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Dear Degree Candidates, Doctor of Divinity Recipients, Colleagues, and Loved ones:

Congratulations on reaching this extraordinary moment. Through the familiar rituals we enact on this stage, we confer upon you the privileges and responsibilities of your new degrees. Faculty, mentors, and staff have all guided you to be fellow travelers. And now we look on proudly as you train your eyes to the future and take your next steps.

But what does your future bring? As a scholar, I have been trained (or, in our current wording, formed) to seek truth by gathering sources together, evaluating them with scientific precision, and then presenting what I see, even if it contrasts with what I feel. Ultimately, I have learned: to be a scholar, one must live in three worlds (at least)—the world that is, the world that we want, and the worlds that others want. With each meeting, each conversation, I revel in the tension of competing possibilities.

One of my son's baseball coaches, and a dear friend, summarized this view succinctly. When a player performed particularly well in a game, or when the coach wanted a player to focus in a difficult moment, he would call to them: "It's your world. We're just living in it." The team never forgot how much they relied on each other; but the coach's words gave each player the confidence and support to be fully present, and to face each challenge—especially important in a game, that, like life, constantly subjects you to failure.

At times when I feel particularly powerless, I wonder what it means for us to live, and sometimes endure, in the fantasies of others. Do we fight back, or do we respond by writing our own fantasies? In his novel *Unholy Land*, author Lavie Tidhar creates an alter ego fantasy writer who is challenged in this manner by a tv host: the host "accusing him of writing fantasy, and wasn't that an escape, to which he'd responded, somewhat defensively, that on the contrary, fantasy was the only way that allowed one to examine

alternate realities, and wasn't that an important thing to do, politically under the circumstances" (*Unholy Land*, p. 2). In these moments, I think of the words of the prophet Joel, chapter 3 verse 1—And the elders shall dream dreams, and the young people shall see visions—and I wonder where, between these two activities, we can best situate our goals for the world. How will you write your stories ethically, and rely on our own skills and rationality, and yet accept with grace the moments when our world seems absurd, or upside down? We must live in reality, yes, but first we must have visions.

Over the course of your studies at Hebrew Union College, you've read sacred texts and scholarship, analyzed writings, and learned how to translate your own thoughts into logical strings of words, sermons, explanations, curricula, and theses. You've studied the rhythms of Jewish life, prayer, and education, and mastered their patterns with the help of teachers, mentors, and colleagues. And you've pursued these goals even as you may have found yourselves living in someone else's world, whether technological, bureaucratic, economic, political, or climate-based. And I have seen you negotiate the tensions of these worlds with intelligence, grace, and humor. As you have diligently pursued your truths, Hebrew Union College's Skirball campus has highlighted Jews as a people of the book...shelf; it has offered its own physical manifestation of *tzimtzum*; mustard-yellow chairs have presented local history and heritage, often involuntarily; and perhaps your dreams have been interrupted more than once by the sudden appearance of a 20-foot tall metal Moses holding two tablets above his head, and preparing to... well, that's typically when I wake in a cold sweat. I hope you have also seen your time at Hebrew Union College as an exercise in rationality, refinement, and tradition, and in the opportunity to envision the Jewish future you wish to pursue. Thank you for trusting us, thank you for your role in creating our sacred community; and please come back often.

And now, graduates, we look to you to fulfil your visions. This is your world now. We are only living in it. As you go forth, please treat us well, remember us, and strive to make your world a better place for us all.