upon male and female slaves." (Joel 3:1-2)

Democratic ideals such as these, though certainly found in our tradition, took a very long time to become rooted in Judaism. Living as Jews did for most of their history among peoples who deeply believed in hierarchies and social stratifications, it comes as no surprise that Jews too developed hierarchies of various sorts – some based on ancestry (are you a priest? are you a Levite? are you a descendant of King David?), some based on wealth (are you rich? are you poor?) and some based on learning.

These traditional hierarchies accompanied Jews through the diaspora, and even followed them here to the New World. The hierarchies did not magically disappear in 1654 when the first Jews came to America. But it is fascinating to see how, from the American Revolution onward, many traditional hierarchies were called into question. This being the 350th anniversary of American Jewish life, it is appropriate to explore this theme a little more deeply, as an example of how America's egalitarian ideals came to influence our American Jewish religious life.

In Philadelphia, for example, a remarkable marriage document, a copy of which is found here in the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, reveals that three heroes of the American Revolution, including the famous Revolutionary-era financier Haym Salomon, knowingly affixed their signatures to the marriage certificate uniting a female convert to Judaism with a priest, Jacob I. Cohen. Such a marriage ran contrary to Jewish law, which limits the marital choices of priests – according to Jewish law, priests are forbidden to marry converts or divorcees -- and Philadelphia's Sephardic congregation, as a result, righteously sought to block the marriage. But these three Revolutionary heroes had no patience with such hierarchic distinctions, and they defiantly performed the marriage on their own.

Later, in the 19th century, the Reform movement went further in the effort to undermine hierarchies in Judaism. The 1869 Philadelphia Conference of Reform Rabbis declared that [quote] “every distinction between Aaronides [meaning priests] and non-Aaronides, as far as religious rites and duties are concerned is . . . entirely inadmissible, in worship as in life.” Just as Moses had wished all the Lord's people to be prophets, Reform Jews, influenced by the Bible's Holiness Code, insisted that all Jews could be Priests – *mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh* (a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.) Traditional distinctions between Priests, Levites, and Israelites were abolished.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, hierarchies based upon wealth and economic class proved more difficult to level. We know that in New York, in the colonial era, a special high bench (*banca*) was reserved in the women's gallery for the aristocratic ladies of the Gomez family. Following the American Revolution, in 1786, it was, as a symbol of democratization, forcibly removed. Henceforward the Ladies Gomez had to sit on the same level as everybody else. Nevertheless, into the early 20th century, most American synagogues and temples--including this one-- separated rich and poor, offering the best seats in the house to the wealthiest members. “In the rows nearest the pulpit sat the rich old members, their sons and daughters and grandchildren,” the writer Edna Ferber recalled of her temple in Appleton, Wisconsin. “Then came the next richest and most substantial. Then the middling well-to-do, then the poorest. The last rows were reserved for strangers and. . . ‘Russians.’” [*A Peculiar Treasure* (1939), p.74]

Exactly a century ago, however, in 1904, this hierarchy too began to crumble as the concept of free seating entered the American synagogue. Detroit's Temple Beth El pioneered this development, partly for pragmatic reasons: the temple was growing so quickly that it did not have enough seats to sell or rent to everyone who wanted one. Consequently, it decided to make all seats available in the sanctuary on a first-come, first-served basis: every seat sat open, none was assigned. Rabbi Leo Franklin, the famed Reform rabbi of Beth El, became the Jewish apostle of free seating. ““In God's house,” he declared, “all must be equal. There must be no aristocracy and no snobocracy.” Rabbi Stephen S. Wise soon followed up with what he called the “free synagogue.”

There free seating on a first-come, first-served basis represented a “token and symbol” of other caste-leveling freedoms: freedom from fixed dues, freedom of the pulpit, and freedom of opportunity for all—women included—to become Temple members and office holders. While few other synagogues went quite that far, free seating, a system that allowed even the poorest member to come early and claim the choicest seat in the sanctuary, became normative in American Judaism over the past century. Today, it is a characteristic feature of synagogues across the spectrum of American Jewish religious life, except in some places on the high holidays..

One final example of the leveling of hierarchies in American Judaism involves the area of Jewish learning. For years, especially here in America, high level Jewish learning was the preserve of the male rabbinate. Mastery of Jewish texts, high level Jewish study, creative Jewish scholarship—that was as foreign to most American Jews, women in particular, as prophecy and priesthood. Few lay people knew Hebrew, fewer still could read Aramaic texts like the Talmud. Men who did evince interest in Jewish studies were advised to become rabbis. Women interested in Jewish studies were advised to marry rabbis.

East European immigrant Jewish leaders like Rabbis Bernard Revel and Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz in the early decades of the twentieth century took aim at some of this hierarchy. Jewish learning, they insisted, should be open to all Jewish males, rabbis and lay people alike. Revel created what became Yeshiva University where students –first only men, and later, in 1948, women -- pursued high-level Jewish and secular studies in tandem, and not just with an eye to the rabbinate. Mendlowitz, through institutions like Torah Vodaath and Torah Umesorah sought to produce what he described as “a generation of . . . competent businessmen or professionals who have devoted years to intensive study of Torah and will continue to do so in their spare time.” These developments eventually affected all movements in Judaism, and in time the great divide in American Jewish life between “Jewishly learned rabbis” and “unlettered Jewish laypeople” began to break down. Rather than being reserved for privileged males alone, Jewish study, like so many other aspects of American Judaism, has been democratized. In our day, any man or woman can strive for the highest level of Jewish learning. Indeed, with the proliferation of centers of Jewish study across the United States and the world, including all of the branches of HUC-JIR, we can, perhaps for the first time ever, truly aspire to the day when “all the Lord’s people will be Jewishly learned.”

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Ordination Class: in this, the 350th year of Jewish communal life in North America, as you now take up the mantle of Moses, our rabbi (Moshe Rabbenu), I hope that you can approach Jewish life with the same open-minded, broadly democratic and all-embracing inclusiveness that he displayed in declaring “*Miyiten kol am adonai nevi'im*” “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”

Do not worry about divisions and hierarchies in Jewish life. Do not worry about who sits where. Do not worry about honor and status. Instead, like our first and greatest rabbi, Moses, strive for the day when all Jews, men and women alike, may stand fully equal to one another: as priests and as prophets; as rabbis and as teachers; without heed to wealth or to ancestry; and above all, as Jews united in the quest for Jewish learning and for Jewish living – AMEN.