

Commencement Address 2010

Arnold Eisen

Two aspects of the Sinai covenant that Jews celebrate and reaffirm at Shavu'ot strike me with special force: the fact that the covenant binds Jews to one another and to the world at the very same moment that it binds us to God; and the fact that now, as much as ever, the covenant needs each one of us to bring it to fulfillment. The Creator requires the diverse knowledge, skills, experience, and wisdom of human partners to carry on the work of creation. Our world is still not just or compassionate enough, the Torah insists. You and I can make it better. The responsibility that this Shavu'ot message imposes, the work to which the covenant calls Jews, the meaning it bestows on every one of us, confer more than enough blessing for a lifetime.

That lesson is particularly relevant on this occasion, as we send forth another set of dedicated and well-trained men and women into the world, armed with the ability and the resolve to treasure the knowledge they have acquired here for its own sake and to use that knowledge for the good. The age-old covenant of Judaism is also especially relevant today because The Jewish Theological Seminary has just completed a reassessment of its mission and role in the world, the details of which I want to share publicly for the first time with this gathering of the JTS community.

We began the process of institutional examination and renewal fully aware that this is a time of rapid change and massive challenge: change in the worth and significance of books; change in the meaning of knowledge and its transmission; challenge to major institutions and assumptions that have structured the Jewish community in North America for many decades; and challenge to the ability of Judaism and its covenant to speak in any sense to the great majority of contemporary Jews. We knew that it would not be simple to plot the next chapter in JTS's future at a time of economic constraint and widespread uncertainty inside and outside the Jewish community. But we also knew that it was essential that we do so because we believe that JTS remains essential to the future of Jews and Judaism in North America and beyond.

JTS stakes the new direction that I shall describe to you today on the conviction that this moment offers not only unprecedented challenge but unprecedented opportunity. It is true, of course, that the Jewish community in North America must deal with anxiety and alienation so widespread they threaten the vitality and even the survival of numerous Jewish organizations and institutions. It is also true, however—and, we believe, of decisive importance—that recent decades

have seen substantial achievement in a number of areas: day schools and camps, revitalized synagogues and congregational schools, programs in adult Jewish study, social justice, spirituality, and the arts. We should not forget as we contemplate present opportunities that the Jewish community, despite recent losses in financial and social capital, possesses material and human resources of which our parents and grandparents could only dream. The possibilities for growth and renewal today may be less readily discerned and less frequently noted than the obstacles that confront Jews, but they are truly remarkable. The question is how we can best take full advantage of them.

The administration and trustees of JTS believe that now, as at every previous turning point in the life of North American Jewry over the past century, the keys to success in meeting challenge and seizing hold of opportunity are *learning, leadership, and vision*. An in-depth, clear, and nuanced understanding of the Jewish past, combined with a firm grasp of present-day dilemmas and complexities, can equip Jewish leaders to shape a future for Jews and Judaism that is both vital and authentic. We must chart a way of learning and living Torah in our generation that is at once deeply grounded in the experience and wisdom of our ancestors and thoroughly responsive to contemporary needs and sensibilities.

Solomon Schechter made the link between learning, leadership, and vision the theme of his address at the seventh JTS commencement ceremony exactly one hundred years ago. Leaders of the Jewish community, Schechter stated, had to declare in all that they said and did, as courageously as the martyrs of old, “A Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain.” Great learning was required for this task. Jewish leaders needed to know from firsthand study what Judaism had meant in the past in all its variety and complexity. They also required an unambiguous understanding of the change required to *conserve* Judaism, as opposed to the kind of change—alarming to Schechter as to us—that turns Jews and Judaism into something else entirely.

Charting and transmitting authentic ways of learning and living Torah in greatly altered circumstances, and educating leaders able to preserve Judaism faithfully by changing it faithfully: this is the mission to which JTS rededicates itself this Shavu’ot. For almost 125 years, JTS has provided the Jewish community—and the world—with a distinct vision of what Judaism has been and can be, and has educated leaders imbued with that vision and capable of directing its realization. The role this institution has played in nourishing the religious and intellectual life of North American Jewry through our world-class library and outstanding faculty is widely appreciated. JTS’s track record of groundbreaking innovation in the service of Jewish community and tradition is no less impressive. Think of Camp

Ramah; The Jewish Museum; *The Eternal Light* series that JTS produced for radio and television; foundational interfaith dialogues; the conception and development of numerous Conservative and community day schools; the establishment of sister institutions in Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem; and the formative contribution made by JTS to the growth of academic Jewish studies. In 2010, The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary remains among the very finest Jewish collections in the world; the JTS faculty continues to be distinguished and world-renowned; the student body is just as excellent and eager to serve as ever; and the record of innovation goes on unabated. In recent years, JTS graduates have founded and led an array of dynamic new institutions, revitalized existing synagogues and schools, and stood at the very forefront of organizations dedicated to reenergized worship, renewed pursuit of social justice, creative thinking about the Israel-Diaspora relationship, and high-quality adult Jewish learning.

Our alumni have exercised this innovative leadership at a critical time when Jewish identity can no longer be taken for granted and Jewishness of all sorts is up for grabs. But it is a time as well when hundreds of thousands of Jews in North America, *do* make and retain strong connections to Jewish tradition and Jewish community. Many others are searching for meaning and purpose for themselves and their families. They are powerfully attracted to experiences of tangible, face-to-face community that supply what they most need and want in life: ethical lives of purpose, ritual observance that offers profundity and joy, guidance at key junctures of the life cycle, deeper connection to Israel and the Jewish people, a wise and resonant Jewish voice on major issues confronting our society and the world, and celebration that fills their homes and hearts with spirituality and transcendence. Many seek inspiring faith that brings them to encounter with God and impels them to work for a better world.

The successes and failures of the Jewish community in recent decades show that *leadership* and *vision* make all the difference—particularly when these are grounded in unquestionable authenticity born of learning and commitment. The Jews who lead us into an uncertain future by building new sorts of community and supplying new interpretations of our tradition must be so confident in their knowledge of the past that they are able to adapt Judaism to new circumstances without fear that such change will destroy what is most precious in our inheritance. They must understand how previous leaders have conserved Judaism by teaching, living, and changing it: carefully but boldly, and always with great learning and profound love.

In 2010, many institutions of higher education seek this balance. Louis Menand, in his perceptive reflection on what he calls “the marketplace of ideas,” suggests

that a crisis is looming for colleges and universities in part because knowledge changes much faster in our day than “the system” through which knowledge is acquired and transmitted. Americans insist “that the production of knowledge should be uninhibited and access to it should be universal,” and the Internet would seem to represent and advance both goals decisively. But the system of higher education in this country dates in almost every aspect from the late nineteenth century, and as a result, the academy and its disciplines are faced with urgent and challenging questions: What do students gain by sitting in a classroom now that knowledge is instantly available on countless ubiquitous devices? Do books still matter? How can we hope to order knowledge—or careers—in late-nineteenth-century categories when Internet searches break down all categories, fuse past and present, and threaten every order with randomness and disorder?

It is clear that all institutions of higher education, including Jewish institutions, require a willingness to be flexible and to adapt inherited paths to new realities. In the face of overwhelming uncertainty, we will also need the wisdom to stand fast in the convictions and covenant that define us. A society, tradition, or community can cope with change of this rapidity and degree, I would suggest, only by providing tomorrow’s leaders with the learning and vision they need to carry their traditions and communities forward, not least the knowledge of how their traditions have grown through change in the past.

That balance of history and possibility, now as ever, is difficult to find. From the very outset, JTS has taught and demonstrated that there is no necessary contradiction between scholarship and belief, no unavoidable conflict between faith and reason, no inescapable tension between our focus on North American Jewry and significant involvement in the State and society of Israel, just as there is no incompatibility between rootedness in the Jewish community and pluralist respect for individuals and communities of other faiths. JTS has long sought to shape Jewish leaders who are fully open to the contemporary worlds of science and the arts, society and politics, and at the same time fully committed to Jewish history, teachings, and practices in all their complexity and variety.

I promise today that JTS will seek to articulate and communicate this vision of Judaism with renewed effort in the coming years and to imbue it in a new generation of scholars and religious, educational, and lay leaders.

Because learning is essential to the task of covenant, **JTS will remain a preeminent institution of Jewish higher education that integrates rigorous academic scholarship and teaching with a commitment to strengthening Jewish tradition, Jewish lives, and Jewish communities.** We cannot rightfully

seek to steer Jews and Judaism into the future without ever-new and always first-rate scholarship about the Jewish past. In response to the changing conditions in which Judaism must be lived and taught, JTS will work to better focus both teaching and learning, and to maximize synergy among JTS's various offerings and schools. We will stress *interdisciplinary* study in every area and develop *core curricula* in every field. We will provide future rabbis and cantors, scholars and educators, lay leaders and professional leaders, not only with rigorous textual and contextual learning, as always, but with the *new skills and training* demanded by their changing roles—as in pastoral care and arts education or in education in Jewish leadership as JTS uniquely understands that particular set of roles and responsibilities. In addition, we will offer our future leaders greater exposure to other faith traditions and broader understanding of the diverse Jewish community. There will also be heightened emphasis on how to teach the texts and history that are studied here, and how to inspire others with what has been learned.

Secondly: **JTS will renew its efforts to bring the unique resources of teaching and learning gathered at 3080 Broadway to bear in a host of new ways for the benefit of Judaism and the Jewish community in North America and beyond.** The *continuing education* of Jewish professionals at work in the field will become a core mission of the institution. I promise our graduates that the degree awarded to you today is only the beginning of lifelong learning with JTS. It will also be part of JTS's core mission, starting this fall, to reach adults in the New York metropolitan area with *high-level, in-depth, cutting-edge, and open-minded Jewish learning*. *The Library* will seek to live up to its potential as *a major cultural resource to this city, and especially to the Jewish community of this region*. Just as the walls separating schools and disciplines inside JTS will come down, so will the walls dividing full-time students on campus from part-time students in the surrounding areas who are eager for Jewish learning and Jewish wisdom.

Last but not least, JTS will redouble its efforts to **provide intellectual and spiritual leadership for Conservative Judaism and the vibrant religious center of North American Jewry.** Indeed, we shall return to the promise of Schechter and Finkelstein that *this* Jewish theological seminary truly be of and for *America*, by **broadcasting the message of Judaism as we know and teach it to the broadest possible audience.** We shall serve Conservative Judaism and the religious center by continuing to provide professional and lay leaders to communities that seek to live in accordance with the vision of Torah that JTS articulates, as well as by communicating that vision with new energy to a variety of audiences through a variety of media. In cooperation with other institutions and

organizations, we shall use the resources of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education to *make a greater impact than ever before on day and congregational schools*. We shall strengthen JTS's close connection to *Camp Ramah* and seek to bring the methods and insights of Ramah to bear on synagogues and schools. We shall direct the resources of our rabbinic and cantorial schools to the *revitalization of synagogue worship*. We shall engage students, faculty, and others in *rethinking the paths of learning and living Torah that define Conservative Judaism and the broader religious center*. Finally, we shall bring Judaism into more frequent encounter with the areas of health and medicine, weigh the impact of Jewish principles and teachings upon key matters of public policy, and seek new sorts of honest dialogue between Judaism and other faiths, particularly Christianity and Islam.

That is JTS's agenda for the years to come, our covenant with graduates and supporters, our tradition, and our community. For many of us, myself included, the way we practice scholarship at JTS for its own sake and seek to use it for the good is also part and parcel of our people's covenant with God. The Jewish community has wisely invested heavily in new programs and talent in recent decades. I hope that it will join us in investing in you, our newest alumni, and in this established but ever-innovative institution that is uniquely committed to the learning, leadership, and vision needed to ensure the Jewish future. You, our graduates, hold the key to that future.

And so, I say to List College graduates: you will no longer be enacting the hyphen in your identity as North American Jews by walking up and down Broadway between biology or poli-sci classes at Columbia or Barnard and Talmud or Jewish history classes at JTS. Bigger opportunities for fruitful synthesis and tension await. Strengthen that hyphen for the good of all the communities of which you are a part.

Graduates of The Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School: you have learning and skills that are desperately needed by Jewish communities seeking a way in conditions no one could have imagined. Reach deep into the tradition and yourself. The Torah that you now represent wants holiness in the world and not just in the Temple. It wants you in the world. We are proud you will be there living in Torah, for Torah.

Graduates of The Graduate School: scholarship and teaching in Jewish Studies arguably matter more than ever, now that the possibilities open to Jews in every field are greater than ever—and the worth of the humanities is widely challenged along with the need for classroom teaching and the value of books. Be bold in

your practice of learning for its own sake and your insistence that knowledge be used for the good.

Last but not least, Davidson School graduates: has there ever been a time or place when Jewish education was more necessary, given the absence in most Jews' lives of Jewish times and spaces that convey instruction in the natural course of things? Has there ever been a time, in Israel or North America, where Jews had more scope for bringing Judaism to bear on the way the world works—and less knowledge of what Judaism has said or required in the past? Torah needs teaching and doing in new ways. We need you to make this happen. We have every confidence that you will.

To all our graduates, at this moment of transition for you as well as for JTS, I speak for the trustees, the faculty, and the administration in saying that I believe firmly in your ability and in that of the institution that has trained you. I am convinced that you are well-prepared for the work ahead. So is JTS. The gifts and responsibilities of covenant summon us, now as always. We dare not fail to respond with all the boldness and experience at our command. Let's get to it.