

New York Ordination Presidential Charge
and Intro to Ordination Speaker

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The Gus W. Herrman President and Professor of Political Thought**

Hebrew Union College, Ordination, May 3, 2026

Boker tov.

Welcome to the ordination ceremony of 18 remarkable students from Hebrew Union College.

For over 150 years,
Hebrew Union College
Has been a living laboratory
for progressive reform Judaism and Jewish leadership.
We believe a vibrant tomorrow
depends on nurturing spiritual, scholarly, and effective
Jewish leaders today.
Even with its powerful legacy that inspires all of us,
Judaism can not and does not advance on its own.

As dynamic leaders, our students, soon to be rabbis and cantors,

will connect and strengthen your communities,
applying Jewish wisdom
to the most pressing challenges of our day.

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As this marks a new beginning for you,
I will share the wisdom my mother gave me
at the beginning of each school day, she would drive in her Datsun in
the outskirts of Illinois. She would be singing Gloria Gaynor all the way.
And each day when she dropped us off, she would say:

“remember—”

she would say...

“today is the first day of the rest of your life.”

Even now, at 96,
her steps are slower,
her days ahead far fewer than those behind,
yet each morning she begins again...

filled with optimism

for the day before her.

Perhaps this is why,
of the many names our tradition uses for God,

“Ein Sof”—
that which has no end—
resonates most deeply for me.

*If God is without end...
each moment carries the possibility
Of renewal, of beginning again.*

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How different is our human existence¹.

Our lives are almost “without beginning”—
how unlikely it is that any of us is here at all.

*Of the trillions of possible children,
Our parents might have created
we are the ones who came to be.*

But once begun, once born
We, unlike god, move toward an end.

¹ For another time: If there is a symbolic embodiment of “Ein Sof” it must surely be the circle. Remember what it is like to trace the figure: you can start wherever you want, but once begun, you can continue without an end. And it is reflected in the concept of Pi, the underlying mathematical expression of the circle, the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter. Pi begins with a solid, respectable 3—a prime number, no less—and then dances off into infinity, never repeating, always beginning, never ending. Ein Sof.

The Psalmist writes²:

“[Our] days are like grass
Like the bloom of the field
Thus [we] bloom

כִּי רוּחַ עֲבָרָה בָּנוּ וְאִינָנוּ וְלֹא יִפְרֹנוּ עוֹד מִקוֹמוֹ

When the wind passes by [us]—
[we are] gone...”

And not only we,
but what we create,
passes by—
even the works of art and institutions
buildings and political states
we assume will endure.

Even the American Republic,
in words attributed to Benjamin Franklin,
is ours only so long as we can keep it.

Rare in formation,
fragile in life,
without permanence—

² (Psalm 103: 15-16, Robert Alter translation)

all things human
pass away.

Ironically, It is precisely this impermanence
that gives our lives meaning
and makes hope possible.

“Life’s ultimate meaning,”
writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,
“remains obscure
unless it is reflected upon
in the face of death.”

And how true it is.

No matter how beautiful

a wedding,

a novel,

or a symphony,

we are grateful they do not go on forever.

(J And yes, even this ceremony will come to an end!)

There are endings we pray for:

the suffering of those in pain,
the destruction of war even when necessary,
the humiliation of those not accepted for who they are.

But most often,
the endings of what we love
bring pain,
loss,
anger,
and remorse.

Today we feel that loss especially.

As this Tuesday we celebrate the 8th yahrzeit of my predecessor Aaron Panken, who died tragically in a plane crash.

We mark the absence of a beloved colleague,
Rabbi Andrea Weiss, zichrona livracha
our Head of Seminary Programs,
whose love for our students was unparalleled,
and who brought grace to this moment year after year.

We are grateful to Rabbi Michael Marmur,

who will serve as officiant,
carrying Andrea's dignity and memory into your blessing.

Michael—thank you.

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This truth—
that nothing we create is permanent—
is what gives us courage
to begin.

Kierkegaard reminds us that heroes are judged
not by what they achieve,
but by the fact that they began at all.

Abraham, who set out on his journey—again and again.

Esther, not because she saved the Jews
but because she had the courage to stand before the king.

Herzl, not because the State of Israel was founded
but because he initiated the struggle.

And you our students—

who began your studies in what seemed like the end of the pandemic,
on for it to come roaring back,
giving years of your lives
simply to begin again.

In a moment,
you will ascend these stairs
and become rabbis and cantors,
in service to God and the Jewish people.

At that moment, something will change.

A religious transformation
And People will see you differently.

In that perception, you will be given power.

***You must – and I know you will -- use that power
to bring hope and the sacred
into the world.***

The burden is great—
but fortunately, you do not bear it alone.

You join thousands of Hebrew Union College alumni
across the United States, Israel,
and more than 30 countries,
working in sacred partnership,
supported by your teachers,
and by the leaders of the institutions of our Reform Movement
who join us today.

Draw on us

As you engage your communities in the majesty of Jewish life—

Bring the sanctity and comfort of your presence

To the bedside and the house of mourning,

Raise your prophetic voice

to a world in need of healing,

Teach those thirsting for knowledge with

the wisdom you draw from the wells of our sacred texts

and the history of the Jewish People

And inspire your communities

With the beauty of our liturgy

that only your voices will elevate

Invite people
to begin again,
wherever they are.

Through your leadership, wisdom, and courage,
you will live the idea of Ein Sof:

ever beginning,
never ending—
a path toward the Good and the Sacred,
the Beautiful
the Righteous,
and all that is Just.

For today we celebrate
the first day
of the rest of your lives.

Mazel tov.

Introduction of Josh Breitzer

It is my pleasure to introduce the ordination speaker,
Chosen by our students to address to them at this liminal moment,

Cantor Joshua Breitzer

A Michigan native,
graduate of the University of Michigan and the New England
Conservatory,
in, 2011 he was ordained a Cantor at Hebrew Union College

Since then, Cantor Breitzer has helped shape Congregation Beth
Elohim in Brooklyn
into one of the most vibrant and inclusive centers of Jewish life in the
country.

And that is no surprise because
Josh has the rare gift of bringing people together
and turning a room into a soulful community
and with abundant joy.

Many of you know this first hand in his role
As a member of the faculty
Of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music—
engaging, joyful, and deeply present.

But his influence extends well beyond New York City.

The Forward named him one of the best new Jewish music voices in its "Soundtrack of Our Spirit" series.

He appears in the PBS documentary *The Four Sons and All Their Sons*

And he is a recognized leader in his field, evidenced by his election last year as President of the American Conference of Cantors.

after years of service to the ACC board.

Congratulations, Josh.

Above all Cantor Breitzer considerable heart, wisdom, and

deep love of our tradition

To everything that he does

With our gratitude to his wife, Donna,

and their sons Jonah and Gideon

who are with us to day

for supporting him for so many years,

Please join me in welcoming Cantor Joshua Breitzer to the *bima*.