

HUC-JIR Ordination Address

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It is an enormous honor to be here today. This moment reminds me of the awe and emotion I felt at my own ordination, which was then mixed, of course, with not a small measure of imposter syndrome. Rabbi Leon Morris?? I feel a sense of that imposter syndrome now as well, standing in the pulpit of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise to say something about the future of the Jewish community you will serve.

I feel the presence of a century and a half of rabbis ordained on this bima, the contributions they made to Judaism and the lives they touched. I think of my hero, Judah Magnes, the first American-born Reform rabbi, Jacob Rader Marcus, born in my hometown of Connellsville, PA, and my beloved childhood rabbi, Barry Roger Friedman. Although I went to the New York school, the Cincinnati campus shaped my journey, starting with a letter I received from Rabbi Gary Zola when I was 15 or 16 years old, leading me to high school and college colloquia, NFTY National Board meetings, and more.

In the opening words of our parashah, we read, אַם-בְּחֻקֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ – "If you walk in my laws." The metaphor of walking is repeated throughout the Torah and within this parashah.

The midrash in Vayikra Rabbah connects these opening words of the parashah about *walking* with a verse from Psalm 119:

חֲשַׁבְתִּי דַרְגֵי וְאָשִׁיבָה רַגְלִי אֶל-עֲדוּתֶיךָ

"I have thought about my paths, and I would return my feet to your testimonies."

You have indeed considered your paths, all the possible directions that your life could have taken. At this hour in particular, so many of us who are here to celebrate with you,

feel how fortunate it is that your feet have led you to this path. This moment in history urgently needs your leadership.

The world is on fire, and now more than ever, the Jewish people needs your insight, teachings, creativity, and sense of shlichut, of mission. Yet, this path that you have chosen is largely unlit, unpaved, and unclear. While a similar path was pursued by generations of rabbis who lived before us, your rabbinate will require an ability to navigate a radically different world. Compared to our Reform forebearers like Rabbi Wise, the American Jewish community you will serve vastly differs from the one that inspired him to shape the institutions he did.

As my friend and colleague, Rabbi Danny Schiff, who joins us this morning insightfully noted in his recent book:

“The foundational ideas of the Conservative and Reform movements were crafted as cutting-edge concepts for a societal and intellectual milieu that existed when horses were the dominant mode of transportation. It is, however, unrealistic to expect that ideas derived from a nineteenth-century response to modernity will be well-calibrated to a vastly transformed epoch with self-driving cars controlled by artificial intelligence ply the streets.”

Technological advances, the emergence of AI, scientific discoveries, medical advances, and much more require a Judaism that can be made relevant to the most pressing issues of our day, and a fluency with texts and ideas that allow that discourse to flourish. The demographics of American Jewish landscape are also in flux. By 2050, the majority of the world’s Jews will live in Israel, and more than 20% of American Jews will be Orthodox, both profoundly impacting Jewish identity, practice, and culture.

Personal Choice Cannot Become an Idol

חֲשַׁבְתִּי דַרְכֵי וְאָשִׁיבָה רַגְלִי אֶל-עֵדוּתֶיךָ:

“I have thought about my paths, and I would return my feet to your testimonies.”

The midrash from Vayikra Rabba continues with greater detail and provides a specific example of what this verse from Psalms means and how it is connected to the opening words of our parashah.

אָמַר דָּוִד רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם בְּכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹם הָיִיתִי מְחַשֵּׁב וְאוֹמֵר לְמַקּוֹם פְּלוֹנִי וּלְבֵית דִּירָה פְּלוֹנִית אֲנִי
הוֹלֵךְ, וְהִיוּ רַגְלֵי מְבִיאוֹת אוֹתִי לְבֵתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּלְבֵתִי מְדַרְשׁוֹת, הֲדָא הוּא דְכַתְּיִב: וְאַשְׁיְבָה רַגְלֵי
אֶל-עֲדוֹתַי:

David said: ‘Master of the Universe, every day I would plan my route and say: I am going to this place or that, to this home or that. But my feet would bring me to a beit kneset (shul) or a beit midrash (study hall).’

Note here how the midrash captures the notion that our chosen paths are not entirely of our own making. Perhaps many of you also feel that an element of calling and destiny guided you to this path. Perhaps the opportunity to serve the Jewish people, to teach, and to inspire is even experienced as a sense of duty and obligation.

Duty and obligation are terms that are rare in our Reform lexicon. Yet they are making a resurgence in the conversations about contemporary religious life.

Antonio Martinez Garcia, describing his decision to convert to Judaism, wrote,

“The current liberal project’s moral goal...is creating lives devoid of any unchosen obligations and absolutely rife with chosen identities of fanciful and recent coinage. The problem is that it’s the unchosen obligations—or the obligations chosen but whose downstream responsibilities cannot be unchosen—that give us the only real meaning in life. Family, children, our hometowns, our childhoods, our ethnic identity (if we have one), or the chosen-but-undoable commitments—marriage, joining the military, that company we start, religious faith—are the defining obligations where our selves really play out.”

After two centuries of emphasizing personal autonomy and human freedom today our movement can declare victory in that campaign. Every modern Jew knows they are free to make choices in all areas of their lives, particularly when it comes to religion, spiritual practice, and ritual. They need no reminder from the pulpit that they are free to choose. For them, for all of us, it is simply a given. They wouldn’t assume otherwise.

But now, as rabbis, you can help them navigate what to do with this freedom, how to use their positive freedom responsibly, their freedom to do, in ways that enhance themselves, their community and the Jewish people.

My beloved teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, developed the concept of the “autonomous Jewish self” as one of the most rigorous attempts to rein in unbridled autonomy within the Reform movement. Rabbi Borowitz’s five vectors involved in covenantal decision-making provide a framework for balancing personal autonomy with the commanding force of tradition. Many other modern Jewish thinkers developed their own ideas about how to reclaim a sense of obligation and duty without denying the inescapable reality of personal choice and freedom.

Your rabbinic leadership begins at a moment in time in which increasing numbers of American experience what social critics are calling “the tyranny of choice.” At the same time, dichotomies of all sorts are being broken down. Autonomy versus Heteronomy. Human freedom versus obligation. Critique versus blind acceptance. This way of seeing things now seems too reductionist, too simplistic. Nuance is the order of the day. In this century, we can think in poetry as well as prose, in symbolism as well as fact. We can bring a hermeneutic of embrace to live comfortably alongside our extremely well-developed hermeneutic of suspicion.

To be Jewish leaders today, we must re-embrace the notion of halachah on Reform terms. Professor Mark Washofsky wrote in his new book,

“Halachah is the textual language through which the Jews have worked out their answers to the question, ‘What does God, speaking through the medium of Torah, want us to do?’”

Indeed, Prof. Washofsky writes,

“...halachah is the indispensable source of information for the making of ‘informed choice,’ which we have declared to be the necessary prerequisite to exercising our autonomy...”

Jewish Study as Central

Let's return to our midrash.

וְהָיוּ רַגְלֵי מְבִיאוֹת אוֹתִי לְבַתִּי כְּנִסְיוֹת וּלְבַתִּי מְדַרְשׁוֹת.

Note how the midrash presents the Beit Knesset (the synagogue) and the Beit Midrash (the house of study) as the two great rabbinic institutions of Jewish life. While we have achieved enormous success in building synagogues over the past century and a half, we've largely neglected the Beit Midrash.

I want to share with you a letter that the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'Am wrote as words of advice to his friend Rabbi Judah Magnes, who had just assumed the pulpit at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan.

“... I am not sure whether you regard the Synagogue and the House of Study as two distinct institutions and mean to establish them separately from one another; but if you do, I do not think that you will achieve your object. Experience everywhere, and especially in America, has shown that the Synagogue by itself, as a House of Prayer exclusively, cannot save Judaism, which, unlike other religions, does not depend on prayer. Nor can the separate House of Study, which is intended for young people in search of knowledge, serve as an instrument of popular education. We have to revert to the system that our ancestors adopted in days gone by and to which we owe our survival: We have to make the Synagogue itself the House of Study, with Jewish learning as its first concern and prayer as a secondary matter.... Learning, learning, learning is the secret of Jewish survival.”

You may lead communities brimming with creativity and innovation, congregations committed to social justice and Tikkun Olam. However, many still need an infusion of deep Jewish content, of study that ignites the mind and the heart. Our community possesses the most extraordinary breadth of secular education of any in Jewish history, yet our ignorance of Judaism is unprecedented. The value of Talmud Torah – the study

of Torah – remains elusive in American Jewish life. While it is true that many folks have enrolled in courses, attended lectures, and participated in film festivals. Board meetings might begin with Divrei Torah. But Jewish learning remains more “infotainment” than the fuel on which Jewish life runs. As more and more people seek depth and wisdom, you will have the opportunity to bring about an American Jewish cultural revival driven by Jewish content – texts and ideas that can inspire and help us navigate the change occurring all around us.

In his bold article of 2011, “Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry,” Leon Wieseltier distinguished between two instruments of Jewish identity: conviction and competence. To an American Jewish community marked by significant intellectual capacity matched with skepticism, Wieseltier correctly posited:

“I have no doubt that the future of Jewish culture in America will be determined more by Jewish competence than by Jewish conviction...”

In that article, he argued for the prioritization of knowledge over faithfulness.

“If we cannot make sure that we will be followed by believing Jews, we certainly can be sure that we will be followed by competent Jews... Ignorance, I think, is much more damaging than heresy.”

Now more than ever, we need a Torah-intoxicated Reform Judaism in America, applying Jewish texts and ideas to the most important issues of our time. We need an anchor for our creativity, a basis for our commitments to social justice, an answer to what awaits when someone is welcomed inside our big tent.

And the ethos of the Beit Midrash, celebrating diversity of opinion and lifting up the importance of constructive disagreement – *machloket l’shem shamayim* – is a value all Americans need now more than ever.

Your continued learning will fuel your leadership, and sharpen your rabbinate. It can be what generates the passion and renewal your community seeks, and the source of inspiration and depth that will draw others to more committed Jewish lives.

As the definition of literacy shifts in an age of easy access to information, we will all need to adopt what Rosenzweig stated: "Nothing Jewish is alien to me." Our rabbi and teacher, former president and chancellor emeritus Rabbi David Ellenson, whom we mourn deeply this year, stated, "A rabbi must be a lifelong student, continually growing in knowledge and understanding, and must inspire others to do the same." Let this commitment to lifelong learning and growth guide you as you transform all the communities you touch into Batei Midrash.

We Are a People

The second use of the verb "to walk" in our parashah describes the nature of our relationship with God.

וְהִתְלַכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיּוּ-לִי לְעָם:

I will walk about in your midst, and I will be a God for you, and you yourselves will be a people for me.

Our relationship with God is collective and national. We are a people. And our relationship with God has always been understood as the story of *Kneset Yisrael*, the totality of the Jewish people.

You become rabbis at a moment where the tension between universalism and particularism challenges and confuses American Jews, particularly the young. Reform Jews have championed a universal message of justice and peace for the entire world. We have been at the forefront of articulating a vision of Jewish life that, like the prophets of Israel, understood that our mission and our scope of concern and responsibility extends beyond the Jewish people to the world at large. And, in this age of unprecedented technology and communications between people everywhere, it is easier and more natural than ever before to extend the attribution of our "neighbor" to include any human being anywhere.

Unknowingly, slowly, and subtly, the universal message of Judaism transmitted almost exclusively by several generations of American Jews, alongside the notion that we are a religion, and not a people, brings us a distortion of who we are. As Prof. Leora Butnitsky writes in her book, *How Judaism Became a Religion*,

“Prior to modernity... Judaism was not a religion, and Jewishness was not a matter of culture or nationality. Rather, Judaism and Jewishness were all these at once: religion, culture and nationality.”

By isolating the universal impulse in Jewish thought to the deliberate exclusion of the particularism that serves as its ground, we end up obviating and undermining the need for Judaism itself.

וְהֵיטֵי לָכֵם לְאֱלֹהִים וְאַתֶּם תְּהִי־לִי לְעָם

I will walk about in your midst, and I will be a God for you, and you yourselves will be a people for me.

The past seven months have reinforced the connection between Jews here and Jews in Israel. Indeed, the massacre of October 7 shares much in common with the ideology of those here who, in the name of universalism, deny the Jewish people a right to self-determination and statehood. The war there, and the expressions of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism here, are part of a common, all-too-familiar phenomenon that links our two communities together in a covenant of fate.

The Jewish communities you lead will need your intellectual leadership to remind them that we are a people, we are a family, and we will not allow others to dictate our self-definition. Our greatest contributions to the world at large will be predicated on our determination to be true to who we are.

American Judaism will continue to be enhanced by a closer relationship with Israel and Israelis, with the Hebrew language, and with the vibrant Jewish culture that emerges in a Jewish-majority milieu, just as Israeli culture, and particularly Israeli Judaism, will be enriched by the dynamism and creativity of American Jewish life.

As the demographics of American Jewish life change, and as the Orthodox and Haredi population grows, we will need to remind those we lead of the importance of Ahavat Yisrael, loving our fellow Jew, and seeing the connection between us as one family, perhaps like adult siblings who may lead very different lives, make very different choices, and live miles apart, yet share a sense of loyalty and personal responsibility. It will be up to you to help American Jews, steeped in the values of universalism, see the value of Jewish particularism and celebrate what makes us unique and distinct.

Final Words of Blessing

What a privilege and honor it is to witness this moment. The Sefat Emet (150 years ago) explains the midrash we have been exploring differently. He says that King David didn't always wind up in a beit kneset or beit midrash every time he headed out for a walk. Actually, King David's feet took him to all sorts of different places, but wherever he went, he found that he could always find something holy to do in those places.

The Sefat Emet understood, וְאֲשִׁיבָה רַגְלִי אֶל-עֵדוּתֶיךָ:

“I would return my feet to your testimonies.” as “I would return my feet to a place where I can testify and bear witness.” לעדותו להעיד עליו. And that place can be anywhere – to serve as a witness for God, or to witness God's presence, or the potential for holiness, everywhere you go.

Aaron, Madeline, Emily, Shirah and Sam – this is our blessing for you.

What promise and potential you bring for the future of American Jewish life and Reform Judaism, even – or especially – on these largely unexplored paths that this century and this land present.

Im b'chutotai telechu– If you walk in God's ordinances... If you walk with courage and hope and faith, you will lead a new generation of American Jews to understand the possibilities inherent in their freedom.

Im b'chukotai telechu, if you embrace Torah and continue to probe its depths, you will inspire those you teach to discover for themselves its profundity and relevance to their lives.

Im b'chukotai telechu, if you walk alongside the Jewish people everywhere, if you strengthen our sense of belonging, if you experience the communities you lead as an indispensable part of a greater whole of *Knesset Yisrael*, you will lead a new generation to fulfill our unique mission and purpose.