

The Deceptive Significance of Study
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
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Graduation
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It is very good to be here this afternoon. It is an honor to deliver this commencement address and my words are an inadequate attempt to convey my gratitude. You have invited me home, my academic home. However, the title of Thomas Wolfe's novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, ring in my ear. I will let you be the judge. I stand today in a place for which I developed a deep affection and before respected teachers whom I to this day hold in such high esteem.

It is a particular honor to be at this ceremony since rabbinic students who were studying on campus at the time I was here, sometimes in the same classes, now are being recognized for their years of outstanding service. Learning to study Talmud, Midrash and Mishnah-Tosefta with these rabbinic students was one of the distinguishing characteristics of my graduate education. Studying with these students was one of the ways in which HUC-JIR became my home, one of the means whereby I became part of a Jewish diaspora which has led me to seek out connections with the local synagogue or temple in every community in which I lived or worked since I left "home." I must add that given the pace of my own Ph.D. work I had ample opportunity to be associated with many rabbinic classes.

It is a privilege to be here standing before the graduates. I have some appreciation for how hard you have worked. I remember at the time of my own Ph.D. graduation having a new appreciation for the phrase, "earned degree." I also recall the exhilarating feeling of having acquired some new skills, linguistic and otherwise, new insights and new perspectives that I was eager to develop in an ongoing agenda of research and writing. I had ideas about how I wanted to use them in the classrooms in which I would teach and the students with whom I would interact. I was left with a passion for continuing discovery and study. Sometimes late at night, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes on extended weekends of research and writing I dig deep to again summon that passion to the forefront. And then I have the energy to continue. Graduates, stoke that fire of study and discovery. There will be days when that's all you will have to rely on.

Today's title emerges out of both my academic life and my administrative life within the academy. My administrative roles have taken me to campuses throughout the Midwest on a regular basis and to sustained interaction with their leadership. In that travel I have developed an increasing conviction that I wish all students enrolled in colleges, universities and seminaries across the continent could develop the understanding of study that was fostered in my graduate experience on this campus. Graduates, I hope that you would continue this tradition of study.

While admittedly this text may simply be evidence of my own advancing age and chastened sense of possibility, I often find myself thinking about the state of higher education in the manner attributed to Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair in M. Sotah 9:15: "from the time when the temple was destroyed . . . men of deed [or "miracle workers"] were diminished, men of violence and of [loud] tongue grew strong, #qbm Ny)w #rwd Ny)w

l)w# Ny)w ('and there is no one to study [or "interpret"], no one to inquire, no one to ask').” This text apparently was not part of the earlier established versions of the Mishnah since both Bertinoro and Rashi end their copies of this text just before these lines. The historical provenance is hard, even impossible, to determine. Perhaps we shouldn't let historical considerations stand in the way of a good text. I must note that earlier in this same mishnah, we find attributed to Ben Azzai the lament of every faculty member throughout history, that diligent students have ceased. Our text would appear to be picking up the lament of Ezekiel 34:6 decrying the lack of leadership for an Israelite community controlled by shepherds who are attending to their own welfare rather than to the good of the flock. For the medieval rabbinic community this lack of leadership is described as the loss of persons who possess the ability to study and to interpret the community's texts as well as to make petition to the Holy One for its welfare.

The higher education community in North America is under siege. Its value to the country as a whole has been questioned at the congressional level on a regular basis for the past decade and a half. Most recently, a local congressman has led the drive for significant changes in the legislation regarding higher education. These attacks occur at a time when the business community registers concern about the basic communication and analytical abilities of the graduates of our colleges and universities as well as the country's loss of a competitive edge in the advancement of scientific and technological innovation. For private institutions this translates into a higher level of competition for limited philanthropic dollars. I clearly should not go on in this vein. You get the point. There is continual pressure for the reform of the higher education system and there is no common agreement on what direction that should take.

An interesting but I think extremely relevant foray into the complexities of a vision for higher education today can be found in the work entitled, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, by Martha Nussbaum from the University of Chicago.¹ In this work she outlines a possible program for a "liberal education" that is rooted in the classics but adequately responds to the present concerns. In her work she describes and defends the use of the Socratic method of education as fundamental for the creation of the citizen of the world, the self-designation used by Diogenes the Cynic.² By definition, we all are citizens of the world in the twenty-first century. In semi-popular writings this phenomenon has amply been described by Tom Friedman in his works, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and more recently, *The World is Flat*, as well as by other authors.³ It is my assertion this afternoon that the kind of textual education we learned on this campus is deceptive in its significance because it is precisely this kind of study which can be used by knowledgeable and skilled faculty to raise up, to educate, the generation that is confronting this reality of globalization. Note that I used the word assertion. I view a commencement address as an opportunity to make statements that cannot be fully supported in the time available, a rare opportunity for an academic.

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

² *Cultivating Humanity*, 50, quoted from Diogenes Laertius in his *Life of Diogenes the Cynic*.

³ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor, 2000); *ibid.*, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005); Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).

In order to support my assertion about the importance of the type of study we learned in this institution I cite four claims about Socratic education that Nussbaum considers important.⁴

Socratic education is for every human being.

She argues that “The historical Socrates is committed to awakening each and every person to self-scrutiny.”⁵ One of the important ways in which critical thinking skills are developed is through the encounter of persons, communities and civilizations different from our own. Within graduate school here some of you have been engaged in the reconstruction of the ancient civilizations of the ANE, a significant encounter with another civilization. Some of us were engaged in studies of the biblical texts, again a world far away from the one we presently inhabit. Others of us learned the texts of the Greco-Roman era or of later periods. I know that all of you have been trained to listen to the text. Listening to the text is one method whereby modern students can learn to listen to and appreciate experiences different from their own. For a global citizen negotiating between cultures on a regular basis this is a remarkable skill.

Some of us in this graduate school came from non-Jewish backgrounds and had the wonderful privilege of being participants in the Jewish community associated with HUC through our enrollment here, a significant encounter with another faith tradition and communal experience which changed our lives. In my studies here I gained a deep understanding of a set of sacred texts which were not my own. I also gained a deeper understanding of the community that valued those texts. No mere antiquarianism, but a deep encounter with a community and its texts. The development of these types of skills and perspectives is fundamental preparation for life in a global society.

Two years ago I left the college where I had been academic dean for seven years. At the closing baccalaureate I sang for those graduating students the Sh'ma` which I had learned through regular participation in the chapel services on this campus. I wanted to talk with them about the meaning of study.

Socratic education should be suited to the pupil's circumstances and context.

Here Nussbaum reminds us that education is ultimately an individual experience, every person engages in this process in their own manner and moves in different directions as this process unfolds. I do not think she is here referring to a simple subjectivity or narcissism. Textual engagement is one method for moderating the extremes of self-absorbed subjectivity and detached objectivity, both of which are prevalent in institutions of higher education and neither of which provide the basis for sustainable life in a global community.

We can identify the classic, the influential and the sacred texts of many of the major cultural and religious traditions of our world. Those which don't have texts frequently have stories which can be identified. Students preparing for life as citizens of the world need to know their own texts as well as the texts of some others to know who they are, and who they aren't.

3. Socratic education should be pluralistic, that is, concerned with a variety of different norms and traditions.

⁴ *Cultivating Humanity*, 30. While she says that she will list five claims, she actually only lists four in the text.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 26.

Our experience with globalization should have convinced us that the universal human being of post-Enlightenment European philosophy and theology does not exist. For many the significance of this tradition was consumed in the fires of the Holocaust. Persons find identity in communities and traditions, in attachments and relationships. I would argue that educational opportunities available in very specific communities and traditions is an integral part of preparing persons for citizenry in a globalized context. From this campus I proceeded to spend thirteen years in African American seminary education. The types of textual study in which I had been engaged in this community and my experiences with and observations of the manner in which textual engagement served the purposes of community identity formation and maintenance on this campus permitted me to teach biblical studies on that campus in a similar manner. I could devise research projects similar to what I had observed on this campus so that those students could develop a heightened awareness of how the biblical texts had functioned in the history and formation of their communities. I could more successfully convince them that what they did with the interpretation of those biblical texts mattered for the welfare of their communities and for the national and international contexts in which their communities existed. I had learned and experienced a textual tradition which provided a model for how textual study and engagement could assist another community that was not my own. I had been educated to be more of a citizen of the world and had learned ways in which I could educate others toward that same end.

I think of projects of a similar nature that may not be text-based but still represent a tradition of common study. The Albright Institute of Oriental Research in Jerusalem directed by a Reform Rabbi, Sy Gitin, has been my home in Jerusalem for more than a decade. This institution has continued to support and promote archeological research in Israel in both the Palestinian and Jewish communities. When I am resident in Jerusalem as a recipient of research grants from that institution I am expected to give lectures for students of the Palestinian institutes of archeology as well as for the Jewish and Christian academic communities. The desire to understand archeological research relevant for my own work becomes a bridge for living and experiencing the difficulties encountered in that conflicted land. Study on the road to becoming a citizen of the world.

A pluralistic approach to text demands a wholistic approach to history. Within this school I developed a passion to understand as much of Judaism during the Greco-Roman period as possible. Josephus, Qumran, Enoch, 1 and 2 Maccabees have consumed my life these past twenty years. My faculty appointments have been in New Testament but I teach courses in the book of Daniel. Perspectives on all these texts were influenced by my early introduction to Rabbinic literature. Too much of the work done by Christian scholars has been characterized by the selective engagement with those portions of Jewish literature and historical experience which support their own interests and theological tendencies. The literature which I read and study is a consistent whole. The academic world in which most of us live and work is not constructed in that way. If you add in the extensive archeological work on Greek and Roman sites in the land of Israel within the past 25 years, which I tour on a regular basis because of what I was motivated to study and understand on this campus, we see the basis for constantly changing perceptions of the development of Judaism and the origins of Christianity. Such wholistic understandings are crucial for the education of students as citizens of the world.

Permit me to cite one example from my own research. We now can document a trajectory of wisdom literature from the biblical book of Proverbs into the Qumran scrolls through texts such as 4QInstruction, a remarkable composition whose publication was accelerated because of the efforts of Ben Zion Wacholder and Martin Abegg. The popularity at Qumran of this extraordinary text is attested by evidence of at least 8 copies in the Qumran corpus. It contains a combination of instructional material similar to that of wisdom literature found in biblical books such as Proverbs and Sirach, and eschatological material rooted in Hebrew prophecy and best known to us from the books of Enoch. Universal judgment is a theme throughout a number of the fragments. Those who are judged worthy of participation in the epoch of truth with the heavenly host have had their ear uncovered to understand the *raz nihyeh* “mystery of existence.” This “mystery of existence” provides the basis for instruction on matters of daily living: advice on borrowing money, the necessity of speedy repayment, relationships with the creditor, instruction for marriage, advice for farmers and craftsmen. A remarkable blend of practical wisdom and eschatological perspectives. Similar features characterize works such as 4QMysteries and 4QWays of Righteousness.

We then note the attention paid to wisdom and knowledge in the sectarian texts of the Qumran corpus such as the Community Rule and the Damascus Documents. In these texts wisdom is no longer rooted in the practical questions of living. Knowledge now is the provenance of the sect, its exclusive possession. True knowledge is not available outside of the group; membership in the group makes it available. We see an apparent move from the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible rooted in the experience of everyday life to a kind of wisdom that is attached to eschatological sanction to a knowledge that is the exclusive provenance of a self-declared sectarian representation of Judaism. A remarkable development in Second Temple Judaism that has only been identified since the full publication of all of the texts from Qumran.

We can also apply this perspective to issues regarding Christian Origins. Jesus is regarded as wisdom in the Gospel of Matthew, the only avenue of wisdom available. This text probably represents the claim of a community associated with that gospel to be the exclusive arbiters of wisdom. Such a claim now has a historical context within Second Temple Judaism. Within my role as a faculty member in a Christian seminary I now must help students deal with a text that originally was written as the statement of a distinct minority group and which became a powerful instrument in the hands of the majority in the development of western civilization. Beginning to develop that level of sensitivity with regard to issues of power and exploitation and how texts function in that process is an important ingredient in education for world citizenry.

As a student on this campus I also learned about the way in which textual interpretation is not a neutral process. It was my presence on this campus rather than any explicit direction from faculty members which lead me to read about the manner in which anti-semitism had shaped so much of the discipline of New Testament studies, most ably described by E. P. Sanders in the initial section of his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.⁶ An increasing awareness for a faculty member educating students for their role within a globalized world.

4. Socratic education requires ensuring that books do not become authorities.

⁶ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997).

In this case I'm going to bend Nussbaum's intent a little bit in order to reflect one of her interests in making this statement.

Adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all are regarded as people of the book, in some ways even of the same book. However I am not certain that these traditions have always used book in the same way. There is an ongoing debate concerning the priority of theory and text in many of the disciplines we study. An example. Clearly many Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures remained more skeptical of the documentary hypothesis as a fundamental methodological approach to the study of the Pentateuch than the majority of scholars in mainstream Protestantism. We could regard that theory as book, a reigning hypothesis that ultimately required the texts to find their place within the theory. I recall Samuel Sandmel of blessed memory to be much more skeptical of the existence of the Q document in Gospel studies than most of his New Testament colleagues in Protestant seminaries. There was a built-in resistance, perhaps mistrust, of over-arching methodologies that could become determinative for the reading and interpretation of a given text. In our studies here I learned that text trumps method or book. Such an insight is of value in the present debates concerning post-modernism or even the role of cultural studies. Needless to say, this subject is much more complicated than these few paragraphs suggest.

Frequently in Christian history, theology or dogma has trumped adherence to the significance of the text. Christians sign on to a confession or statement of faith which includes some agreement about the authority or even meaning of the text. Confession trumps text. What I learned on this campus is the central significance of text. This perspective is remarkably important as a tool for the education of persons around the globe. Texts can provide a common identity while permitting multiple interpretations, a valuable tool for educating persons of various ideologies and cultures. When students in my present seminary classes approach me with questions concerning the validity of a certain reading of a biblical text, my first response is one I learned on this campus: Go read the text again and see if it still holds up. Such a textual tradition does not permit me to assume that I have the sole authoritative interpretation of a given text. A revolutionary concept for many people around the world.

In conclusion, I wish most of all for you graduates the continuing joy of study which I experienced on this campus and which I hope you did as well. In the words of M. Peah 1:1, "There are things whose fruits a man enjoys in this world while the capital is laid up for him in the world to come: honouring father and mother, deeds of loving-kindness, making peace between a man and his fellow; *mlwk dgnk hrwt dwmltw* ('and the study of the Law is equal to them all')."