

Hebrew union college
Los Angeles, May 15, 2005
"The fourth ordination 2005"
Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin

RABBI ISAIAH ZELDIN:

Thank you, President Ellison. I could have listened to you forever. When I first came to this town, I think I was the youngest of the faculty members of the Hebrew Union College. I think I'm now the oldest.

Some people have asked me, you know, how do you maintain yourself so well. I'm about in two months to celebrate my 85th birthday. So I tell them that I have a very good doctor. He advises me that I should walk for a half hour every day for a hundred years, and I'll live a for a long time.

If I listened to my elocution teacher at the Hebrew Union College, I would have begun the speech this way: A myriad of memories has meandered through my mind. Notice the alliteration.

But since I am now a simple practicing rabbi for 60 years, I'll begin by saying this is a very special occasion, not only for the college, but for the Zeldin family. Bruce, it's wonderful seeing you here. It was your family who welcomed us when we came. The college is not 50 years old. It's 52 years old.

And it really began when Rabbi Jay Kaufman of blessed memory, then the vice-president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, invited me to come to California. I had been in California as a substitute chaplain during the war. And went back to New York, where I was assistant dean of the Hebrew Union College School of Education and Sacred Music-- you have to say that in one breath.

And when I was invited to come out here, it was to be the director of the UAHC and also the dean of the College of Jewish Study housed in this very temple. And we used the temple for about 12 years. They never charged us one solitary dime, due to the gracious offering of Rabbi Magnum, its esteemed rabbi, it's president, George Finess.

And I came here with my family in 1953, in the summer. And in August, I received a letter from the same Rabbi Kaufman, said to me, Shai, if the college doesn't fly, you should know that it's been tried for six or seven years, and it's been a dismal failure; it's not your fault.

Well, the first thing I did, is I learned a lesson in New York, being assistant dean there. I went to the Bureau of Jewish education and found a charismatic individual, Sam Pennington. And the two of us devised a scheme to populate the College of Jewish Studies. We said that Sunday school teachers would get increases in salary if they got accreditation. And we were offering accreditation.

So immediately, when we opened the school in September, we had three people speak. You should

always know that's one thing I did to put you on the face of the map. And it was at the College of Jewish Studies that we developed the pre-rabbinic program, and we attracted 14 young men at the time. And some of them are in the audience here.

One of them was Dr. Louis Barth, now dean of the college. One was Professor Mike Myers. And one was Alfred Gottschalk-- Gottschalk came afterwards. In New York, I had taught a class in pre-rabbinics, in Russian. I came to California. And you'll pardon my saying this, but I found the California studies students knew that there was very little difference between an aleph and a wastepaper basket. So I continued to teach, who was a marvelous Hebrew pedagogue. And by the time our 14 students got to Cincinnati or New York, I was told by the faculty there, all my colleagues, that they were amongst the best trained Hebrew students that the college had ever received.

It was here in California that the college received its first accreditation, and that was in 1957. And only thereafter were we able to get accreditation first to the New York school, and then to the Cincinnati school. That's the history of the college.

I appreciate your indulging my memories. They are present memories. And I have to mention one professor whom I enticed after he retired from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, to come here. That was Dr. Samuel Cohen, who brought forth this library and immediately donated 7,000 books to the Hebrew Union College library. And it was because of that library that we got the accreditation. So these are pleasant memories. They were struggles, but they were such sweet struggles. And the success of the college is the warmest thing that can happen to a rabbi after 60 years.

But now that I've served for 60 years, and incidentally am not retiring-- because my name is Shai, and I'm shy and not retiring-- -- as an aside. But my congregation, I always give asides.

Tomorrow I leave for Israel. And I will be taking with me 85 of my congregants to celebrate my 85th birthday. You've indulged my memories. Now a few words of advice to the graduates. What would an ordination be without advice? One of my professors used to say the worst vice is advice. But I think that you're entering probably the finest calling a human being can enter. There is more opportunity in the rabbinate to benefit people than in any other calling or profession on the face of this earth. You affect more people, you influence more lives, and you find fulfillment in whatever you do. But you should know that learning isn't confined to the classroom. Learning is gained through experience.

And you've heard-- I built a rather dynamic congregation here in Los Angeles. And the things that I learned were never taught at the Hebrew Union College. I now know about zoning and hydrology and real estate and financing, and how to get things through the city council of this very difficult city.

It is a fulfilling calling, but it never stops being a place that challenges you to go on and learn more. And I'll give you one example. You know of course, that Israel is embroiled in a situation of

disengagement. And ultra-orthodox rabbis have come out against it because they say they will apply the law of the rodafe. I don't know who your Talmud professors are now, but I hope that you study the law of rodafe. Because reform has an answer to those ultra-orthodox rabbis. Incidentally, it's in the Sanhedrin. I think it's the seventh chapter. Starts with the mission goes on.

Where did people learn that the rodafe-- and rodafe, for those of you who don't know, is pursuant. And the law says that if A pursues B in order to kill him, and you, the person on the side, kills A, the would-be murderer, then you are innocent. Because the pursuer can be killed to save an innocent life.

Now, say these people, as did incidentally, the assassin of Yitzchak Rabin, I was in the law of rodafe. (UNINTEL PHRASE) leave the territory, it would jeopardize the lives of Israel. Now they'll say anything about their arch-enemies, a new prime minister.

But you should know that if you read the commentaries afterwards, where did it come from? It came from last week's Torah portion. You shouldn't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. Which means that you can't be an innocent bystander in an awful lot of things, including if someone is drowning in water and you can swim. You are obligated to rescue that person. That's Jewish ethics.

Well, if you apply the law of rodafe according to the Talmud and its commentary, you should know that the killer of the rodafe is innocent only when it is certain that the pursuer intends to kill the other person. The entire issue of disengagement is a political issue. It is not certain. As a matter of fact, I kind of think the opposite will be the truth, that with the giving up of Gaza, Israel will be safer.

So studies never end. A rabbi is really the inheritor of two traditions at the same time, the tradition of Moses and the tradition of Aaron. You will be pastors and ministers, but you should also be descendants of the prophets, the conscience of the people.

But should there be a conflict in your mind, you should know that what we study is the Torah of Moses, and not the Torah of Aaron. Priorities of the rabbi is to be the conscience of the people and to be the follower of the prophets. But there are two kinds of prophets. There's the prophet who rebukes the people, like Amos and the first Isaiah. And there is the second Isaiah, the prophet who comforts the people.

And I, in my 60 years in the rabbinate, prefer the second Isaiah, because our people have gone through hell. You haven't lived through the Holocaust, but you lived through the suicide bombings. Where even to this day, the United Nations has not condemned suicide bombing. You know why people ask me all the time, why do we remain Jews in America? And I say to them, because we have a unique contribution to make. Our contribution is all the other major religions in the United States look to get the individual into heaven. That is true of Christianity. It is unfortunately true of Islam.

Judaism doesn't aim to get its followers into heaven. We want to build a better earth for our children and our children's children. That's our contribution. And our contribution is to say to the world, suicide bombing that targets innocent people is evil, unquestionably. And that's how you must raise your voice, because you are defenders of our people.

My good friend David Ellinson said that I love Israel, and you must be lovers of Israel. It is easy to become an Israel basher. There are too many others that are Israel bashers. But be a defender of Israel. We live in dangerous times. And peace is not yet secure.

But now I have to tell you that when you go through your rabbinate and you preach and you minister and you console, you should also know that one of the greatest joys of rabbinate is raising your own families. And your families must be model families. I know it's not proper to say why should the rabbis' children be different, but they really have to be. Nothing will give you more satisfaction than to have your own children follow your footsteps and your values.

My pride is that my students, some of whom were my students 50 years ago, are spread throughout this land, back into my one synagogue, are spread throughout this land in the rabbinate, in the cantorate, as educators. In this class, there is a graduate who is the son of a young man that I introduced to the rabbinate, who is now the rabbi of a big congregation in San Diego. Dr. Barth is my son, my proxy. In Jewish tradition, a student is the child of the teacher.

You have listened patiently. I have one final message. I started off with memory. Too many people have amnesia. You know, there's a funny story about the man who went to the doctor to be examined, and the doctor said to him, I have good news and bad news. So the man says, all right. Tell me the bad news first. He says, the bad news is you have the onset of Alzheimer's. He says, what's the good news? He said, the good news is you can forget it. (LAUGHTER)

A final message to the graduating class is about memory. I began with memory, and I'll end with memory. The bible teaches a great lesson in the Joseph cycle. At the end of one of the weekly portions, it says the chief butler didn't remember Joseph, but he forgot it. Well, rabbis come in-- you know, you should have said either he didn't remember him or ?

And the answer is because he chose to forget him. Because it didn't pay for him to remember. And in the very next chapter, up speaks the chief butler two years later, when Pharaoh has a dream and nobody can interpret it. And listen to the words in the Torah:

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

My sins I now remember. Notice he uses . Remember that. is the causative. I caused myself to remember. The lesson, of course, is ended in the first verse in Exodus, where it says:

(FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED)

We didn't know Joseph. What do you mean, you didn't know? Joseph saved your land. He chose not to remember. I say that to you, because you should remember one thing after all of you become successful. And that is that the institution that made you successful was this very Hebrew Union College. When I was the dean, I used to go around to congregations. And I would say to them, you

know what the Hebrew Union College is? It is the one institution that does what no single congregation can do by itself. It trains its future leaders. There are in synagogues, in places where there are no longer any Jews. But in every place where there was a rabbinic seminary, except in Germany, where it was destroyed by Hitler-- in every other place, Jews continue to exist where there is a seminary that trains its leaders.

You have now heard my speech from beginning to end, cut short because David Ellinson unfortunately took a longer time to introduce me. (LAUGHTER) So I want to leave you with my 11th commandment: (FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED) Do not forget who made you what you will become. Thank you very much for listening. (APPLAUSE)

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