



Judah Cohen Graduation 2026 Invocation
New York Graduation, Hebrew Union College

Welcome to this glorious, joyful day.

My name is Judah Cohen, Provost of Hebrew Union College. And welcome to our Hebrew Union College to our graduation ceremony.

To President, Andrew Rehfeld

To our outstanding program directors, faculty, administration, students, leaders of our boards of Advisors and Board of Governors,

To Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmor, our ordainer.

To Rabbi Josh Davidson of Temple Emanu-El, which hosts our ceremony every year, and provides us the right space for every occasion.

To Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, and to the leaders of our Reform movement institutions.

To our Board Chair David Edelson.

We are so honored to have Rabbi David Saperstein here with us today to give the graduation address and to accept the Sherut L'Am Award.

And we keep in our hearts, those who

Most importantly, welcome to our degree candidates

who have earned the Master of Hebrew Literature

and Master of Sacred Music,

Master of Arts in Jewish Nonprofit Management, and

Master of Arts in Religious Education.

Family, friends, and colleagues, inherited and chosen, in robes and in festive dress, thank you for the providing the support that brings us to this moment. For your love, your encouragement, and your humor. While we celebrate the work of the students at the front of our sanctuary, and behind me, we know that they stand, and sometimes cry, on your shoulders. Thank you.



I also want to assure you that while this ceremony is scheduled as an in-person experience, I am thrilled to welcome all those joining us on our livestream. I can assure you that what you'll see in the hour (or maybe two) ahead will be designed, written and presented by humans, with many kinds of intelligence, all real.

And to our alumni—welcome back! Twenty-five years ago, when I was a doctoral student, I remember being with you, in classes and services, practica and recitals, celebrating your achievements as you prepared for a future with optimism, some trepidation, a passion for wisdom, and a spirit to serve the world: all amid that constant tension between honoring the past and our tradition and navigating the unknown landscape of the new century. Now we know what those years would bring, and here we are: our maturity may be symbolized by pure white strands crowning our heads (and sometimes departing from them); we recognize gravity as more than just scholarly seriousness; and as we read our sacred texts, we have come to know the true meaning of magnified and sanctified: Cantors and Rabbis and Educators, we welcome you back to receive an honor for your years of dedicated service.

This season completes my first year as the Provost of Hebrew Union College, and I stand before you all in awe—and not just because I am still standing. My early years at Hebrew Union College over 25 years ago, showed me the active pursuit *Shalshelet HaKabbalah*: the chain of reception that Jewish leadership represents. In this moment, however, it feels profoundly different. We are no longer the newest link in that chain, but instead, after years of navigating challenge after challenge, many expected, many more unexpected, we have somehow become the anchor for others to learn and receive the wisdom of ages on their own terms. During this ceremony, under the pomp and circumstance, degrees and diplomas, processions and applause, we acknowledge through you, our candidates both new and returning, that the chain of inheritance is constantly in forward motion.

By joining together as one congregation, we affirm that Jewish leadership demands far more than accumulated knowledge or technical skill. In earning these accolades, we answer the call for something deeper: a willingness to give ourselves in service to others, to open our hearts across generations, and to accept our sacred trust as a lifetime of challenge and change, both in the world, and in who we are. In this space, now, we see that sometimes we can most profoundly fulfill that call to Jewish leadership simply by being present. *Hinei Anachnu: HERE WE ARE. WE ARE READY.*