

**Chancellor Arnold Eisen, JTS Commencement Address
Ordination/Investiture Ceremony
May 21, 2009**

It's my privilege to offer a word of Torah to our new rabbis and hazzanim. The word is *love*. It is the subject of a remarkable mishnah in chapter 5 of Pirkei Avot: when love is *teluya v'davar* (conditional on something) the *davar* perhaps being sexual attraction, and the thing on which love depends becomes *bateh*—vanishes, becomes as nothing—so does the love. Conditional love does not stand. Unconditional love is not vulnerable in this way.

Chapter 6 takes up the theme in its very first mishnah—one of the most extravagant expressions of the eros of Torah that I know. “Rabbi Meir taught: whoever engages in the study of Torah for its own sake achieves a host of merits; moreover, it was worth creating the world for his sake alone. He is called beloved, friend, lover of God, lover of humanity, a joy to God, a joy to humanity.” What is more, “the secrets of Torah are revealed to him: he becomes an effluent fountain, a never-failing stream; he becomes modest and patient, forgiving of insults; it magnifies and exalts him over all creation.”

I hope you have had moments during your study at JTS—and not only isolated moments—in which you have experienced this powerful love of Torah. And I hope there will be moments in the near future—and not a few of them—when you will share your love of Torah with those you serve, arouse this love in them, give voice to its requirements and its rewards.

The requirements include community substantial enough to engender the trust that is key to learning; devotion to the details of text and practice; tefillah that leads to action and vice versa; attention to the lessons of the heart as well as the mind; attention to the individuals who face your face.

And the rewards? Here are several I hope you have tasted over the past few years: the satisfaction of learning something really new; the still greater satisfaction of doing so while studying with a friend—the friendship growing as the learning grows, as you feel yourself growing from both of these; the discovery that you are directly addressed by a particular text or commentary written centuries ago, or by a recent scholarly argument over what the text's correct wording should be, or what it means; the knowledge that this study helps you in ways you could not have predicted to *be* good and *do* good, that it increases your love for the world and its creatures, that it heightens your love for the Creator of this world and its Torah, that it brings practice and *kedushah* in tow; that it leaves you high at some points and drained at others—just as Rabbi Meir said it would. You may love God, however you understand God, so much at a moment of real learning that it hurts. The distance from God hurts, and you want more than anything to keep the Torah you love and the friends you love close at hand. As the great sage Plato put it, in the tractate called *The Symposium*, you want this love of the good for yourself always.

At this moment, recalling that one, you may be afraid of never experiencing it again. You are perhaps wondering if being a rabbi or hazzan is really such a good way for a

nice Jewish boy or girl who loves Torah to be spending life—and not only because Shabbat will likely be a workday ever after, and the attractions of the Upper West Side, including its kosher pizza, are hard to find anywhere else. You may fear that your study and teaching of Torah will never again be entirely *lishma*, and will suffer as a result; you wonder if there will be enough Jews around you *lishmo'a*—to nurture your spirit as you nurture theirs, to sustain your path through life in Torah as you urge them to embark on it or stick to it. You may have seen the recent study by Steven Cohen and Larry Hoffman that finds depressingly low levels of interest in spirituality and God among American Jews and become discouraged.

Indeed, the mishnah in chapter 6 that speaks to you most loudly today might be Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma's story of leaving a great city of scholars and sages and meeting a man on the road who offers thousands of gold *dinarim* as well as precious stones and pearls if only Rabbi Yosi will come to live in his community, where there is currently no Torah. Some of you have recently accepted contracts from shuls or other employers out there in the world, no doubt for untold millions of dollars. You are wondering if you did the right thing for your souls. Others of you, in this uncertain economy, are still wishing for the chance to make that bargain for your souls, with or without the approval of Rabbi Yosi or his descendants, the Rabbinical Assembly Placement Commission, or your deans.

I want to say to you, O my graduates, in all seriousness, that you must not accede to such dichotomies between your past and future, between this community and those, elites and *amkha* places given over to the study of Torah and communities that face the more difficult task of learning and living Torah amidst all the obstacles and opportunities that we call life. I am here to tell you that there are some wonderful shuls, camps, schools, and communal agencies out there. I've been to them. I know you can make them better as they make you better. There are some not-so-great institutions that need work by you that will alternately frustrate you, challenge your assumptions, engage all your learning, and elicit even more of your human skills. Most important of all, there are incredible *people* out there, not all of them learned or devoted to learning, not all of them observant or committed to observance, who are waiting to be touched by you, to make your life difficult as well as holy, to bring you to tears and give you satisfaction that you feel you do not deserve.

But you will deserve it. For you will facilitate the creation of sacred moments in their lives, bring them Torah, speak to them about God. You will be able to do this if and only if you make sure that you do not lack for Torah in your personal life, that you are not bereft of the pleasures and challenges you seek to share, that your own mind and spirit have not atrophied, that you never forget what you love, and make sure never to stray far from the object of that love.

Permit me to make one final affirmation, born not of my current position or my scholarship on American Judaism but from nearly forty years of adult experience. There is a life-giving path of Torah out there, and not just in here, called Conservative Judaism. I hold fast to it gratefully because it holds fast to the conviction that learning and living Torah in any time and place, including this one, demands all we can bring to it, all that *all* of us can bring to it: scientists and artists, business and government,

women and men, gay and straight, younger and older, those more learned in Torah and those more learned in other things, practitioners of halakhah and devotees of aggadah, the wisdom of our tradition and the wisdom of other faiths, the footnote on page 361 of that text you struggled with last month, and the *niggun* or poem you will discover for the first time when a student or congregant shares it with you next fall in a place you are barely beginning to call home.

Take this tradition of Torah forward, please. It is precious to me, to all of us at JTS, and is now in your hands as much as ours. Whether your work is inside or outside the framework of Conservative Judaism, please do not succumb to the mantra of this path's alleged decline. Prove the doomsayers wrong by the *ascents* in learning, faith, and community that you make and that you make possible for others. You know that Judaism, including Conservative Judaism, is all about love as surely as it is about holiness and mitzvah, repairing the world, and sharing responsibility for the earth. It is about love for *ha-makom* and *ha-briyot* that you love with all your heart, including heartache; all your soul, including dark nights of the soul; all your mind, not least the parts of your mind that propel Torah forward by giving voice to thoughts and doubts that no student or sage has ever before formulated or imagined; it needs all your might, as you perform deeds that Torah has been waiting for you to put into action.

I wish this for you, my hazzanim and my rabbis, with all my heart, confident that in you the love of Torah will never be *bate!* I know that together we can build Jewish communities of Torah that are worth more than all the *dinarim* in the world. And I promise you that this day will mark the beginning of a new stage in a lifelong association with JTS that, God willing, will keep us all teaching and learning Torah to and from one another for many years to come.

Mazal tov.