

Graduation 2024

The Aims of Liberal Judaism and Liberal Education

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Welcome to Graduation Ceremonies of our 149th academic year!

Celebrating the accomplishments of the Class of 2024 / 5784.

And honoring our graduates

who have served with distinction

for 25 years of service

to God, the Jewish People and Israel,

and the larger world.

Our world needs your collective guidance, wisdom, and vision more than ever.

We begin with a prayer for the safe return of the hostages,

(now in their 238th day of captivity),

A prayer for the recovery of those wounded in body and spirit,

A prayer for the removal of Hamas,

and an end to the devastation and pain,

the suffering and innocent death

it has wrought,
throughout Israel and Gaza.

And a prayer

For those who govern the state of Israel

That they steadfastly apply Jewish values

That limit harm even in pursuit of legitimate objectives

As Nachmanides's described of the Jewish limits on warfare:

“We are to learn to deal kindly with our enemy.”

Despite this moment of such pain and anguish

We go on as planned.

As we did in the days after Oct 7,

When we installed a visionary new director
of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music,
Cantor Jill Abramson

In the *weeks* after Oct 7,

When we ordained
the 127th, 128th, and 129th
new Israeli Reform rabbis in Haifa.

And in the *months* after Oct 7

As we are pleased to announce two new major gifts totaling \$8.7
million dollars to support HUC—JIR from:

- Michael N. Goldberg
who has established the Michael N. Goldberg Rabbinical
Scholarship Fund,
in memory of his wife Ellen C. Goldberg, of blessed memory,¹
- And Annette Segil²,
who has established the Annette R. Segil Professor of
Education and Jewish Learning as a testament to her lifelong
commitment to Jewish education
instilled in her by her parents.

And even today, with the alarming rise in antisemitism
And nearby protests on college campuses,
we again insist on going forward.

The campus protests illustrate a tension
Between openness and limit setting
Between ensuring freedom of thought and expression
even when it offends
And prohibiting harassment and threats of violence against others
language that Zionists should be killed;
Or that those who support Israel

¹ "honoring her connection to HUC-JIR as clinical faculty and their shared commitment to the future of the Jewish People."

² "a leader in the LA Jewish community and friend of HUC-JIR for decades,"

Are “pro-genocide.”

How *does* one have an open community
and yet set limits for behavior within?

I am inspired by the work of Rabbi David Ellenson, of blessed memory,
who served as the 8th President and Chancellor of HUC-JIR,
and whose untimely death in December we mourn this year.

David studied the tension
inherent in liberal Judaism
between Jewish tradition with strict boundaries
and the open, liberal, modern society in which it existed.
It is the tension that created Reform Judaism
And remains a tension today.

One way is to create barriers to entry
And ensure the purity of your community
By refusing access to those who do not share all of your commitments.

I once had that view,
when I was 29 years old.

still in graduate school,
I was on the board of KAM-Isaiah-Israel in Chicago
Led by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, of blessed memory.

Rabbi Wolf taught me
that the Reform Movement's motto
"choice through knowledge"
was too focused on "having choices,"
rather than on making themⁱ.

And so at a board meeting almost thirty years ago,
I suggested we require that each member family
To sign a *binding* covenant agreeing to:

- Attend shabbat services twice a month,
- Engage in regular Torah study
- Volunteer on the care committee

And I suggested that failing to meet these communal obligations
Their membership would be terminated.

This idea went nowhere for good reasons.

Is forced compliance really the way to encourage engagement in a liberal
society?

And yet, there was still a nagging truth behind the idea:

For can any community say it has expectations of its members without requiring their compliance to its values as a condition of membership?

The question is particularly important for Hebrew Union College.

How others perceive the choices of Jewish leaders

Particularly rabbis and cantors

Is often as important as the integrity behind the decisions they make.

Recognizing that leadership development and clergy formation go beyond what you learn in the classroom,

HUC articulates other expectations that we have of our students:

- to study Torah beyond what's required,
- to adopt meaningful ritual practices,
- to adhere to a high ethical standard for themselves and others;
- and to cultivate *ahavat Yisrael*, a love of and commitment to the Jewish People and Israel.

And we expect our rabbis and cantors

to make a commitment to maintaining a Jewish home

and those with long term partners, a Jewish family.

But with one exception that is now under review,
we don't set any prohibitions or requirements around these expectations
We rely instead on the power of liberal Jewish education and Jewish
Critical and historical study of Torah, text, history and ideas.

Deep exposure to the complexity issues and the diversity of Jewish
practice

And a commitment to Israel and Jewish Peoplehood

The role modeling and mentorship by our faculty at HUC and in the field.

And we have faith in our students

to make responsible choices

recognizing that we cannot control our students' choice

once they leave seminary.

As the Jewish world transforms quickly around us

We are now facing calls to adopt political litmus tests for our students
by those unsettled by a new generation's views about Israel.

And those calls are not surprising:

For historically at moments of societal transition

Even liberal societies feel compelled to erect barriers

In the usually vain hope that prohibitions and barriers are effectiveⁱⁱ.

But rather than shun students

I'd prefer that we have confidence in them

and our educational program.

Students who care enough about the Jewish people

To want to be our leaders

To study at an institution that for over 50 years

has required a year of study in Israel

learning Jewish history, mastering Hebrew, and understanding Israel's complexity.

An institution

that is unabashedly committed to the principles of liberal Zionism,

that defends the needs for the protection of the Jewish People

That fosters the flourishing of Jewish life

And that limits the exercise of state power by principles of democracy and human rights for all, whether in peacetime or war.

But it is true that without walls and barriers

Some students might get through

Making decisions and holding beliefs that are anathema to our values.

As the Israeli political philosopher Yael "Yuli" Tamir has observed:

"...if we wish to respect individuals as the authors of their own lives, we must accept that some of their choices will seem to us less valuable than others." (Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*).

And if we wish to respect our students and alumni

as thoughtful leaders of the Jewish people,

and have confidence in the potential of liberal education

and liberal Judaism
then we will have to accept
that some of their choices will also
seem to us less valuable than others.

And I dare say,
They will come to see that some of our choices,
May not have been as valuable as we believed they once were.

It is precisely at a moment of when complexity is lost
that we need to celebrate the values of liberal education
pluralism and openness
to the very ideals of liberal Judaism
at the foundation of
Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion

We thus celebrate our students' commitments
and honor your achievements.

We honor the sacrifice and commitment of our alumni,
that often put the needs of others ahead of your own and your families.
As translators of Jewish tradition through the power of Jewish
education

You will, and have inspired responsible choices
By applying Jewish wisdom to the most pressing challenges
Of our world.

So, let us celebrate today – the contributions of our alumni still in their
prime, the future of our graduates with their potential stretched before
them, and our cherished values.

You represent the very best that we could have hoped for.
May you be fulfilled as you go from strength to strength!

ⁱ I've shared this image before:
it is as if we are still dancing with Miriam by the shores of the sea,
newly liberated from oppression in Egypt,
without recognizing that Miriam is waiting for us at Sinai,
waiting for us to make meaningful Jewish commitments
that would bind us—
to Jewish practice, study, ethical behavior,
and to one another
in the formation of a community and a people
for the sake of our world.

ⁱⁱ This is not the time nor the venue to explain why HUC is committed to liberal Zionism
And the virtues of *liberal* nationalism that we
Endorse not just for the Jewish People
But in principle for others including the Palestinians:
the protection of a people,
the flourishing of a culture,
and the deployment of state power
limited by the principles of democracy and human rights for all.
Nor is this the time to state our public distress
at the actions of this Israeli government
who well before October 7
violated these very same standards
of Zionism
by making the Jewish people less safe,
constraining Jewish flourishing by narrowing it
and undermining the principle of democracy and human rights
that is a condition of liberal Zionism.
