

Huc-Jir Ordination Address May 5, 2024

Boker Tov..Good Morning. I was so grateful to President Rehfeld for his kind invitation and I've very much looked forward to this moment, though I didn't foresee being unable to be there with you all. I was very excited to share this moment with all of our wonderful ordainees and with you, their excited families and friends. I never anticipated that I would miss my first ordination of the College- Institute in the 57 years that I have been at HUC-JIR.

Six years ago on this day, May 5th, a day before that year's Ordination, in the mid afternoon, I was standing behind a batting cage watching our then 7 year old granddaughter, Stella's first ever at bat in a softball game and I marveled at how wonderful life can be. At that moment I noticed my wife, Terry, who was sitting in the stands waving to me to come over. After watching Stella strikeout...though she did hit a foul ball..and we all cheered, I walked over to find out the unthinkable news that Rabbi Aaron Panken had been killed. A plane he was flying with an instructor had crashed in Middletown N.Y....and I was asked to ordain the cantorial and rabbinic students the next day at Temple Emanuel.

Stunned, I couldn't imagine having the wherewithal to step into Aaron's role in less than 20 hours, being so unprepared, especially emotionally. But in contemplating

the moment, I kept on thinking of the journey of the Jewish people and it's leaders over 3500 years, which was marked by moments of transcendence, moments of song and uplift, yetalso moments of extreme suffering and pain which they learned to endure in order to reach the land promised to their ancestors.

But prior to entering the Promised Land, the Israelites had to look back and rememberremember whence they came; remember past experiences, what brought them to this juncture in their lives and the passionate commitment that burned within them.....remember all those who perished in the desert; all those they had left behind; ...remember the aridity of the desert and its loneliness... remember their hopes and dreams.

So, too, each one of you who is being ordained this day needs to look back and remember...the dreams and goals which brought you to this moment and the yearning you felt to make a difference in people's lives. And also to recall all the individuals who helped shape your decision to embark on this journey of devotion to the Jewish' people..and then nurtured it, some of whom may only be here in spirit this day. My friends, they surely will be standing next to you on the bimah at your moment of Ordination, including Rabbis Aaron Panken and David Ellenson.

Standing on the shore of the Jordan River, thinking they could just reach out and touch the promised land, the Israelites couldn't help but remember the stories they heard about their ancestors as they faced the forbidding waters of the Red Sea, wondering if they would survive the suffering and pain of the trek through the desert.

And yet, as Pharoah's army followed the Israelites into the Red Sea, they all died, but the Israelites marched through on dry ground. They witnessed the wondrous power of God and, led by Moses and Miriam, they sang of their deliverance.

The rabbis in the Midrash tell us that there are ten(10) songs which constitute all of Jewish History...which mark the journey from Egypt, Mitzraim, Meitzarim..the Narrow Places of constraint and suffering in our lives, to the messianic..to wholeness, shalom, peace. Ten songs

which move us beyond the mundane, the prosaic, and express true transcendence...harmony between God and Human Beings.

And the paradigmatic song ..Shirat Ha-Yam, the Song at the Sea, which begins: "Az Yashir....Moshe u'Venai Yisrael" ...is a moment of Timelessness in time—Az Yashir - is usually translated as "Then Moses sang" ... or...since yashir is a future tense verb, "Then Moses will sing? For the Rabbis, "Az Yashir" implies both past and

future.....it is a moment when time stopped...when all of Israel experienced more than the present. Lashir means "to sing;" ..but lashur means "to glimpse into the future." In a moment of song, a moment of true community...past, present and future are conjoined.

And so...forty years later, remembering the stories of the crossing of the Red Sea, the descendants of that generation of Israel took their first steps into the Jordan River. Yet, they were unsure what the future had in store for them, even as they tried to hold on to the faith engendered in them during the 40 year trek through the desert. The Israelites trembled as they took their first cautious steps to cross the Jordan. They were unsure what the outcome of their journey might be, even as they tried to hold on to the faith engendered in them during their journey through the desert.

So we say to all of you about to be ordained as Rabbis and Cantors, as leaders of the Jewish People: Be unafraid to acknowledge your doubts and fears, which today we all share, even the most accomplished among us, as we try to understand and then negotiate the contours of our world which are so foreboding. Yet, embrace who you are, what you have to give...your many treasures of self, all of which are so crucial in these days of suffering and uncertainty.

The moment of Ordination is indeed a consummate moment of song - that not only marks past achievement and forces us to reflect upon what brought us to this very juncture in our lives...but, even more so, impels us to consider our actions vision for the future and that which we hope to achieve.

This moment is truly one of timelessness in time ...in which each individual ordained as a rabbi and as a cantor is linked forever to generations of past leaders of our Jewish people and those who will come after us; to all those who enjoy the joy and the blessing of singing God's song. It is a moment of poetry in the prosaic of life when we can sing out: "Shiru L'Adonai shir hadash" on behalf of all those who yet hold out hope for a better tomorrow.

So we say to each one of you, as Moses charged his disciple Joshua, before he crossed the Jordan: "Hazak ve-Ematz- - Be strong and of good courage" and may you ever be a berachah, a blessing to all those who will be blessed to call you "Cantor"..... "Rabbi."