“What if…?”
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My sincerest thanks to Dean Cohen and President Panken for inviting me to speak to the faculty, students, and staff of our Cincinnati campus. And my thanks also to the good members of our community who support and endorse our work. We welcome everyone to another year of teaching and learning. I would especially like to welcome those rabbinical and graduate students who are new to our campus, and to acknowledge those who will be graduating at the end of this academic year. I’ll be addressing my remarks this morning to you – our students. The rest of you may certainly listen in if you like.

As for me, this is both a beginning and a conclusion: January 1, 2015 will be the first day of my retirement. That’s 126 days from today. (But, hey, who’s counting?) So this is my final opening day convocation, and the last time I will address the HUC community.

One of the very nice things about being the dean of this campus was the opportunity to meet so many interesting people. One of them was a gentleman by the name of Judah Folkman, a physician at Boston Children’s Hospital. We awarded Dr. Folkman the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters at our graduation ceremony in 2008, in recognition of his pioneering work in the field of cancer research.

Dr. Folkman was a dear friend of Dr. David Aaron’s family. The evening before the ceremony, the Aarons invited a few of us to join them for dinner at their home, where we had the opportunity to meet and speak with Dr. Folkman. Over dinner, he explained his research to us.

Dr. Folkman told us that most cancer therapies – radiation or chemotherapy - target individual cancer cells. Surgery, of course, tries to excise the entire tumor. Sometimes these approaches work. Often they do not. But Dr. Folkman’s approach was radically
different. For a long time doctors have known that cancer tumors generate their own blood vessels through a process called angiogenesis. In effect, cancer draws nutrients through its own private supply line. So Dr. Folkman asked himself this question: what if science could somehow turn off the mechanism inside the tumor that produces those blood vessels? Then the tumor and the cancer would simply starve to death.

Some scientists realized immediately the implications of Dr. Folkman’s question. Nobel laureate Dr. James Watson predicted that within two years Dr. Folkman would “cure cancer.” When Dr. Folkman published the results of his initial experiments with mice – complete remission in almost every case - even his detractors had to admit that Watson’s prediction might come true: there was a good chance that Judah Folkman would discover the cure for cancer.

But it was not to be. Dr. Folkman could not replicate in human subjects the results of his promising laboratory experiments.

Those of us listening to Dr. Folkman that evening could not even imagine the disappointment he must have felt: after coming so close, only to see his experiment fail at the end. I suspect Dr. Folkman anticipated our reaction, because he continued his story by assuring us that he considered his experiments to be successful.

He told us that when he realized that some of his assumptions were wrong, he and his team pursued new directions that led them to new and unexpected medical applications. For example, although he did not discover how to completely stop the growth of blood vessels in cancer tumors, he did learn how to reverse the rapid growth of blood vessels in the eye that causes macular degeneration. So what began as a search for a cure for cancer, led instead to a cure for a disease that causes blindness.

As I look back on my years at HUC, I find myself thinking a lot about Dr. Folkman and what he said to us that evening. Because I think that in a very real sense, this school is
much like his experiments. HUC looked at the Jewish and the academic worlds, and saw in them things that were missing, or things that were wrong. And HUC asked “what if?”

What if, asked Adolph Oko, HUC were to build a library that would be one the greatest Judaica and Hebraica libraries in the world, open to scholars and scholarship around the globe?

What if, asked Jacob Marcus, HUC were to collect papers and documents from congregations – large and small – and organizations – major and minor – from all over North America. And what if we made all those papers available to everyone who wanted to understand and tell the story of the Jewish people in North America, so that the story would be told accurately and never be forgotten?

What if, asked Julian Morgenstern and his colleagues on the faculty, HUC were to establish an academic and research center for Judaic and Hebraic studies that rivals and even surpasses those in Europe; a center staffed and led by one of the finest Judaic Studies faculties ever assembled, and open to students of all faiths; a center where scholarship is not confined or limited by religious dogma, but a place where faith itself is flexible, free to reach for the expanding horizons of knowledge and truth?

What if, asked Nelson Glueck, our students viewed Hebrew not as ancient texts, but as a living language? Wouldn’t students better appreciate and understand the literature written in Hebrew if they thought of Hebrew as their native tongue?

I could go on. But you get the point: so many of the programs and activities on this campus began because someone thought there was a different way, a better way to do things. The Klau Library, the American Jewish Archives, the School of Graduate Studies, the Year-in-Israel program all began as experiments.

Not all of our HUC experiments led to the successes we anticipated. Some of them never got off the ground.
Nearly 40 years ago, I had a series of meetings with the President of the University of Cincinnati, Dr. Warren Bennis. What if, Dr. Bennis asked, HUC were to serve as the Department of Religion and Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati? Just imagine how our joint efforts would enrich both schools.

Or consider the proposed HUC Center for Holocaust Studies. What if, President Gottschalk asked, HUC built an academic research center for the study of the Holocaust that would also serve as an educational resource for the entire Cincinnati community?

For a variety of reasons, we decided not to pursue the first experiment. But the discussions with President Bennis built the foundation for UC’s own Judaic Studies department, and for the joint academic program with Xavier University that HUC developed four decades later.

As for our experiment with the Holocaust Center at HUC...After considerable investment of time and money, we realized that the Cincinnati community needed a Holocaust Center much more than HUC did. So we spun it off, and gave it to the people of Cincinnati. Today, the Center for Holocaust and Humanity Education is a vital part of our city.

It is important that you, our students, know about our experiments -- the ones that worked and the ones that didn’t. It is important to understand that we learned from our successes and from our mistakes. It is highly unlikely that any of you will devote your lives to pursuing a cure for cancer. But you will try to heal the world in other ways. And as you do, you will come to grips with the reality of a world that is constantly and rapidly changing. The old answers no longer suffice. Sooner or later, you will have to find your own way, a new way, a better way. Sooner or later, your congregations and your classrooms will become laboratories for your own experiments.

When you come to that point, try to learn from Dr. Folkman’s experience, and from ours, as well…
Don’t be afraid to ask “what if?” – even if you are the only one asking the question; especially if you are the only one asking the question. Challenge conventional wisdom. Make it your mission to get others to challenge it, as well. Koheleth may or may not have been correct that the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong. But there is no doubt that the future belongs to the curious, and to those who have the courage to confront the status quo.

Like any good scientist, as you seek solutions to problems, you will discover information that tests your most highly valued assumptions. When you do, don’t fudge your data. Don’t ignore or try to explain away that information. Rather, rethink your assumptions.

Remember that experiments are not ends in themselves. They are a means to an end. Whatever answers you derive today might very well be unworkable tomorrow. The world keeps changing, and so should you.

That’s an especially difficult challenge for those of us who live in the world of religious thought and who lead religious institutions. The word “sacred” is very much in vogue today. At one time or another, I’ve heard the word applied to ideas; beliefs; texts; prayers and prayer books; curricular innovations; architectural spaces; songs; professional organizations; conventions; committees; months of the calendar; defined benefit pension plans; budgets; and real estate. Now I understand that some people use that word metaphorically. Nevertheless, be careful with it, because our tendency is not to change what we consider sacred. Everything I mentioned before – texts, ideas, prayers, and all the other “sacred” items on the list – are in reality answers to questions, ways to understand the world, attempts to solve problems. They are, in fact, experiments. There is nothing “sacred” about an experiment. Rather, it is the question that drives the experiment – or better yet, the curiosity that drives the question - that should be held in awe.
Finally, understand that yours is not the only experiment. Others are experimenting as well, and maybe finding different answers to the same question. You will learn from all of them. Respect and value your colleagues’ experiments, as much as you value your own. And remember that you often learn the most from those who disagree with you.

A postscript….a few months after that dinner at the Aaron’s home, Dr Folkman suffered a fatal heart attack. But his students and his colleagues are carrying on his experiments. Their work is slow and deliberate, but it continues to progress. Who knows? Some day they, or their students, or their students’ students, may accumulate enough knowledge from their successes, and from their failures, to cure not one, but many diseases.

And someday you, or your students, or your students’ students may have learned enough to heal this world in other ways: to make this world a truly better place -- a world as God intended it to be.

And to think it might all have begun with the question: “what if?”

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It is customary to conclude a talk such as this with an appropriate prayer. This is mine…

על ישראל وعلى רבנו وعلى תלמידיו עליו כל תלמידי תלמידיהו…

Upon Israel and upon her teachers, and upon their students and upon all the students of their students…

Upon those who are teachers and those who are students…may you gain the courage to ask and the knowledge to seek.
Upon those who are students and those who are teachers… may you gain the wisdom to learn from one another, and may you inspire one another to change this world into something better than it is.

Upon those who enter this school in the autumn and upon those who will leave it in the spring - and from one who will depart in 126 days (but, hey, who’s counting?)…

Shalom.