

Speech by Michael H. Zaransky

Thank you Chancellor, thank you Rabbi, and thank you all so much for being here tonight. I also especially want to thank Keith Shapiro and Karen Kesner for agreeing to serve as chairs tonight and to Debbie, Tal, and Alma of the JTS staff for all of your work and dedication.

I feel quite humbled tonight. I am very proud to be considered as a lay leader in the Jewish community. That's because, being referred to as a Jewish community leader places me in the same peer group as so many of you here tonight. I admire and respect so many of you greatly for the tireless work that you do for our community..... both career professionals as well as lay leaders. Thank you for considering me as your peer.

While we have much to be proud of, if we are to be true leaders, and if this leadership award is to have true meaning, we must also acknowledge our shortcomings. The truth is..... we are failing to engage significant numbers of our people in ANY form of Jewish life. Study after study confirms disturbing trends and paint a rather bleak future. The Jewish community is too low of a priority or irrelevant in too many Jewish lives.

As leaders, we have an obligation to act. We need to lead change. The status quo is simply not working well enough and if we don't rise to the occasion and take action to turn the tide, the very future of the Jewish people may be in jeopardy.

We live in a wonderful country where we are free to practice our religion and be fully open about our Judaism. The ultimate irony is that as a result of freedom and modernity, many Jews, my contemporaries, and certainly the generations of our children and grandchildren are exercising their freedom of choice and choosing quite freely....NOT to be Jewish. It is easy, especially here in America, to fully assimilate into the majority culture and opt out of being part of the Jewish community.

It is up to us....there is no one else.....we are in charge here..... it is up to us to take action and make innovative and well planned changes necessary to engage greater numbers in our community and to excite and involve the next generation .

I have no doubt that we have the collective talent and ability to accomplish this great and holy task.

We can do this! We are the people that went from enslavement to the Promised Land, from the darkest of days just 60 some years ago during the Holocaust to the most powerful, affluent, and highly educated Jewish community in the history of the world. We have witnessed the miracle and the pride of

the modern State of Israel. Am Ysrael Chai, the people of Israel Live ! May we continue to go from strength to strength..... Chazak, Chazak, v' net Cha Zek.