

## GRADUATION SPEECH: HEBREW UNION COLLEGE

May 19, 2005

It is an extraordinary honor for me to be here, to receive this very special recognition and to have the privilege of addressing this graduating class. I should note, as undoubtedly other honorary doctorate recipients have, that my children think this is a less than cricket way to earn academic recognition; they did it the hard way.

Let me salute those assembled here and all those who are part of this special day. The administrators, faculty and trustees. The many different groups of honorees. The graduating students and their parents and partners who helped make this day possible.

I want to pay special tribute to David Ellenson. You know of his distinguished career as a writer and teacher, his amazing leadership of the huc campuses, his devotion to turning out religious leaders of and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I know him, as well, as an innovator who has helped American Jewish World Service launch our program for rabbinic students and who will, next january, do us the very special honor of joining those students as their rabbi-in-residence for a week of intensive and transformative work in El Salvador. They will be dealing in a direct and personal way with the challenges and needs of some of the many people in today's world who are largely not visible to us but whose future depends on us.

We live in a world of extreme poverty and obscene wealth, a world of growing and dangerous inequality—in this country and around the globe. A world in which the few prosper and many starve offends our commitment to fairness and insults our belief in justice.

The challenges are immense, but the wherewithal exists to address them. There are steps for us to take—individually, in community and as a nation—that will change the direction of the world. And the capacity exists in each of us to rise up to meet those challenges. What is required, first, is that we embrace our responsibility to humanity, commit to help those with whom we do not share a country, a language, a political structure or a culture. We must bend our minds and our voices, our energies and our material resources to helping the other and the stranger and to pursuing justice.

Those of you receiving your degrees today—whatever your background, your area of expertise, your life work to date, your plans for your future work—you graduate to positions where you can influence and redirect people's lives. You have made many life choices and faced many challenges to get to this day.

As you already know, of course, the choosing continues. What I wish for you is the capacity and the determination to keep making choices, to keep challenging yourselves, and to strive against many obstacles to live your faith and your values. My hope is that you take to heart the teaching of Gandhi that you must be the change you hope to see in the world.

Why? Because that is the leadership we need today, and because our faith calls us to assume such responsibility. This is a time of great social and political turmoil, a moment when people are losing their rights and our fundamental constitutional protections are under attack. It is a time when more than 30 million Americans go to bed hungry every night, when around the world six million children under 5 die each year—17,000 a day—from entirely preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia.

It is a time when, in Africa, life expectancy in 30 countries is less than 50 years, 25 million people are HIV/AIDS infected and only 4% have access to life-saving drugs. It is a time when 28,000 young people have been kidnapped in northern Uganda, a time when there is a genocide occurring in Sudan, where at least 400,000 Moslem subsistence farmers have lost their lives from government-sponsored violence and displacement.

This is also a time when change is possible. For the first time the world has the knowledge, the resources and the capacity to move people out of poverty, to effect change in every corner of the globe. We can build a real alliance in which the developed world countries provide full forgiveness on debt—surely a Jewish thing to do; dismantle trade barriers; and contribute what is actually the small sum of \$50 billion a year to put all children in school, eliminate avoidable infant death, wipe out malaria, and cut global poverty in half by 2015.

Significant progress has been made. Debt relief already granted has allowed 4 million more Ugandan children to go to school and built 31,000 new classrooms in Tanzania. In the last five years 50 million children have been

immunized. Well more than half the world is experiencing economic development, has a foot on the ladder and is actually climbing it. The tragedy of our age is that 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the world is not on the ladder, is caught in a trap of disease, physical isolation, environmental degradation and climate stress from which they cannot escape on their own.

There is, then, much more to do. What we need is the political will and the moral determination to act, to take on our share of responsibility for helping to heal the world. We should be doing this—as individuals, as a country and as a Jewish community—for reasons of security and global economic development and because it is the only moral course of action for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will not be easy.

This is a time when dissent is increasingly unpopular, when too often, in too many places, people retreat to the comfort of their own lives. It is a time when there are real pressures not to rock any boats, not to be controversial, not to make others uncomfortable by challenging the way things are. It is a time when too many of our leaders—political and religious—are themselves pushed to acquiesce, caught up or bogged down in the minutiae and bureaucracy of their own lives.

This is a time when we need new prophets, people who will call it as they see it, be willing to speak truth to power, alert people to the dangers we face and exhort others to action. I say this often, that we need new prophets for our age, and then I am reminded that the prophets whose words I treasure, whose writings form part of our religious heritage, were reviled in their own time, often treated as outcasts, had too much to say that no one wanted to

hear. Their lives were probably not much fun, and in their time not nearly enough change occurred.

So I revise my call. It is a time when we need those who can speak as prophets—as you must — but need, even more, those who will go further. We need those who will take action on behalf of the issues they believe in and those who will work to build activist prophetic communities. We need you to create an activist, global, social justice Judaism for the 21st century. We need leaders who will educate themselves and others; share visions of a better, more just future; show the way by idea and by example; and convey a sense of hope and possibility.

It is a challenge to educate others and move them to action. We live in a world with too much information, but some of the fiercest truths are rarely reported and often they do not penetrate our consciousness or stay with us very long. The story of the tsunami was delivered to the world with unusual intensity, but it lasted in the press for just 21 days, and it will affect the quality of life in south Asia and Somalia for years. The stories of inequity in our own country are too often buried in the papers' inside pages, and the stories of malaria and aids in Africa or genocide in Sudan are largely not part of our media diet.

We must commit ourselves to learn and teach enough about the plight of today's other and stranger to create and maintain our determination to act. We need to know what is happening and to be sure that others know, but we need, also, not to allow the facts to overwhelm. If we are to honor our obligations to help the stranger, to pursue justice, to become Jewish global

citizens and to build new paths to peace then we cannot, we must not, retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed.

We need people who will work on all levels. It is important to be involved on a personal level—to feed the hungry, work directly with the poor, be of service in the world. But service only is not enough. People must also learn and address the root causes of injustice, plan for larger social action, demand new policies and appropriations, and embrace advocacy. We should be doing this work—both the service and the advocacy—as individuals and in schools, on campuses and in congregations, in the many different communities of which we are members. This will happen when the leaders you are and the leaders you will become help others learn the ways they can be involved and remind them of the values that say they must be.

And it is critical that you help others to approach this work with a mixture of patience and of hope. They need to understand the often complex, always too slow, ways to get from here to there. And they need hope, the ingredient that keeps us going when we might otherwise quit. Rabbi Marshall Meyer spoke of the “small flame of hope that illuminates our lives even in our darkest moments.” May you carry that flame of hope and share it with others as you work to build prophetic community.

The creation of a more just society, then, is all of our responsibility. It is how we can express our devotion to God, how we can create greater harmony. It should be our central focus, require our attention and commitment, demand that we go to work in the world. It requires that we understand ourselves as responsible for the other and the stranger,

interconnected with all of humanity and able to make a difference in their lives.

We must understand that our actions have consequences for those around us and for those on the other side of the world, that we honor God when we help those in need, when we work with them for greater justice in their lives, when we use the affluence and influence of our community on behalf of those who most need our help.

As rabbis, cantors, educators and faith leaders you have many roles. You are teachers and academicians and sacred music makers, care givers and officiators at life cycle ceremonies. You are also, in our tradition, moral leaders, prophets and the builders of prophetic community. Too often, in too many jobs, this last role is neglected or diminished, surrounded by political anxiety, smothered by others who would find it easier not to be urged to action. It is because this is a risk, that I have urged you today, as you celebrate this great milestone, to be moral leaders, to have what you do most fully reflect who you are and what you believe.

I urge you to heed the observation of rabbi Heschel that “living is not a private affair of the individual, it is what we do with god’s time, what we do with God’s world”. Accept the challenge to do the most you can with your time in this world, constructing lives of commitment where acts of loving kindness and acts of political courage are woven into the fabric of your days.

As our text teaches, the answers are not in heaven and not beyond the sea. It is within our reach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to create change in the world, and

within your reach to help others understand this, create a vision and be motivated to act. It is your challenge to build those prophetic communities that can move toward justice. As you embark on this work i know you will keep in mind the wisdom from Pirke Avot which teaches that we are not required to complete the task but we do not have the right to refuse to participate.

This same thought was very powerfully expressed by the faith leader who inspired the peasants in El Salvador where we will again take rabbinical students—and David Ellenson—next January. Let me close with those words from Archbishop Oscar Romero:

We accomplish in our lifetime  
Only a tiny fraction of  
The magnificent enterprise  
That is god's work.

This is what we are about.  
We plant seeds  
That one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted  
Knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that  
Will need further development...

We may never see  
The end results,  
But that is the difference...

We are prophets  
Of a future not our own.