

ORDINATION ADDRESS
SUNDAY, MAY 14, 2006
Rabbi Lewis M. Barth

Thank you so much Rabbi Ellenson, for your introduction, for your friendship of over a quarter of a century, and for your extraordinary leadership of the College-Institute. I'm honored to speak at this Ordination, even as it has been an honor, beyond the responsibility involved, to have been Dean of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, for the past nine years. If a person is fortunate, he or she lives long enough to experience blessed events, and to cherish them, as well as failures, and to learn from them. In 1979, the last year of my first incarnation as Dean, neither the time, the political will, neither the resources nor the stature of the Los Angeles Jewish community could be mobilized to expand our Los Angeles Rabbinic program to include the last two years of study leading to Ordination here. Now, twenty-seven years later, we gather for our fifth Ordination—with the inner sense that this is something that HUC-JIR, nationally and regionally has always done, a regular event in our annual cycle.

For you, the Ordinees, this day is unique and special. Your joy is ours—as well as the conviction that what we have done together, and what you will accomplish, will guarantee the future of liberal Jewish religious life in our community, throughout the United States and wherever Jews live and you serve.

There are three topics I want to share with you this morning. They seem particularly meaningful to me on this occasion. As I'll explain, they are relationally based, not halakhically based. These three topics are: real listening, deep faith, public ceremony and public rhetoric. I want to address these topics through the vehicle of texts, some of which we have studied together.

Real Listening

Let me begin this discourse by quoting the opening verse of *Haazinu*, Deuteronomy 32:1, spoken by Moses: "Give Ear, ye Heavens and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth." *Deuteronomy Rabba*, a classic sermonic midrash, contains the following comment:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: 'if you incline your ear to the Torah, then when you begin to speak Words of Torah all will remain silent before you and listen to you...From whom do we learn this? From Moses our teacher. Because he inclined his ear to the Torah, when he began to speak words of Torah, both heavenly and earthly beings remained silent and listened to his words.' As it is said, "Give Ear, ye Heavens and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth."

In a moment I'll return to the "power" assumptions of this text. At this point I want to emphasize the relational aspect: the leader, who has studied diligently, speaks, and the audience, the congregation, ever obedient to authority based on learning, listens silently, deferentially. The Midrash, however, doesn't tell us anything about the audience, *kenneset yisrael*, "the Congregation of Israel," except their silent listening. When we think about it, isn't this the old model, the hierarchical top down relationship of leader and followers? It reminds me of the image of the people and the leader in a passage in *Bereshit Rabba*, the Midrash on Genesis:

אם אין רועה אין עולם, (בראשית רבה פרשה מא), אם אין צאן אין רועה

Rabbis may resonate to this rabbinic statement, “if there is no flock, there is no shepherd, and if there is no shepherd, there is no universe.” Yet we know that living people, human beings, Reform Jews are not silent sheep, they are often thoughtful, creative, compassionate people who have the capacity to listen—if they are convinced that we have “the capacity to listen” to them as well, not just talk at them and expect their attention.

On what is “the capacity to listen” based? In every area of modern, (some might say post-modern) endeavor, there has been a remarkable movement from hierarchical relationships, the old authoritarian top-down pattern, to equality based on a shared understanding of different roles. In contemporary psychology, the terms “empathy” and “recognition” suggest that therapist and client both understand that each has a mind that can be open to experiencing the other. Science has discovered built-in mechanisms in our brains that make this possible. They are called *mirror neurons*.

A distinguished psychoanalyst, Daniel N. Stern, in his recent book *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (pp. 78-79), writes: “The discovery of *mirror neurons* ...provides possible neurobiological mechanisms for understanding the following phenomena: reading other people’s states of mind, especially intentions; resonating with another’s emotion; experiencing what someone else is experiencing...in short empathizing with another...We experience the other *as if* we were feeling the same emotion...or being touched as they are being touched.”

We human beings have inborn mechanisms, these *mirror neurons*, for connection with each other!

From a very different and spiritual perspective, our dear friend and teacher, Rabbi Richard Levy, in his recent book *Vision of Holiness: the Future of Reform Judaism*, has spoken of “God” as connectedness between all things. He has emphasized that dialogue with God, however difficult it may be for many, presumes a relationship to God who relates to us. The divine becomes a model of the capacity for listening that helps us believe we do not live in a cold, unresponsive universe. Regarding this idea, Judaism contains its own version of the concept of *imitatio dei*. The Midrash teaches, Abba Saul says, “What is the family entourage of the king to do? Imitate the king.”

ספרא קדושים פרשה א ד"ה וידבר ה' (אבא שאול אומר פמליא למלך, ומה עליה להיות מהקה למלך).
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This approach is very different from the young Rabbi who says to a new congregant, let me invite you to my office—he or she says “get to know you,” but means, “in order that you can come to know me!” Rather, let us attempt to see people in their uniqueness, understand their world, visit them in home and office—in order that when we reach out, when we extend a genuine invitation, we say and mean “so that we can come to know each other; so that I can hear you and you can hear me.”

Deep Faith

Our age is consumed by an adoration of power and the people who exercise it, an idolization of “stars” in every field, which borders on what the ancients called idolatry. So we gravitate to biblical verses that seem to stress the opposite: “Not by strength, and not by power, by my My spirit, says God.” (Zechariah 4:6)

ויען ויאמר אלי לאמר זה דבר יקוק אל זרבבל לאמר לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי אמר יקוק
(זכריה פרק ד ו): צבאות

We love to cite similar pithy statements about the role of the preacher that, upon reflection, have their own kernel of self-aggrandizement. Is it not the preacher's role, we say, to "Comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable?" If we do not "speak truth to power," who will?

Yet there is a less pretentious way to be in the world, a way that reflects, from my perspective, a deeper faith. It is represented in a powerful story in *Deuteronomy Rabba* that presents a conversation between two brothers, Jacob and Esau, representing the competing values of Israel and the Roman empire.

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן כשעמד עשו עם יעקב אמר לו עשו יעקב אחי נהלך שנינו בעולם הזה כאחת אמר לו יעקב (בראשית לג) יעבר נא אדני לפני עבדו מהו יעבר נא טול עולמך תחלה מהו אתנהלה לאטי לרגל המלאכה וגו' אמר לו עד עכשיו יש לי להעמיד חנניה מישאל ועזריה שכתוב בהן (דניאל א) ילדים אשר פרשה א). [וילנא] אין בהם כל מאומם (דברים רבה

R. Samuel b. Nahman said, When Esau and Jacob met, Esau said to him, 'Jacob my brother, let us two walk together in the world as one.' Jacob replied: "Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant (Gen. 33:14)" What is the meaning of "Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant (Gen. 33:14)?" You, Esau, should enjoy your world, but I, Jacob, will journey on gently, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children. "My lord knows that the children are tender and that the flocks and herds giving suck are my responsibility; and if I drive them too hard one day, all the flocks will die (Gen. 33:13)" Esau, Rome, offered to Jacob the power and pleasures of this world, military might, ruthless and greedy governance. Jacob's deep faith, however, was expressed in his willingness to pass up one version of earthly power to fulfill his responsibility to those dependent on him—the weak, the powerless, the children and the cattle—to build a better world. Our deep faith is reflected in our commitment to build people, not empires; community, not "stars", that caring, and not greed represent the true manifestation of רוחי, God's spirit on earth.

Public Ceremony and Public Rhetoric:

Leviticus, Chapters 8-9 contain a narrative description of the ordination of Aaron and his sons to the Priest hood. Ch. 8:1-3 "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take Aaron along with his sons...and assemble the whole community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." From the perspective of public ceremonies, the Midrash emphasizes the reason that Moses assembled the whole community for this event: so that the community would treat priests with קדושה "sanctity", as a special privileged group or class—not a bad idea!

ואת כל העדה הקהל עשה במעמד כל העדה שיהו נוהגים קדושה בכהונה (ספרא צו - מכילתא דמילואים פרשה א ד),

More interesting, however, from the perspective of human relationships is the midrashic play on the oddly phrased command to Moses, "Take Aaron along with his sons." In typical *chutzpadic* fashion, the Midrash asks, did God really mean that Moses should literally take Aaron and his sons, as if he were to grab them, put them in a bag, sling it over his shoulder and go? The answer, of course is no, rather the Midrash teaches קהם בדברים "Take them through words," not by coercion, but through persuasion, not by force but through gentle encouragement.

ואת עמו לקח עמו, לקחן עמו בדברים (מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מס' דויהי פרשה א).

The intellectual discipline known as "Rhetoric" is to teach the "art of persuasion." The goal of the preacher, unlike the political orator, is to bring to consciousness, to

remind, to emphasize and to deepen values already +shared by the community and the preacher. Unlike the revolutionary orator whose goal is to change society or the terrorist, through coercion, to destroy it, the preacher's role is to take people from unconscious assent, assumed commitment and bring values embedded deeply in civilization and religious life to play a conscious role in society. We all acknowledge that it is so difficult to change people's minds, our own included. If, however, we frame our task as that of reminding people of the bonds that tie us together, the values we share, the story of changing beliefs that is our common history—in a word Torah—it becomes a very different matter.

Let me now return to the beginning; *Haazinu*, “Give ear,” “Hear!” We strive for: *hearing* based on relationship, *understanding* based on trust, *partnership* based on shared history and values.

To this wonderful group of students about to be ordained: listen to your people and they will listen to you, and to this congregation of family and friends, understand how study has transformed those whom you love in to *klei kodesh*, “vessels of holiness;” and to all of us present let us continue to deepen our partnership with the sacred to build a better world.