

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Commencement Address  
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## Reviving Public Discourse

I am greatly honored to be here to today, to accept with humility and appreciation the Dr. Bernard Heller Prize. Dr. Heller's life combined scholarship, teaching, religious leadership, and participation in civic affairs. His many and varied contributions to the welfare of the Jewish community are an inspiration to us all, and I am deeply flattered to be considered worthy of the prize that bears his name.

I am also greatly honored to speak to the graduating class of 2005. For me, this is a weighty responsibility. I have grown accustomed to listening to rabbis and drawing upon their wisdom. It never occurred to me that those steeped in the learning of our tradition might look to me for insight. So let me begin by explaining the peculiar nature of my own religious education. When I was a boy growing up in San Francisco, my family belonged to Congregation Sherith Israel, which held services in a beautiful synagogue in the Romanesque style. I attended religious school through tenth grade, became bar mitzvah, was confirmed, and served as president of the temple youth group for two years. But I will confess that during services -- that seemed to me to go on for a very long time -- my brother and I did not always give the devoted attention we might have to the prayers or to the Rabbi's teachings. Instead, we would stare up at the dome, which was encircled by a single row containing a great many light bulbs. We used to occupy ourselves by counting the lights. I can tell you even today that there were 67. Although yesterday I checked this number with my brother and he insists that there were 66.

You might think that by counting light bulbs I wasted my opportunity for religious education. But just above the ring of lights written around the dome in the archaic and politically incorrect language of the old Union Prayer Book was this one sentence from the prophet Micah (6:8): "It hath been told thee, O Man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

Had my religious education taught me nothing more than this, *Dayenu*. These words of the prophet are at the heart of Judaism: they prescribe the behavior that is the essence of a good life, a life in the service of the covenant.

I have tried to live by these words, and I have been blessed by the opportunity to do justice on a scale that is not available to many. Because of Yale University's unique role as the largest employer, by far, in its host city, I sensed, when I became president twelve years ago, a rare opportunity for a private institution of considerable wealth to make a difference in city that was in decline. There were vacant storefronts throughout the downtown; housing prices had declined 20%, and "for sale" signs lined the streets of the best residential neighborhoods. A Yale student had recently been murdered on campus, and the *New Yorker* had just published a series portraying in frighteningly vivid detail the dangerous lives of New Haven teenagers caught up in a culture of drug trafficking and gang warfare.

If ever a job required a steadfast commitment to *tikkun olam*, this was it. Good intentions would not be enough; the soaring rhetoric to which university presidents are given would not suffice. To paraphrase Abraham Heschel, we would have to spell our answers in deeds.

And so, over the past twelve years, we have tried to do our part as institutional citizens. We took the lead in making commercial investments in New Haven's downtown, and there followed in our wake a dramatic renaissance – dozens of new retail businesses and restaurants and a ten fold increase in the downtown residential population. We created more than thirty new science-based companies and lured the nation's largest pharmaceutical company to establish a research facility in New Haven. We invested in the stabilization of neighborhoods by giving a substantial subsidy to our employees to enable them to purchase homes within the city. 80% of the 700 beneficiaries are first-time homebuyers; the majority are members of minority populations. We worked with neighborhood groups to develop job-training programs, to plant community gardens, to design an elementary school, and to bring to the inner city the first new urban supermarket in Connecticut in over 40 years. We helped in the schools, involving thousands of our students in tutoring, mentoring, and giving music lessons. We established a program of science courses and laboratory internships for inner city high school students interested in careers in science, medicine, and nursing. Of the 300 students in to complete this program, every single one has gone to college and the entire first cohort graduated this spring.

Most importantly, we have created an environment on our campus such that students, faculty, and staff have come to feel both a collective and an individual responsibility for participating in the effort to make a difference in New Haven. I tell you all this, because you, too – especially those of you who will take on responsibility for a congregation – will have an opportunity to create, by your example and leadership, a culture of concern and commitment. Your congregations may not have the scale or financial means to transform an entire city, but there is more than enough good work to be done. And so I encourage you to undertake the work of *tikkun olam*, knowing, with Rabbi Tarfon, that we will never complete the work, but we must not desist from it.

Because you will all be teachers as well as leaders, I want to encourage you in yet another direction. I want to challenge you, as teachers and citizens, to do your part to improve the quality of civic discourse. In particular, I want to urge you to resist two disturbing trends in contemporary political discourse: oversimplification and polarization. The strength of our democracy and the wisdom of our collective choices will depend on the efforts we make to reverse these trends.

Consider the Presidential debates. Following the advice of the experts, the candidates reduced every issue to a formula. Now it is true that both candidates were Yale graduates. But think how often the same phrases were invoked over and over again. “Staying on message” was the name of the game. There was no real debate, no progression in the argument. Neither we nor the candidates learned much from the interaction, as we would in a normal conversation, when one person responds to, criticizes or builds upon the ideas of another.

It wasn't always this way. Go back and read the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Here was true engagement, detailed and sophisticated argumentation on the most vexing question in American history: the question of slavery. Even the Kennedy-Nixon debates, the first to be televised, were much deeper and more penetrating than what we've come to accept as inevitable today.

As students of Talmud, you know that the discourse of our tradition is anything but oversimplified. It is richly textured, relentlessly logical, nuanced. Layer builds upon layer, interpretation upon interpretation. I'm not suggesting that our political debates should become Talmudic in their richness and complexity, only that you are well prepared to point out oversimplification to your students and congregants, and to encourage them to demand more than sound bites from public officials.

Public discourse is not only over-simplified, it is polarized as well. In the last presidential election, the candidates were more deeply divided on foreign policy, economic policy, and moral or life style issues than at any time in recent memory. For the first time in generations, the prevailing wisdom of the pundits was that the candidates had to secure the base within their own parties rather than win the swing voters in the middle. And so, compared to any election since at least 1984, the Republicans moved more to the right and the Democrats more to the left, with each party seemingly speaking to those on its flanks rather than those in the middle.

The tendency to over-simplification and polarization leads us to represent too many important public choices as false dichotomies. I am an economist, and so I ask your indulgence if I illustrate this point with examples from the realm of economic policy.

The public debate suggests that we must choose between a flat tax and a progressive income tax filled with loopholes that advantage special interests. Isn't there an obvious middle ground: a progressive income tax with fewer loopholes?

We are presented with a choice between preserving in its entirety the current Social Security system – which is headed toward bankruptcy – and creating a system in which individuals maintain their own retirement accounts and make their own investment decisions. But why can't we create more incentives for private savings while preserving the social insurance or safety net features of Social Security?

We are asked to choose between protectionism that slows world wide economic growth and a passive acceptance of the dislocations caused by free trade. Can't we maintain free trade and design more effective programs to assist and retrain those displaced.

We need to talk sensibly about the policy choices that confront us. There are plenty of good ideas that aren't that complicated. But we need to raise the level of discussion beyond sound bites.

Your education has prepared you to help. I'm sure that you haven't been shy about expressing your opinions here. Don't lose the habit. As citizens and teachers, you will need to engage to improve the quality of public discourse. Insist on an end to oversimplification and polarization. Write letters, and encourage your students and congregants to do the same. Join and lead organizations that advocate for your beliefs, participate in local politics, and, above all, use the critical faculties you have developed in the course of your studies to raise the level of discussion. We can make little progress in a democratic society without intelligent public discussion of the issues.

Maintaining your engagement with civil society in the years ahead in the manner that I am suggesting will require your determination and courage. In the next few years, as you are struggling to succeed in new jobs, it will be easy to turn inward. There will be more than enough to keep you occupied. At Yale, when I award degrees, here is what I say: "By the authority vested in me, I confer upon you these degrees and admit you to all their rights and responsibilities." Not "rights and privileges," the phrase used at so many other institutions, but "rights and responsibilities." You have been educated to become teachers and spiritual leaders. Your responsibilities are broad and deep. Among them is the responsibility to set a standard for others by your own behavior. Thus, in the realm of public discourse, acknowledge complexity, ask probing questions, and seek solutions that make sense. And encourage others to follow your example.

In one of his last letters to John Adams, Jefferson, the eternal optimist, wrote: "I shall not die without a hope that light and liberty are on steady advance." Adams, by contrast, was skeptical. He believed that tyranny was as likely to emerge from free elections as from a seizure

of power. He saw an educated and informed public, as critical to the survival of liberal democracy. He would not be surprised by the current impoverishment of political discourse, but his response would be clear. He would appeal to education as the solution.

We are fortunate that, on the question whether liberal democracy would survive, Jefferson has had the better of the argument for these past two hundred years, at home and around the world. It is our responsibility as educated citizens, your responsibility, to keep it that way.

Graduates of the class of 2005: When you leave here, steeped in learning, with a well-developed capacity for independent thought, and deep commitments, never forget your obligations to serve responsibly those around you, to engage in civic life, to demand reasoned public discourse from others, and to set a standard with your own. The continued flowering of the freedoms we so vigorously exercise in this country depends upon your engagement and your vigilance. Lead on.