

Kavanah

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Hebrew Union College, Ordination, May 3, 2026

Those of you who have attended an Hebrew Union College ordination before will know that each cantor- and rabbi-to-be will stand in front of this magnificent ark will hear words from the person privileged to fulfill the ordaining role. The words are off-mic, like when lawyers approach the bench in courtroom dramas. People always ask, as they hear the music selected by each ordinee and drink in the beauty of the occasion: what on earth is going on up there?

Some of the words I will speak to these persons are very old, and some brand new. Their purpose is to mark the creation of brand new *klei kodesh*.

Kli Kodesh, or in the plural form, *klei kodesh*, can be translated as 'vessels of sanctity', but in its Hebrew usage, the word *kli* is not only a vessel. It is that (*kli dam* is blood vessel) but also *kli zemer* (musical

instrument, which is where the Yiddish expression klezmer comes from), *kli rechev* (vehicle), *kli shayit* (a sea-going vessels) and much more – it can describe a boat, a utensil, a tool, a mechanism, furniture, kitchenware, accessories, and more besides.

This moment of ordination does not make these eighteen individuals holy. They were holy already. All people are, even though the world contrives every moment to forget this rudimentary fact. Rather, it expresses our belief that they are ready to serve as *klei Kodesh*, conduits of meaning, vehicles of possibility, utensils of the ultimate, Tupperware of the transcendent, instruments of hope.

A *kli* does not make itself, although everyone of these eighteen individuals have great natural talents and have shown themselves to be capable of serious application and hard work. You here, the people who brought them into the world and nurtured them and supported them and love them, it is important that you know how much you have done

to bring them to this moment. I know that at this moment every *kli* to be may be bringing to mind people who may not be here in person, but are part of their formation. Vessels of holiness are long in the making, sometimes generations.

Our tradition speaks of the transfer of fluids *mikli lekli*, from one vessel to another. Something is transferred – permission, authority, expectation, - from vessel to vessel, from generation to generation, from ordainer to ordinee. Twice in recent years our institution has experienced profound sadness as the expected ordainer has not been here to perform the task – eight years ago following the sudden death of Rabbi Aaron Panken one day before the ceremony, and this year in the wake of the loss of Rabbi Andrea Weiss a few weeks ago. Many of us here at this moment feel Andrea's lack very keenly. We can take some comfort that she, and Aaron before her, never believed that this moment was about them. For Andrea, the act of ordaining you was one of the most profound privileges of her life. For us, it hurts greatly that she isn't physically here. But as a *kli*

kodesh, she knew that in one of the longest relay races in human history, we only ever get to be active vessels of continuity for a relatively brief time. She is not here to carry you through the choreography of this day, but like others who are no longer here she is part of what you carry.

There is a tractate of the Mishnah called *Kelim*, vessels, and much of its thirty chapters deal with questions of Temple ritual. In this year of upheaval and uncertainty, of war and loss, of blockade and bluster, of the undermining of many fundamental beliefs, one two-word teaching from that tractate stands out. It reads: *Nishberu, Taheru* – if a vessel is broken it is purified.

We are conditioned to think that sanctity goes along with invincibility. You may dream of being non-stick vessels, impervious to imperfection. But that is not the vessels we need you to be. *Nishberu, Taheru* – your lives as cantors and rabbis will not be characterized only by rapture. There will also be rupture. We hope you will do whatever you can to

stay resilient as *klei kodesh* – loving, laughing, pacing yourselves, taking good advice, learning, learning, learning – but we also know that there will be moments when stuff breaks. The cracks in the vessels are where the purity gets in. One Hasidic commentator teaches that this message – that broken vessels carry purity – is an essential precursor to *kabbalat Torah*, receiving Torah, as we will mark as a people in less than three weeks' time at the festival of Shavuot.

So much is broken at this moment. You are launching as vessels at a time when the sea is metaphorically stormy and the straits are physically blocked. Some use their religious status as *klei neshek*, instruments of destruction. Religion is being weaponized. Please remember what the very last Mishnah of the entire Mishnah teaches:

OKTZIN 3:12

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן הַלְפָתָא, לֹא מֵצָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
כְּלֵי מַחְזִיק בְּרַכָּה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֶלָּא הַשְּׁלוֹם

Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta said: the Holy One, Blessed be He, found no *kli* , no vessel that could contain blessing for Israel save that of peace.

To be effective as *kelim* you will need to be courageous and you will not always be everyone's favorite. Sometimes it will be necessary to mobilize and initiate. We pray you will always do so in pursuit of something greater than success, something more lasting than popularity or job security, something more profound than any of us.

We prepare to launch eighteen new vessels. In admiration of your capacities and commitments, we salute you. We need what you bring to these lives of service. We trust that as you navigate our complicated times, the sanctity of the challenge keeps you buoyant. We invoke now the legacy of Moses and Aaron, of Aaron and Andrea, as we launch these vessels of sanctity.