

The path you have been on
2024/5784 Ordination Address

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Later this month my son Hoben is getting married.
Baseball has been a thing for us since he was in grade school.
Every spring for many years
we traveled to Roger Dean Stadium
in Jupiter, Florida
to attend the St. Louis Cardinals'
spring training.

We usually attended three games.
But in March of 2005
when Hoben was nine,
we added a fourth game
even though we knew we'd need to leave early
to catch our flight back home.

As the time approached to depart,
I could see the disappointment in Hoben's face
—not so much about leaving the game early,
Rather his disappointment

that once again
no one
had hit him
a foul ball.

Upon hearing that we'd have to leave after the next batter,
Hoben slumped down into his chair.
I could see him doing his best to hold back tears.
And I found myself wanting to comfort him,
saying, "Don't worry, Hoben—
the next ball pitched,
the last one we can stay for,
that ball is going to be yours."

Well it *seemed* like a good idea the time!

My son was skeptical,
but with the hope that takes over when reason is clouded by desire,
he perched on the edge of his seat,
smacked his glove for good measure,
and waited for the ball to come his way.

The pitcher released a curve ball,
the batter swung and the crack of the bat left no doubt he had connected.

The ball fouled back to the third base side
right towards where we were sitting.

We saw the ball spinning ferociously towards us;
as it approached we could practically smell it.
And as Hoben jumped up to catch it...
we watched it fly **right over** our heads!

Before I knew what was happening,
Hoben ran to the back of the bleachers
and looked down onto the courtyard where the ball had fallen.
I could only see him from behind, waving and yelling.

Suddenly, he turned around
And with a beaming smile held over his head
the very ball that I told him would be his:
another patron had thrown it back up to him.

Hoben ran back to our seats, and he could not contain his excitement:

“Dad, I got the ball, I got the ball!!!!”

And then he looked at me in awe and said,

“How’d you know?”

“How’d you know **that** was going to happen?”¹

Well, of course, I didn’t **know** that was going to happen.

It was one of those moments a parent acts in a reckless way

¹ This is a true story. This was the first of our yearly trips to see the Cards’ spring training at Roger Dean Stadium, a magnificent facility. We really did have to go, I told Hoben he’d get the next ball, and he really did. Scott Seabol who was with the Cards from 2003-2006 hit the ball. Hoben assures me he still has that ball; it’s somewhere in his closet.

to bring a temporary moment of relief to a child.
Most of those moments don't turn out so well:
By setting high and unrealistic expectations,
they can result in further disappointment and regret.

This time, fortunately, it did not;
the expectations were realized
But it was only a lucky guess.

And there was so much that could have gotten in the way.

Dear ordinands of 5784
when you entered HUC-JIR five or six years ago,
you had high expectations of what the next five years would bring.

And there is so much that has gotten in the way of realizing them:
For many of you,
your very start was marked by the shattered expectation
of learning from a friend,
a mentor, and a teacher
with the tragic death of our ninth president,
Rabbi Aaron Panken, z"l,
whose sixth *yahrzeit*—May 5, 2018—
we commemorate this very day.

For most of you,

your first year in Israel
came to an early close as Covid began.
In your second year,
you adapted to the pandemic
and learned to study in an *entirely* virtual space,
while protests for racial justice
and an attempted insurrection
promoted by a sitting president
unfolded on our television screens.

In your third year,
you were appropriately unsettled
as we confronted the abuse of power at our institution,
and its legacy of toxic bullying,
particularly of women,
while at the same time our community became further divided
about the decision
to close our founding rabbinical program in Cincinnati.

And in this, your final year,
you studied under the dark clouds of October 7th,
the subsequent war,
untold human suffering in Gaza,
and rising antisemitism in the United States
especially on college campuses

even as we mourned the passing

of former HUC Chancellor, Rabbi David Ellenson,
of blessed memory.

And we are gathered here on this celebratory day
as over 100 hostages remain in captivity.

And yet here you are.

Despite all that has been thrown at you,
you have demonstrated your resilience and commitment
realized your own expectations,
to become our newest Jewish clergy.

This is the story of Jewish history after all

High expectations to be a light onto the nations,
with so many barriers in the way.

Whether slavery or forced removal from our historic homeland

Continued antisemitism and the attempted genocide of our people

A genocide in the Holocaust

That we commemorate tonight during Yom HaShoah

Or merely responding to modernity in creating Reform Judaism,
a faith bounded by reason and science,

A Jewish particularism now bounded by the very universal aims

you will help bring about through your work:

the Good and the Sacred,

the Beautiful, the Right and the Just.

So now we prepare for that moment when
through the authority of the faculty, administration, and the Board of Governors,
you will be ordained as Rabbis and Cantors
by a ceremony of ordination
beautifully conducted by Rabbi Andrea Weiss.

During Covid when we could not be physically together,
we were reminded that, like all religious rituals,
the ceremony of “laying hands,”
is merely symbolic—we are a faith bounded by reason and science.
But that symbolism does not diminish its power.

The laying of hands marks the moment
when your religious status changes
and you become Jewish clergy,
Rabbis and Cantors
before God and the Jewish people.

It is a *social* transformation rather than a material one.

For when people come to know
that you are Rabbi and Cantor
They will immediately perceive you differently.

And just as *your* expectations of seminary
helped shape *your* experience here,
Because of that status
They will have expectations of you.

As a teacher, spiritual leader, pastor, and advocate for the justice of our prophets.

And you will feel the social power they give you

Including access to the most sensitive moments of their lives.

simply because of who you are,

as Cantor.

As Rabbi.

By applying Jewish wisdom

drawn from Torah and our tradition

you will bring:

comfort to those who are suffering;

joy to those who are celebrating;

wisdom to those seeking understanding;

beauty to those who join you in ritual, prayer, and song

and inspiration to communities desperate for hope in an age of despair.

That social power is an awesome responsibility

that will sometimes be a burden to carry².

² As many of you know,

my father passed away in February.

My father spent his first fifteen years as a career military officer.

Curiously, he was not cynical about the mindlessness of military routine so often ridiculed.

He understood that all vocations

involve some narishkeit, foolishness,

and that professional choices should be evaluated

by that which elevates the work

Rather than what diminishes it.

You too will experience a great deal of narishkeit.

Committee meetings that go on too long,

Pettiness and personalization of disagreement.

I hope you, like my father,

will stay focused on that which makes your work sacred.

The good news is that you will not bear the burden of your role alone.

You will join thousands of other rabbis and cantors,
teachers, communal professionals, and lay leaders,
working alongside you in sacred partnership.

And so now,
In just a moment,
You will each ascend the stairs
And become Rabbis and Cantors
In service to God and the Jewish People.

As you draw strength from your teachers, mentors, and those who supported you.
Set high expectations for yourselves
and let them drive you to success.

Because as I think back to Roger Dean Stadium 19 years ago
We all know that my words did not make a foul ball fly back in our direction,
Yet I must believe that helping my son with the expectation
that the *next ball* would be his
was at least part of the reason
he did what he had to do
to make it a reality.

And isn't that what these last five years have been for you,

keeping your expectations high
to help you do what you had to do
to avoid the many barriers
of an unbelievably challenging world.

So go after every foul ball sent your way

Offer your prophetic voice to a world in need of healing,
Find paths for engagement into the richness and majesty of Jewish life
Apply Jewish wisdom to the most pressing challenges of our day
And through that work
You will build and sustain
robust and resilient communities.
And bring peace and justice to our world.