

CHANCELLOR ARNOLD M. EISEN: RA CONVOCATION ADDRESS 2010

It is my great honor and pleasure to welcome you to The Jewish Theological Seminary. To those of you who are JTS alumni, welcome home. I hope it feels good to be here again and that you find the place looking good. To those who are not alumni, I hope you visit us frequently and come to feel as at home as I have.

This is a proud moment for JTS. You use the learning you acquired here and elsewhere to teach and inspire your communities. You build upon the vision imparted by teachers here and elsewhere to shape imagination of the future. You have learned the hard way, on the job over many years, what it takes to lead communities and organizations through wilderness and keep them focused on the path that leads to Promised Land. We are proud to claim a share in your achievement. I hope this ceremony, where you are surrounded by classmates, allies, teachers, families, and friends, will give you *hizuk* for the next stage of the journey. I want to reflect briefly on that journey with the help of two texts, one of which is very familiar to you and the other probably less so.

The text you know well is the Eldad-Medad incident in this week's parashah, B'ha-alot'kha. When God shares the divine spirit that rests on Moses with the seventy elders, and two of those elders, Eldad and Medad, begin prophesying in the Israelite camp, Joshua is alarmed at their activity, fearing for Moses's authority. Moses is not alarmed; quite the opposite. We see in him a leader at his very best: unafraid of sharing the divine spirit with others in his community, even content to have God pour out more of God's Spirit directly on as many individuals as God chooses. Moses understands that his leadership requires followers who share his vision and his burden. Too large a gap between leader and congregation is dangerous to both. Moses feels no need to glance backward over his shoulder to make sure that no one approaches him in talent. He is pleased to learn that Eldad and Medad are *mitnabim* (acting the prophet) in the camp—a term that I think bears on contemporary rabbinic leadership in two different senses.

The first, building on Heschel's notion of prophecy, suggests individuals determined to do God's will in the world, which is that God's creatures be treated with greater justice and compassion. Heschel wrote that prophets are individuals who hold God and human beings in their minds and hearts at the same time, at all times. They see things from God's point of view and not only ours. They feel the suffering of other creatures as if they were their own children—which they are, to God—and cry out for justice and mercy as a result. Every Jewish leader whom I know aspires to be a prophet in that sense, and hopes that the Jews he or she leads (and not only they) will come to feel this way as well.

There is a second connotation of the word *navi* that is relevant to rabbinic leadership. It is captured in the JPS translation of Numbers 11:25 as, "And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke *in ecstasy* . . ." What does that mean, I

wonder, in the context of ancient Israel? And what does ecstasy signify for mature rabbis with long experience as teachers and pastors—leaders who are presumably committed to life *in* community rather than apart from it? I do not think we want rabbis who are ready to jump ship for desert islands where they can meditate and seek personal enlightenment to their hearts' content. How then can the word *ecstasy* help us think about what Conservative rabbis might aspire to in the next phase of their rabbinate?

To reflect on that question, I will leap beyond my own personal comfort zone—a prerequisite for successful leadership, I believe, and certainly something one should do after years of learning the craft and exercising discipline. I want to talk about my favorite modern painter, Cézanne, and bring several lessons for the rabbinate from Meyer Schapiro's well-known analysis of Cézanne, published nearly half a century ago. I am, of course, no expert on Cézanne, only a passionate admirer of his work. But, then again, I am also not a rabbi or expert on the rabbinate, only a passionate admirer of your work. Still, I think there is a lot that can be learned about the latter from the former.

If you know Cézanne, you know that his paintings are marked by bold colors and solid forms. They transmit great emotion and incredible peace. Every subject is depicted with great fidelity to how it appears in nature and, with equal faithfulness, to its unique appearance to the eye of the artist. Cézanne takes the world apart and puts it back together in a manner that seems supremely real and luminously beautiful. "The visible world is not simply represented on Cézanne's canvas," writes Schapiro, "it is re-created through strokes of color among which are many that we cannot identify with an object and yet are necessary for the harmony of the whole."

I see rabbis doing something similar. You do not simply represent those you serve, in either sense of the word *represent*, but through many strokes of activity over many years—a teaching here, a word of comfort there, thousands of meetings, uncounted personal interactions, and many hundreds of worship services—you build something harmonious and beautiful. You and those you lead are likely unaware, at the time, of the impact of these discrete activities. But they accumulate and, in the aggregate, make for a great achievement.

There is one major difference between the rabbi and the artist: Cézanne stands aloof from the subjects he paints. He observes. His artistry depends upon withdrawal from the world. His subjects—especially in later years—are quiet. Rabbis cannot stand aloof. The theater of your artistry is always in motion. We want the individuals and communities that rabbis serve to grow and change year by year, even if the ritual forms remain largely the same. That is the pleasure of what we might call "rabbinic craft." The congregant who merely mouthed prayers last year says them now with real devotion. The couple who did not get the idea of mitzvah before parenthood now understand it from the inside. The person who could not cope with illness now confronts it head-on with courage and hope. The student who had to be dragged to class is now hungry for learning. The seniors

who have lost many friends to death look at the year's cycle with new understanding.

Time can work against a rabbi if it fortifies indifference or cynicism, but often works in your favor if it allows potential to grow and relationships to mature. If God and you catch the moment, sparks light or catch fire.

Time seems absent from many Cézanne canvases. He freezes time in great moments of perception—no doubt part of his appeal to me and others. He makes this world seem more solid than it is; we, who are so much more fragile than the rocks he paints and rarely at peace like his still-lives, enjoy being caught up in the stillness of his work. This is part of what appeals to Jews in shul, it seems, and perhaps in other Jewish settings as well. Tradition is more solid than we are, and we seek to partake of that permanence. The Jewish people breathes the air of eternity and we want to fill our spirits with such eternity. Synagogue or Jewish classroom can be a place to meditate, take stock, sit quietly, allow love to wash over you.

And yet time had great impact on Cézanne's art. Schapiro notes that "a great exaltation breaks through at times in his later work." The paintings in Cézanne's last years have an epic largeness. He sees nobly and builds with a few clear objects. His canvas is tremendously alive: throbbing with color and powerful rhythm. When Cézanne returns to the subject he has painted many times before, Mont Sainte-Victoire, he seems to Schapiro (and to me) "passionately free." There is a sense of "ecstatic release," an "upsurge of color . . . rich tones on a vast scale." There is also a courageous willingness to let whole sections of the canvas be in their whiteness: to lie fallow, as it were, in a kind of Shabbat for himself and the landscape.

Our synagogues, schools, and other institutions need these qualities right now—and rabbis of long experience have the best chance of getting the balance right. There is a certain freedom that comes from deep familiarity with people and institutions. You know what matters and what does not, what you can let go of and what you have to hold onto really tightly because you are going to move fast and go far. I cannot say what this means for your shul, your school, your camp, your young people, your seniors. No outsider can. But I can say—as can anyone whose eyes are open to the conditions of Jewish life in North America today—that the formulas arrived at decades ago, before those of us here received our formal education, will not work any longer. The kind of rabbis most of us knew growing up will not succeed. The ways in which Conservative Judaism sought to reach people fifty years ago often do not impress or inspire anyone today. We will not get far by temporizing, hedging bets, being so careful before moving that we lose ground constantly.

I believe that you know what I am driving at. There is no science in this business of ours, though there is skill, learning, experience, and the imagination that builds on these. In other words, there is *art*. May you paint well in coming years, rabbis,

in brush strokes overflowing with vitality and color. We need your boldness and your wisdom. If JTS can help you in this effort, please let us know. We want to be your partner now as always.

Thank you. *B'hatzlacha.*