



**Andrew Rehfeld, Ph.D. President**

**New York Graduation Address 2026, Hebrew Union College**

What an honor and pleasure it is

To welcome you to celebrate the Graduates of the class of 5786/2026

A ceremony held just over one hundred and fifty years

after our founding in the great city of Cincinnati in the fall of 1875.

The degrees that we confer

Recognize our students' achievements

after years of study

And we acknowledge not only their work and sacrifice.

The support of your friends, family, and loved ones

Whose commitment to you we also honor today.

Thank you for that support.

I want to recognize our faculty

For their hard work

Over these years.

And also the absence of some of those faculty:

Cantor Bob Abelson

Rabbi Martin Cohen

And most recently, Rabbi Andrea Weiss.

May I ask our faculty to stand and receive the accolades you deserve for having raised up our students.

Today we also celebrate

Our accomplished alumni of the class of 2001

Through your work in the field

You have demonstrated the importance of this institution



To raise up leaders for the entirety of the Jewish ecosystem  
Through your work as educators and spiritual leaders,  
organizational executives, chaplains, and advocates

You have comforted those who are suffering  
Celebrated with them in times of Joy  
And created meaningful pathways to our tradition  
Strengthening your communities for the sake of our world.  
We are so honored to recognize your sacred service today  
And the significant sacrifice it has taken of your lives.

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I want to begin with a statistic  
our honorees may find either inspiring—or alarming.

Twenty-five years of service  
Along with the two to 7 years of study at Hebrew Union College  
Means that you've been in some way connected to the College  
For almost 20% of our existence!

And not only that, but for more than ten percent  
of the entire history of the United States.

*That* is a remarkable achievement  
And perhaps a sobering reminder  
that history catches up with all of us.

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In thinking of this history  
I was reminded of Benjamin Franklin

Who, when asked whether the US was a monarchy or a republic,  
replied:

“A republic, if you can keep it.”

What does it mean to “keep” something,  
over time,  
across change,  
through generations?

Our tradition offers an answer.

In Deuteronomy,

God commands us *l’shmor et haShabbat*

—to keep, to guard the Sabbath.

Yet earlier, in Exodus,

we are told *lizkor et haShabbat*

—to remember the Sabbath.

Midrash teaches that these commands were uttered as one:

“Shamor v’zachor b’dibur echad”

As we chant every Friday night since the 16<sup>th</sup> century

—keep and remember, in a single utterance.

And there is wisdom there:

we cannot keep what we do not remember—

and we cannot remember

without understanding why something came to be.

The purpose of any institution

—whether the Constitution or Shabbat

—is not identical to its form.

Shabbat observance looks different across time.

The Constitution anticipates amendment.

Franklin understood that to keep the Constitution  
was not to preserve the *structure* of the Government  
It was to remember the values of representative democracy  
And the democratic and cultural norms Upon which it was created

When we preserve things as they are  
Without remembering the *reasons* for which they were created  
we confuse pride of ownership with pride of purpose.  
It is the latter that must always guide us.

Hebrew Union College has long shown its capacity to change and grow.  
No matter how necessary change may be  
It is often heart wrenching.  
We must recognize that there are many ways change can be made  
And that there is reasonable disagreement underlying any particular path.  
And we recognize and hold the poignancy and very real loss  
that accompanies change  
of institutions 150 years old  
Particularly for those most affected  
And those closest to them.

\*

And yet, our capacity to change  
remains essential for our existence.

Look at what stands before us:

the achievement of our students,  
the promise they carry.

Look as well to our alumni—

twenty-five years of sacred service  
reflected in lives of leadership:

Your sacrifice, the things you gave up to do what you have done  
as rabbis, educators, organizers, scholars, and advocates.

Forms differ;  
purposes endure.

Founded by Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati,

Hebrew Union College is a graduate school

a professional school

a seminary

As if all three ideas

were spoken

in a single command.

But they are all serving the “purpose” of our founders.

At the College,

The principles of Reform Judaism

require an unshakable commitment

to liberal Jewish education

Upon which our institution was founded

The principles of Reform Judaism confronted the tension

that Leo Strauss once described

between Athens and Jerusalem.

Athens: where reason, inquiry, and philosophy served as the source of knowledge, and ethical ideals were universalized.

Jerusalem:

where wisdom was derived from God's revelation in Torah in Covenantal relationship with *Am Segula* the Jewish People set apart from all other nations.

Emerging from the Enlightenment

Reform Judaism offered a third way

—not a compromise, but a synthesis:

That the majesty of God's universe

and our ethical purpose in it,

is revealed

through the exercise of reason and science

through which we must understand the accumulated wisdom

in Torah in its most expansive form.

Autonomy as the means through which

we *make* binding choices to Jewish community and practices,

not simply celebrate the choices we have as autonomous agents.

And universalistic particularism: That our identity as Jews and our work in the

Jewish community and on behalf of the Jewish People, is in service to the

universal ends of justice and righteousness and must remain limited by and

accountable to them.

And thus emerges the principles of liberal Jewish education:

We educate; we do not indoctrinate.

We are confident that free inquiry—  
rooted in both Athens and the great Jewish academies,  
along with our almost 60 year long commitment to study in Jerusalem  
is the best means to generate true commitment of our students  
to God, Torah, and Israel.

And that inquiry is the best means  
That we have  
To raise up leaders for an open society  
Ready to confront antisemitism  
And advance liberal Zionism  
It is a principle that rejects calls to violence  
against Jews or Palestinians  
in pursuit of the dignity and right of self-determination  
of all peoples  
in the land of their historic origins.

Liberal Jewish education requires a protected educational space  
not to withdraw from the world,  
but so that our graduates can engage in it more vigorously.

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We who seek to build a more vibrant Jewish future fueled by Reform Judaism  
will succeed only if we sustain that tension between Athens and Jerusalem that lies at  
its core.

We must not be tempted by:  
a narrowing particularism,  
An embrace of Jerusalem  
balanced not by the rational universalism of Athens

but the militarism of Sparta  
Nor shaped by emotional charismatic leaders  
that demand uncritical loyalty to the state—any state—  
without regard to its founding purpose.

Even with the existential threats that Israel faces  
And the very real antisemitism we must confront globally  
History offers warnings of abandonment of liberal aims  
It is not only not good for HUC  
It is never good for the Jews  
There is the risk of course that liberal Jewish education will not always create the result  
we want

Our students will post things that make us uncomfortable.

Our graduates will pursue agendas we believe undermine our strength.

But this is a small price to pay for adhering to our sacred principles

So I ask you: keep, and remember.

Remember those who came before—not to preserve their forms,  
but to carry forward their purpose.

Keep faith with the education that has shaped you.

Let it guide your service.

And may you our new graduates, like the alumni we honor today,  
give that service form—

varied, courageous, and enduring.

You could do no better than to emulate those in front of you.