

**HUC GRADUATION SPEECH. MAY 13, 2024
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Thank you President Rehfield

Dear President Rehfield, Rabbis, faculty, esteemed guests, and most importantly, graduates.

A tectonic shift refers to movements in one or more of the plates that make up the earth's crust, causing catastrophic events on the earth's surface such as earthquakes and volcanoes.

It has become abundantly clear that the unspeakable events of October 7 --and all that has unfolded in its wake --created a tectonic shift for Jews and Jewish life in Israel, in America and around the world. It is those events which will shape the professional careers of today's graduates.

The impact on Israel and Israelis is profound and indisputable—and on this Yom Hazikaron, we feel that impact even more keenly.

But it is within the context of a traumatized American Jewish community that most of you, today's graduates, will be living and working. Let's start by looking at a few examples of the dramatic changes afoot.

Consider Hillel—an organization known by most of you, and one well-known to me. My husband and I met at Hillel at UCLA 52 years ago when it operated out of an old building shared with several other religious groups. Later, as an active lay person, I led the process of building our own building which now stands across from the UCLA faculty center on Hilgard Avenue. Our goal as we embarked on the campaign—a quarter century ago--- was to create a warm, friendly environment to entice more Jewish students to explore and deepen their Jewish identities.

Mission accomplished: Our community built the building and our Rabbis and staff succeeded in bringing in students for the past two decades. Now, post-October 7, our Hillel building is teeming with students.... but not solely for the reasons we originally envisioned. Many are there because they are afraid to hang out elsewhere on campus. We never would or could have envisioned Hillel as a bunker of sorts, to escape campus violence targeting Jewish students.

Here is another example of the tectonic shift: previous acts of violence and hate against Jews or synagogues such as in Poway or Pittsburgh were seen, by and large, as isolated events wherein the perpetrators were fringe actors. And, previously, on college campuses, there were also anti-Zionist voices, but their impact on Jewish campus life was relatively minimal.

Today, on our university campuses, faculty and students are targeting Jewish students either because the Jewish students support Israel or because the students are presumed to support Israel, and all her policies. It seems that in many instances, the nuance and individuality of Jews are erased, leaving us frightened that we are reliving the trauma of Jews in ages past when one Jew was no different from another and all Jews were deemed to be members of the unpopular, despised political or religious “other” of its time.

As difficult and even shocking as it is to believe, the modern anti-Israel cause and rhetoric on university campuses has become a form of legitimate, political expression. It is ironic that this ultra-popular so-called “freedom” movement was spawned by Hamas, which tolerates no free political expression from Palestinians and is an undeniable perpetrator of murder, rape, terror, and anti-Semitism. Rabbi Sharon Brous of the LA synagogue community IKAR aptly noted that on October 7 the world turned upside-down as what she described as “a retrograde, regressive, totalitarian, misogynistic, messianic terrorist regime,” at least for now, became the erstwhile darling of those whom many of us thought of as decent Americans and fellow human rights activists.

Our history is replete with times during which our people lived at sufferance: we have been enslaved because our loyalty was doubted; we have been banished from kingdoms because our religion was different; we have been expelled to seize our wealth;

we have been murdered and scapegoated for ills which have plagued society. So, the rhetoric and actions of American Neo-Nazis and of Proud Boys are familiar to us. But now, we are at a point in time where antisemitism from various directions and diverse societal and political factions is converging and putting American Jewish life into serious jeopardy.

Post-October 7, the movement against Zionism has broadened in many instances to becoming openly antisemitic. To be sure, there are some who would rather describe what is happening as expressions of criticism of Israeli policy, or, at most, as anti-Zionism. However, there is a great deal of evidence that this movement has, in many cases, transcended far beyond that narrower description.

The anti-Zionist and indeed, often antisemitic, movement has gained not only legitimacy, but also has attained a certain elevated, heroic, almost righteous status. And that movement and its newfound prestige extends beyond college campuses into government bodies and councils at all levels. There are voices in the US Congress who call Israel genocidal and there are local school boards and small city councils for whom Israel is completely irrelevant to their work, but nevertheless is the subject of antisemitic rhetoric and passionate resolutions of condemnation. It is that shift in status, acceptability, and its pervasive and growing popularity which has created one of the most profound seismic shifts for American Jewry.

And, here is a final example which strikes a particularly painful note for me.

Twenty years ago, in response to the genocide in Darfur, the late, great Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis asked me to partner with him to create Jewish World Watch, a Jewish response to genocide-- putting into action the post-Holocaust adage “Never Again.” The mission of Jewish World Watch was based upon the teachings of Torah and to ensure that we were not repeating the sin of silence committed by most of the world during the holocaust.

With Rabbi Schulweis’ moral clarity and deploying the community organization skills I learned here at HUC and at USC’s school of social work, the organization flourished. Jewish World Watch’s mission captured the support of synagogues and churches with special appeal to high school and college students who were excited to engage in a significant global humanitarian cause...as Jews.

We established campus clubs across the US to educate students on the genocides we were fighting, integrating Jewish values into our training. These students activated their campuses and helped make a meaningful impact in fighting genocide and serving its survivors.

Aside from Darfur, we mobilized for the millions of women raped in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for the marginalized Muslim Uyghurs in China, for the Muslim Rohingya population in Burma, and for the millions of anti-Assad civilians being murdered in Syria.

We spoke in hundreds, maybe thousands of venues to inspire anti-genocide activism. We traveled to many of these far away, scary places many times to lend moral support and pragmatic support on the ground with projects we helped to develop and fund for the benefit of survivors.

With that background, you can probably imagine our shock and despair, that after October 7, our newsletter updates about the ongoing genocides and our projects have, at times, become the targets of hateful vitriol and accusations, that as perpetrators of a genocide in Gaza, we have no standing or credibility to decry other genocides. Meanwhile, on campuses, as many Jewish students are harassed and accosted by protesters accusing them of being complicit in a genocide against Gazans, asking our students to speak out against genocide in Darfur or Burma or China, has placed them in a dangerous and precarious position, making it impossible to currently continue our work.

On October 12, well before Israel's invasion of Gaza, there was an article by Gal Beckerman in the Atlantic in which he wrote:

“The people on ‘my side’ (referring to those involved in activist human rights causes) ... are supposed to recognize the common humanity of people in need. But I quickly saw that many could see what had happened only through established categories of colonized and colonizer, evil Israeli and righteous Palestinian—templates made of concrete.”

The question is: how do we deal with this? Or more aptly to you graduates: how will YOU deal with this?

Since the 1950's, American Jewry has ridden a “post-Holocaust” wave of apparent safety and popularity. According to the many Pew Research studies conducted over the last many decades, America's Jews were repeatedly found to be the most admired religious group in America. We thrived, we were accepted, indeed admired. For non-Jews, marrying a Jew was by and large acceptable...even desirable. Not that antisemitism did not exist. But most would agree that antisemitism did not impact American Jewry's sense of security and safety in America.

During that time, thanks to the rabbis, educators, and Jewish communal workers, many of whom were and are graduates of this institution, countless novel Jewish community organizations and projects were created and then stewarded. It was an era of enormous creativity in American Jewish life.

Synagogue life was re-imagined, religious practices were reinvented, and Judaism flourished--from the Orthodox to those who created and embraced the New Age Judaism, and everything in between. Untold ways for American Jews to support Israel were developed.

Further, during those decades, many organizations were founded using Jewish values to address a panoply of causes that are not uniquely Jewish. For example, the Coalition for the Environment and Jewish Life fighting climate change; JQ working to create joyful and healthy lives for LGBTQ+ Jews, and one, of which I am the past board chair, Beit Tshuvah, providing a Torah-based program for addiction recovery for Jews and non-Jews alike. And, as I already referenced, there is Jewish World Watch fighting genocide or another organization, which I co-founded and lead, Jews United for Democracy & Justice providing a weekly virtual town hall to promote and preserve our American democracy and fight against authoritarianism.

In a recent epic article about American Jewry which appeared in The Atlantic, author Franklin Foer calls the last 75 years “the Golden Age for Jews in America.” And sadly, Foer starkly asserts, that, as of October 7, that Golden Age is over.

It may be too soon to know whether Foer is right or wrong. But, what we DO know is that this graduating class will face extraordinary and unique challenges as they embark on their careers.

Now, a growing number of young Jews in our community are publicly raising questions that previously would only be whispered. They are asking out loud if they can embrace Judaism without embracing Israel. And even those who hold Israel and its promise as a core value for American Jewish life, must deal with a world—and our own American political landscape—that increasingly sees Israel as a bad actor and seeks to make her a pariah.

What is the foundational core of our post-October 7 Jewish identity? How will we grapple with our relationship with Israel and the divides within our own community about Israel? What changes will be made to better educate our children about the complexities of Israel and her neighborhood? How do we teach our children and community to be critical thinkers and caring critics?

How do we teach the lessons of our tradition, a tradition that invites responsibility for one another's conduct and allows careful challenge to Jews who are angry at, or disillusioned with, Israel, such that they draw closer to Israel rather than reject her? What will America's and American Jewry's relationships be with Israel going forward?

Will our community meet the challenge of finding new ways to connect those disillusioned with Israel to embrace her or perhaps a new way for American Jews to engage with or even meaningfully challenge Israel on critical policies?

And further, in this post-October 7 world, what does being a Jew mean in the public or civic sphere? Even as our community grapples with these complex internal Jewish identity issues, our Jewish community must also consider how to rebuild or reintegrate external civic relationships after feeling betrayed or abandoned by many of our traditional allies on domestic civil and political issues. These are just some of the critical questions which will be at the center of your careers as Jewish communal workers and educators...And, that's not all...

For the last 75 years Israel was only one of the two foundational pillars of American Jewish communal identity and life—the second foundational pillar was the Holocaust. So, while you will be dealing with the dramatic changes brought about by the events of October 7, the second foundational pillar raises dramatic challenges for this generation of leaders as well.

Since shortly after 1945, remembering the Holocaust has been central to our American Jewish organizations and educational curricula. To those of my generation, it was our parents and grandparents who directly experienced the depth of that trauma.

But now, for today's youngest Jewish generation, the Holocaust is a far off distant historical event that happened as many as 5 generations ago. To them, it may as well have happened to the Israelites who left slavery—the 6 million might be a symbol of survival, but not one which evokes the visceral, emotional reaction it did to those of us raised in aftermath of the Holocaust and whose parents and grandparents were survivors.

It will be your challenge to ensure that the murder of 6 million Jews does not become an historical footnote for future generations of American Jews; it is important for our people to know our history and to honor the lives, culture and the memory of those who perished in the Shoah. As the Baal Shem Tov, who is known as the founder of Hasidic Judaism said, “Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.”

And further, the lessons of the Holocaust transcend our own story. The lessons of the Holocaust go to the fabric of the well-being of our American society, a country founded on civil liberty, religious freedom, and courts committed to the rule of law, not the rule of an empowered party or person.

In preparation for speaking to you today I was thinking about the challenges which faced my graduating class of this school 49 years ago when I embarked on my career. I remembered that then too, we as a community were in crisis. The late Gerry Bubis, founder of the School of Jewish Communal Services as the Zelikow School was known at the time, explained the crisis as existential--a crisis of the very continuity of the Jewish people. How would American Jewry which was more or less free of the scourge of antisemitism, a community that was accepted so completely by American society, going to combat assimilation and intermarriage.

There is an irony that the crisis confronting the field 50 years ago was borne of the absence of antisemitism confronting American Jewry, while your class' crisis is borne of the resurgence and emergence of new forms of antisemitism.

So, I will conclude where I began. A tectonic shift refers to movements in one or more of the plates that make up the Earth's crust. But, one thing about the earth's plates...they are always shifting and the earth, in the brilliance of Creation, adapts and evolves.

Similarly, as October 7 was a tectonic shift for our people, so too are those shifts endemic to the creation and evolution of the Jewish people.

Ancient tectonic shifts, such as: Our exodus from Egypt, our gathering at Mount Sinai, our exile to Babylonia, our expulsion from Spain -- and more contemporary shifts such as: the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, the 6- day war, the exodus of millions of Soviet Jews from the Soviet Union, the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin, and of course October 7— are just a few of the monumental tectonic shifts our people has experienced making us and Israel who we are today.

Every generation has its challenges—and the challenges before you, the 2024 graduates of the Hebrew Union College, are substantial indeed. It is those challenges that will shape your mission and service.

You are ready. You are educated and prepared. You are motivated. And you are poised to address these challenges and contribute to the tapestry of the enduring, dynamic, and exciting story of our people. It is not just a story of survival. It is a story of a flourishing resilient people with unique perspectives, values and gifts to contribute to the world and its inhabitants.

It is YOUR turn to be at the center of writing our next chapter. A chapter in which you will imagine the ways to help American Jewry adapt to today's seismic circumstances and lead us forward.

How exciting is that? For us and for you!! And, we here today have no doubt that you can do this...and you will...and you will find strength in one another and what you create will be great.

I am confident in entrusting the future of the Jewish people to you.

Mazal tov and may you all go from strength to strength.