

Living the Life

I am deeply honored to stand before you today as an honorary degree recipient of Hebrew Union College as we celebrate and recognize this year's graduates.

I also am humbled to be included with the other honorees, whose accomplishments and contributions to humanity are an inspiration and source of pride for people of all faiths.

I am joined today by my lovely wife Marjorie, who taught me how to live a Jewish life, and by my dear friends Rabbi David Goldstein and his wonderful wife Shannie. David is Rabbi-emeritus at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans and one of my closest friends. He has been trying to transform me into a Jewish Scholar, and has so far been unsuccessful. So I'm sure he considers it quite a miracle to witness me receiving an honorary degree from his alma mater today.

By the way, David Goldstein is my role model for a Rabbi because he possesses all the attributes I so admire in people: passion for his work, humility, wisdom, knowledge, and perspective.

He has the keen ability to see through the eyes of others and to express with humor, sensitivity, clarity of speech and insight what might be helpful to make the lives of others better. Even if you forget everything I say, if you remember those traits and my wish for them in your lives, you will have walked away with a valuable message.

The cartoonist Garry Trudeau once quipped that "Commencement speeches were invented largely in the belief that outgoing graduates should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated. ". Today I have a corollary to this quip: No newly ordained or future Rabbi should go into the world and to the bema without being forced to hear a speech from one of their likely future congregants.

Not only could I be one of your future congregants, but my own life has been profoundly changed by my experience in embracing Reform Judaism, and Reform Judaism's ability and willingness to embrace me.

I was born and raised in New Jersey by an Italian Catholic mother and a Russian Jewish father. We recognized Jewish and Catholic holidays while growing up, much to the amusement of my childhood friends. Jewish holidays were spent in my grandparents' apartment in New York, where I fondly remember helping my grandmother make matzo ball soup and preparing the table for Shabbat or for the High Holidays.

Christian holidays were spent with my mother's family, enjoying an enormous Italian meal and playing with my cousins. This dual life was a mystery to my Christian and Jewish friends and its existence eventually earned me the nickname of "half- bagel." I'm not sure if that was a compliment or not.

Growing up in an interfaith home in the 1950s was sometimes difficult, especially when it came to fitting in. My Jewish friends said I was never really Jewish because my mother was Catholic, while my Catholic friends said I was not really Christian because my father was Jewish. Despite this, my parents never forced my sister or me to take sides. Today, she is a devout Catholic and I am an observant Jew, and we love and respect each other for our choices. Our parents, who passed away several years ago, were pleased for both of us and never biased our decisions.

"That's an interesting story," you might be saying, "But what does it have to do with us as we graduate today?"

Only this: when I decided to follow the Jewish faith, it was Reform Judaism and its commitment to inclusion that allowed me to not only make that choice, but to be embraced and accepted without hesitation. Without that commitment and acceptance, I would not be standing before you today, proud of my Jewish heritage, committed to my faith and, I hope, representing to others in a positive way the foundations of our beliefs.

My story, of course, is not unique but it is worth repeating because each of you will have the opportunity to do for others what Rabbis in the past have done for me. Inclusion and acceptance are transformative acts that can change a person's life. I hope you will be that agent of spiritual and religious transformation when called upon. The responsibility is awesome, but I can tell you from firsthand experience that the end result can be truly life-changing.

The commitments to inclusion and to Tikkun Olam are sometimes seen as separate aspects when we read or talk about the cornerstone beliefs of Reform Judaism. Yet when I look back on my own life, I realize that inclusion is in itself an important way of repairing the world. Inclusion, by its very nature, combats exclusion, intolerance and prejudice. Inclusion encourages respect. Inclusion accepts those who are different into our faith and, through them, sends them out into the world to change their own lives and all those with whom they come in contact.

And what better goal can we aspire to than repairing the world? It is a beautiful, noble aspiration, but it is not easy. You'll find, as you go through your life that the stresses and strains of everyday living may work to distract you. The business of the world can discourage you.

Yet, that is where our faith compels us to overcome and persevere. And we can do that by realizing that we are privileged, every one of us. We are not necessarily privileged because we come from wealthy families, or because we've had easy lives. We're privileged because we have been given the opportunity of education, that we have been instructed in both the things of the classroom and the tenets of our faith.

Such privilege carries with it responsibility to ensure that others less fortunate have the same opportunities we were afforded. We have a responsibility to practice inclusion and to work to "pay it forward" in ways that repair the world. We have a responsibility to take what has been given to us and pass it along, in small ways or large, everyday and at every opportunity. As Jews, this is our history and our destiny.

You might think today that you don't have the ability to shoulder all that responsibility, but you do. Whether you are a newly ordained Rabbi or graduate degree holder, you already possess the knowledge and skills to "repair the world." The opportunities will present themselves, and you will know how to respond.

How do you know? I can only answer that by saying, "You will know." I'm reminded of a story about New Orleans jazz legend Louis Armstrong. When asked

once to describe his music, Armstrong replied that “if you have to ask what jazz is, you will never know.”

By that same token, if you have to ask what it means to “repair the world,” you probably will never know. But everyone here today knows what it means. It is just one among many things that bind us together and gives us purpose as Jews.

We all understand the importance of *Tikkun Olam* as the epicenter of our faith:

- When you see a family struggling in the darkness of the Katrina flood waters, and you reach out to help;
- When you see a starving child, and you provide a meal and hope for the future;
- When you see indescribable despair and personal suffering , and you find a way to make it better; and
- When you realize that discord, social injustice, poverty, health disparities, and unacceptable public education systems continue to exist in America and around the world, and you use your talent to redress these seemingly intractable problems.

When you see and do these things, then you know what Tikkun Olam means.

This belief sustained and guided me throughout the experience of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Katrina was both a natural and man-made disaster of unprecedented proportions. Its impact on New Orleans, the Gulf Coast Region and Tulane University was devastating, and it threatened the survival of everyone and everything touched by it. The government’s response, or lack thereof, will always be a dark chapter in the history of this country.

Unless you personally lived through Katrina, you cannot fully understand its pervasive impact. In my darkest hours and days after Katrina I needed a lifeline to survive and lead, and a guiding light to show me the way. That lifeline and light came from my religion—it values and beliefs, and what I learned from remarkable people throughout my life who dedicated their lives to “repairing the world” at great personal sacrifice. Time will tell whether I met the challenge or not in Katrina, but I live in the comfort of having tried and along the way, hopefully, helped someone who desperately needed it.

Would I have met the challenges I confronted if I were not a Jew? I certainly hope the answer would be “yes,” but my religion provided a context and expectation that strengthened my will and determination. In many ways, I feel blessed to have been a part of this historical moment to test my faith and to live out my beliefs. I will be forever thankful to Reform Judaism for including me and instilling in me *Tikkun Olam*.

Your journey won't always be easy. There will be failure and disappointment along the way—hopefully, not a hurricane—but during the trying times, recall the words of the remarkable Jewish Rabbi, scholar and former HUC faculty member Abraham Joshua Heschel. He said: “Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments.”

Those of you graduating today are our next generation of leaders, and your influence and direction will impact the world. Given the challenges being faced both by our faith and by the world around us, your task won't be an easy one.

But you will have amazing opportunities to shape and influence the future, to practice your commitment to inclusion, and to help repair a world that often seems so broken. I know you will take what you have learned here at HUC and apply that knowledge and skill in profound and persuasive ways so that our children and our grandchildren have a better life. It has been an honor to be with you today.

Thank you.

*Scott Cowen Speech
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