

Recapturing Our Soul:
A Vision for Jewish Communal Leadership in the 21st Century
HUC-JIR School of Jewish Communal Service
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2010 Rabbi Louis Bernstein Scholar-in-Residence

Good Afternoon. I am delighted to be joining you for the 41st culmination ceremonies here at the School of Jewish Communal Service of Hebrew Union College, and I want to thank Richard Siegel for inviting me to be here as the Rabbi Louis Bernstein Scholar-in-Residence this week. This program has been a model for training of Jewish communal service professionals, and Boston JCRC's own deputy director, Alan Ronkin, is a proud graduate. We also like to claim Julia Malkin, a culminating student as one of our own JCRC alums as well!

The field of Jewish communal service has evolved and changed over the past two decades that I have been honored to be intimately involved as a "Jewish communal professional." I came into the field from "the other world" where I worked as a community organizer in the anti-poverty movement and later in public service in the Dukakis Administration (some of you may remember him!). I dedicated the first part of my career to making the world a better place for all people and was delighted when I happened upon the opportunity to do so from a particularly Jewish place.

I begin with this short history because I think it is important that, as "Jewish communal professionals" with a particularistic orientation and training, we remember that we live and work in a much broader world full of diversity, complexity and competing interests and agendas. The Jewish community is a small, but important part of that broader world, and we too represent diverse constituencies with many diversity different agendas and priority issues of concern. As Jewish communal professionals, it will be your job to lead us going forward from what might be a particularly Jewish place, but with a perspective that always takes into account the broader, more universal world that we all live in and want to contribute to as full partners.

So, what does that leadership look like in the century ahead in which you will be building your careers and making your particular contributions to the field? Well, it begins here at HUC where you have been fortunate to receive a strong grounding in what it means to be a JEWISH communal leader. As I have experienced, first-hand, from our discussions over the past couple of days here at HUC, you have been fortunate to learn in an environment where you have been able to develop and reflect on your particular leadership styles and stories. As Howard Gardner, the author of *Leading Minds* suggests:

The ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies...Leaders tell stories about themselves and their groups, about where they are coming from and where they are headed, about what is feared, struggled against, and dreamed about...The most basic story (he says) has to do with issues of identity. And, so it is the leader who succeeds in conveying a new version of a given group's story, who is likely to be most effective.

Our story, as Jews, is a story of a tradition of caring for strangers, the poor and the oppressed, the widows and the orphans, the elderly and the handicapped. It is a story, as my good friend and Boston Federation director, Barry Shrage, often reminds us,

...that is part of a living chain of learning and literature, that allows us to be inheritors of an ancient and hauntingly beautiful culture. In a time of anomie and loneliness, it carries the secret of community-building that provides our children with a sense of caring and belonging (and our elders with a sense of security and dignity); in a time of rootlessness and alienation, it is a story that connects us to a religious civilization with a 3500 year old history and an infinite future, as well as the ultimate responsibility for the betterment of humankind. (Barry Shrage in *Sh'ma*, March 2010)

So, if we know we need to ground our practice in a particularly Jewish context, how do we lead when the universe we are seeking to change is so very complex and difficult and requires us to operate in a world that extends well beyond the Jewish community? We can rise to that challenge, because AS Jewish communal professionals we come with not only a strong sense of Jewish identity but, along with it, a sense of meaning and purpose that we apply to our work and to our lives. “Nothing motivates us humans more than meaning,” says Meg Wheatley, who is from this neck of the woods and has written extensively about leadership. In her book, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*, she reminds us, that

In such brutal times as these, when good work gets destroyed by events and decisions beyond our influence, when we are so overwhelmed with tasks that we have no time to reflect, it is very important that the leader create time for people to remember why they are doing this work...and whenever we feel “called” to our work, it is easier to remember the meaning of it.

You all are part of a wonderful “calling,” and you are about to enter the field of Jewish communal service, a world that is demanding, confusing, complex and very rewarding. The jobs you assume will, I assure you, have meaning for you and for the community you serve. You will be leaders in a world that is in desperate need of leadership. It will require you to listen and learn to reflect and to act. You will see and hear things that you do not like and that you do not agree with but, nevertheless, you will be required to find your voice and exercise leadership.

What do you do, for example, when you are confronted with an article like that recently authored by NYU professor Peter Beinart that has captured the attention of so many marginalized and particularly younger members of our community? Do you dismiss it out of hand or do you use it as a “teaching” opportunity with the individuals and groups you serve? We may not all agree with everything that Beinart says, but we would be foolish not to acknowledge that his message has resonated with a large swath of our community, a part of our community many of whom are not feeling very good about identifying and connecting with Israel or the organized Jewish community.

In a speech given a couple of weeks ago to the New Israel Fund’s Board of Directors meeting in Israel, Beinart speaks about himself as a concerned Zionist who worries that we are losing a whole generation of young people who do not care at all about Israel and who are “abandoning Zionism altogether because they believe, in part, that being a Zionist means abandoning your critical faculties and your devotion to human rights.” He goes on to say “that they have never been told, in an Israeli accent, that they can be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian; that they can be both Zionists and democrats (small d).” And then he quotes one of my Jewish heroes, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

who once wrote: “The people of Israel is a tree whose roots are in Israel and the branches are in the Diaspora. The roots must be strong for the branches to be in bloom. Please be careful with the branches.” “Young American Jews,” Beinart suggests, “are like branches that cannot see the tree, like kindling that cannot imagine the match.”

While the Beinart comments certainly stung all of us in the organized Jewish community, one of the messages I take away from his challenge is that we must redouble our efforts to reach-out and listen to the many people in our communities who feel alienated and estranged from the mainstream Jewish community. That alienation may be around Israel and how she has chosen to pursue the challenge of being a Jewish AND democratic state; or it may be about the lack of passion in our domestic agenda for dealing with some of the disparities in income and living standards of those in our midst. Whatever the reason that whole swaths of our community are drifting away, we must ask the question: “Can we afford to lose any of the Jews among us and what can we do to keep as many as possible in the tent?” It will only happen if the tent is a big one and has room for the differences among us, and if we, as Jewish communal leaders, improve our ability to listen to all the voices even those with which we may vehemently disagree!

We need to pay attention to “recapturing the souls” of large numbers of Jews in our midst, and demonstrate respect for ALL of them, and then come together to heal our very fractured world which, after all, is the work we, as Jews, were put on this earth to do! As the chief rabbi of Great Britain, and brilliant scholar, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs reminds us in his inspirational book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Judaism is a complex and subtle faith:

We are here to make a difference, to mend the fractures of the world, a day at a time, an act at a time, for as long as it takes to make it a place of justice and compassion where the lonely are not alone; the poor not without help; where the cry of the vulnerable is heeded and those who are wronged are heard.

It begins with the choices you have already made in coming to this program at this particular time in Jewish history. You are about to embark on a journey that will take you to places you never imagined you might be. It requires that we, indeed, come together as a community and as communal professionals and learn how to better integrate Torah with Tzedek, Jewish learning with a commitment to justice. We have a responsibility, actually a requirement, to come together, as a community, to do God’s unfinished work of repairing the world. You will all be following different paths as you explore the variety of career opportunities available to you. Whether your primary work is in Jewish education or community relations; planning or fundraising; management or direct services, I hope you will pay attention to the words of Rabbi Sachs who reminds us that “the choice is not between ‘faith’ and ‘deeds,’ for it is by our deeds that we express our faith and make it real in the life of others and the world.”

This is a concept that transcends ALL the movements of Judaism. Rabbi Sachs may wear an Orthodox kippah, but his words are not so different from those of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Conservative rabbi and scholar who taught us that “a Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought – for it is in the deeds that man becomes aware of what life really is...The deed,” he said, “is the test, the trial, and the risk. What we perform may seem slight, but the aftermath is immense.” And, of course, there are many inspiring teachings of Reform Judaism as espoused through the years by the likes of Rabbis Vorspan and Saperstein (and more recently by

Rabbis Pesner and Kolin). “Our tradition,” says Vorpsan and Saperstein in their book on *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice*,

has not dictated specific answers, but rather provided values to be applied to life. Judaism does not mandate for the nations of the world either monarchy or democracy, socialism or capitalism; nor has it endorsed food stamp programs or supply-side economics. These are human inventions and policies. Our role as Jews is to test these human theories and policies and see if they advance or impede the universal moral values of Judaism. And, while good people – including good moral Jews – can and do debate the answers to these questions, a good Jew can never avoid the questions themselves because indifference to the problems that confront society is the unforgivable Jewish sin...because we are Jews and thus we are mandated to dirty our hands in the gritty task of building a better world.

So there you have it, absolute unity of belief from the most dominant streams of Judaism. So, you may ask, wherein lies the problem? I would argue that it is not in the fact that we must take action to heal this fractured world, but it is in the how to do it. In whatever career path you choose to take, you will be confronted with many different beliefs, opinions and passions. Each person you meet will have a compelling story of why their particular paradigm is the right one, why to do anything else might destroy the Jewish community, why Israel’s leaders are all wrong or all right, why Obama is an asset or a disaster for the Jewish people, etc. Your job will be to navigate the path of the “in between.” You will need to be able to disagree without being disagreeable, and you will need to be able to provide leadership during good times and times of crisis.

If you are an optimist, like I am, you will be guided by the belief that most people you encounter really will care about our Jewish future, but each one might just care in very different ways. The bottom line that must guide each of you is a commitment and, I would suggest, an insistence on civil discourse as a requirement. Our ability to engage civilly with one another in our community has been seriously challenged in the past many years and it is a commitment that each of you can and should make to yourselves and to the community-at-large. If you set certain norms for civil discourse as a given, others will follow along.

As we have discussed these last couple of days, in considering the past, present and future of both the domestic and international agendas with which we, as an organized Jewish community are engaged, there are many differences in how challenges we face are being addressed. My colleague, Barry Shrage, recently framed this dilemma in a beautiful d’var torah that he gave to his Orthodox congregation in Newton, Massachusetts on Shavuot. He said:

It seems that we are forgetting the rules of creative engagement so that disunity and strife grows day by day. The political culture, in the United States and in Israel, which seemed as bad as it could get, seems to be growing coarser and more destructive. Parties have stopped talking to each other altogether and the possibility of constructive compromise, of intelligent decision making...of peace...grows ever dimmer. Worse, all sides in the political arguments...in Israel and in the US seem intent on dragging the American Jewish community into a destructive no-win contest between the left and the right.

As we all struggle to work together and find common cause, we seem, as Barry points out, to be pulled by the extremes. In trying to understand why there is such deep anger, Barry draws on the wisdom of Rabbi Sacks who suggests that:

At the heart of divisiveness and polarization is a terrible fear, a sense of abandonment and a failure of optimism and courage...too much anger and vituperation; too much speaking and too little listening; too much condemnation and too little understanding; too much self-righteousness, too little humility and too much preoccupation with our fears and pains, too little attention paid to other's fears and pains.

But, as we have also discussed these last few days, there are models that are working, and there is great cause for optimism about our Jewish future despite the challenges and warning signs which are many. I truly believe that if you have a vision, if you build meaningful partnerships and operate from a place deep in your soul, that YOU can make a difference, YOU can change the world, and YOU will succeed. You have so many great leaders in our history whose lessons you can draw upon. You can look to the models presented by Abraham who opened his tent to the stranger and urged God to save S'dom on the possibility that there were some good people living there; or to Moses who was an insider-outsider, a Jew who was an Egyptian, a man of the oppressed, raised in the house of the oppressor, a man who felt the community's pain, but found, after God's insistence, that he could lead others on a journey of redemption; or to Deborah the judge who was a woman of profound influence in ancient Israel. Deborah was a warrior woman who, although not fully appreciated by the Talmudic sages, was bold and mighty in her leadership during turbulent times after which there was peace for 40 years!

Whichever leadership style YOU choose, I hope you will lead with your soul grounded in our particular Jewish traditions and texts, with a commitment to a universal pursuit of justice for all. So, let me close with the wise counsel of a great American poet and writer, Walt Whitman:

Sail forth – steer for deep waters only;
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee,
And thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?

Thank you and good luck on your journey!