

Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz
Inauguration Address
May 17, 2022

I first want to thank our special guests for celebrating with us today: Senator Schumer, Comptroller Lander, as well as government representatives Eva Wyner, Pastor Monroe, and Simon Sebag.

As I mark this moment, I feel such a sense of gratitude to so many.

- To you, Rachel Gildiner, for your warm and gracious words—you represent the best of JTS! Wishing everyone in your household a *refuah shleimah*, a quick and complete recovery.
- To my predecessor, Chancellor Emeritus Arnie Eisen, with whom I had the privilege of working throughout his chancellorship. Thank you for bringing your vision of North American Judaism to bear on this institution, most visibly on this reimagined campus, which was designed to bring us together for learning and community.
- Thank you to Chancellor-Emeritus Ismar Schorsch, for the most meaningful introduction. Many decades ago, you saw in me a capacity for scholarship and leadership that I did not

yet see in myself. You pushed me intellectually, encouraged my initiatives, and modeled *menschlichkeit* and kindness. I feel most fortunate to have benefited from your counsel and friendship throughout my career.

- I have the privilege of building on the achievements of not only my two immediate predecessors but also the five previous leaders of JTS. I am so honored to join their ranks, all the more so as the first woman in this role.

I also want to recognize others in the JTS community who have made this moment possible:

- To the Board of Trustees, and especially Alan Levine, for their devotion to this institution, for their support and confidence in me. We – JTS and me personally – are so fortunate for their leadership.
- To my terrific senior team who challenge me and partner with me to develop the vision for JTS's future that you will hear about today.
- To the faculty, students, administrators, and staff whose day-in-day out dedication to learning, to each other, and to the wider community enables us to thrive.

Let us also acknowledge the unusual nature of this Inauguration. It's almost two years since my appointment; the shadow of Covid

-19 still hovers, and yet we are marking this moment together – in person and on livestream, and it is thrilling to celebrate with you. As we sang Rabbi Warshawsky’s gorgeous composition during the processional: *Ze hayom asah Adonai nagilah v’nismichah vo*. This is the day God has made; let us exult and rejoice in it.

My devotion to JTS stems from my own family—individuals whose love of JTS, of Judaism, and of service to the community brought me here today. It’s 102 years since my maternal grandfather graduated from JTS’s Teachers Institute. Both my parents were alums, as were many family members, some of whom are here today. They, like I, were drawn to JTS for serious learning, for community, and for its rich vision of a learned, stimulating, joyous Judaism.

That’s the kind of Judaism I experienced at home: my father’s love of Jewish learning, observance and tradition, and my mother’s devotion to Jewish culture—especially the Hebrew language; and their joint commitment to bringing others closer to Judaism.

In my maternal grandmother, I experienced a loving model of a woman deeply devoted to family *and* to her work outside the home. A dedicated volunteer initially, she moved into the work world, was widowed in her early 50s, and eventually became

executive director of a Jewish children's services organization. Little did I know that my life would hew so closely to hers. But 18 years ago, I too experienced the premature death of my beloved husband, and also of our adored son, within 5 months of each other, leaving a gaping hole in our family that will never fully close. This period gave me a window into Judaism's power to sustain, despite my inability over many months to sing God's praises and participate in communal life. I grieved publicly in this institution, gradually refueling my soul through the embrace of my family and of this community as well as the satisfaction I derived from meaningful work. This shattering experience sharpened my sensitivities to others' pain, hopefully enabling me to alleviate some of theirs. It also heightens the joy and gratitude that I experience with my cherished family and closest friends—my husband Eric, my children, stepchildren, grandchildren, siblings, and extended family, which blessedly has expanded over the years. I thank God for it all. As we recite in the Grace after Meals: *Al hakol, adonai elohenu, anachnu modim lach um'varchim otach.* For everything, God, I thank you and praise you.

We gather here today at a moment of great societal upheaval. We face massive challenges and opportunities, the likes of which we have not seen since the aftermath of WWII. We worry about the

climate crisis, the unbridled power of technology and challenges to reproductive rights, privacy, democracy here and around the world, and more.

We also worry that despite the urgency and magnitude of these concerns, the incessant media cycle and lack of a shared base of information make it hard to engage productively with others. To undertake the hard work that is a prerequisite for transformational change.

I believe wholeheartedly—in fact, I have staked my career on the belief—that education is key to such change. Education—deep understanding born of intense intellectual engagement.

Education—the spirit of collegiality and obligation to the common good and to a common community. Sadly, the educational sphere has narrowed as a space for the vigorous exchange of ideas. It has become increasingly hard to engage with others whose perspectives differ from our own. Many bite their tongues or preach to echo chambers rather than confronting opinions that might sow doubt or offend.

These challenges resonate in distinctive ways in the Jewish world as well:

First, American society's polarization has unleashed alarming antisemitic sentiment and activity at a level not experienced in decades. While the Jewish community may unite against this shared threat, underlying societal polarization has also exacerbated tensions among Jews around other issues, notably the State of Israel and the value of religious pluralism.

Once we feel alienated from one another on a particular issue; once we stop seeing the humanity even in those we disagree with, we lose the desire to come to the table at all; we dig in our heels and resist relationship building and collective problem solving.

In the crowd gathered here today, filled with educated and committed Jews, it's easy to miss the second most pressing issue: As the 2020 Pew Research Center Report on Jewish Americans shows, fewer Jews are building rich, sustaining Jewish lives bound up with the Jewish story, Jewish practice and learning, and helping Jews in need. And yet the report also shows that the vast majority of American Jews feel tied to the Jewish people.

They already have a foot in the door; Our task is to get them over the threshold, to help them intensify connections they intuitively feel.

How? In the Jewish sphere as well, education is key.

When I look to my predecessors for insight, I am keenly aware of the monumental role they played in fortifying Jewish life and North American society in their time. Chancellor Louis Finkelstein's aspirations, articulated in 1945, particularly resonate:

The political, the economical, the cultural and even the moral and spiritual realms are interdependent. There can be no religious piety without social justice, no lasting economic prosperity without the sense for the spiritual; no political stability without compliance with moral principles. ("A Jewish University in America: Its Aims and Functions," *Jewish Exponent* 14 September 1945, in Greenbaum 66)

This integrated approach—so rare in his day, and rarer still today—epitomizes JTS's uniqueness and provides a compelling response to today's challenges.

What do I mean by this? Learning to appreciate life's complexity in a nuanced manner: that is the foundation of an integrated life. That is the essence of JTS's educational philosophy: the cultivation of NUANCE: intellectual, religious, and emotional.

First, a Nuanced intellectual life: At JTS we treasure our superb faculty who produce scholarship that illuminates our past, our texts, and our values. We also treasure our material heritage—so much of which can be found in our library. Just three weeks ago I viewed a small women’s *Seder Brachot*, Book of Blessings, printed in Vienna in 1736 that includes a gorgeous Omer counter. It—along with recent scholarship—sheds light on the intensity of women’s daily ritual lives. It touched the core of my religious longings, by tying the daily practice of counting the days from Passover to Shavuot to Jewish women’s practice over the centuries. Accessing our tradition can do this for all of us: when we prepare a favorite family recipe, sing a Hebrew song, or light Shabbat candles, we connect to a rich heritage that adds depth and significance to our lives.

In embracing a nuanced intellectual life, we explore primary sources not only in the form of sacred texts but also marriage documents, melodies, modern fiction, and Omer counters, and which today would include websites, podcasts, and social media. When Solomon Schechter in *his* inaugural address quoted the phrase, “I regard nothing Jewish as foreign to me,” he signaled a commitment to this expansive kind of Jewish learning.

We examine these sources through lenses of interpretation that illuminate, challenge, and problematize our understanding. We

consider context; we study history and the evolution of ideas over time; we use contemporary analytical tools to offer fresh interpretive possibilities. This approach cultivates our students' critical thinking skills, so that students will develop into astute observers, analyzers, and interpreters.

Finally, we learn from one another. Engaged with their students, faculty also *encourage* hevruta—learning with others, for as Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, taught, based on the phrase in Proverbs (27:17)

בְּרִזָּל בְּבִרְזָל יִחַד “Iron sharpens iron.” Study partners sharpen one another. [Taanit 7a]

When we learn from others, we hone and reassess our views; we grow to disagree respectfully and generatively. We come to appreciate that it is the *search* for an elusive truth, not the truth itself, that invigorates both us and our ancient tradition. We grow more comfortable with complexity.

This nuanced intellectual life leads naturally to a second arena of JTS's distinctiveness: a nuanced religious life. We achieve this by integrating our intellectual insights with a spiritual life anchored by halakhah (Jewish law), cultivated through daily prayer and ritual, and deepened through a relationship with God that can touch the depths of our souls and the heights of our spirits.

This integration of intellectual and religious life will prompt us—I daresay compel us—to change, in ways both subtle and seismic. To me, this impulse is epitomized by Henrietta Szold. Steeped in Jewish learning and observance from her earliest years, Szold continued to strive for more. She became JTS's first female student in 1902, after assuring Solomon Schechter that she would not seek rabbinic ordination (something that happily changed, thanks to the leadership of Chancellor Gerson Cohen, and is reflected in our diverse student body and rabbinate today)

Szold's prodigious education emboldened her to put her own stamp on the Jewish story: First, she made Jewish learning available to English-speaking Jews through her editorial and translation work. Second, she founded Hadassah to advance the Zionist project and empower Jewish women. Third, in 1916, she challenged the traditional convention that only males were obligated to recite Kaddish for deceased relatives. Upon the death of her mother, she declined a friend's offer to say Kaddish with these words:

Jewish custom is very dear and sacred to me. And yet I cannot ask you to say Kaddish after my mother.

The Kaddish means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests his wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community which his parent had, and

that so the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family, I must do that for the generations of my family.

Szold knew that she needed to *both* maintain the unbroken chain of tradition *and* add her own link to it. For Szold, as for us, a nuanced religious life must be anchored in the past—in Halakhah, in text, in tradition—*and* be ever-evolving. Engaging with this tension, not fearing it—that is the essence of the nuanced religious life that we embrace, we live, we treasure at JTS.

When we cultivate a rich intellectual and religious life, we foster the third element of JTS's educational philosophy, that of a nuanced emotional life. We recognize the complexity of human emotion and know that we can love our family, people, and country even though they will at times make us angry, deflate us, even break our hearts. Our tradition doesn't shy away from human fallibility. Think of the Torah's depictions of our ancestors—Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and others. All are flawed, complicated. Knowing that we will occasionally be disappointed by those we love, feel exasperated by our study partners, and disagree with those we care about does not deter us from engaging.

Rather, it grounds us in humility, encouraging us to look more deeply into one another, to lift up their strengths and find our common humanity.

We see the challenge of emotional nuance playing out around Israel: We feel joy and elation at the existence of the State of Israel. We celebrate its culture and achievements. Yet this State that we love deeply can also crush our hearts—when its government discriminates against our way of practicing Judaism or when its policies fail to ensure the dignity and rights of Palestinians, Arabs and others in its midst. As we do with our loved ones, we choose to double down on love, which drives us to work ever harder to shape and influence Israel's choices and direction.

Ultimately, this commitment to nuance and complexity prepares JTS students to develop compelling visions of change and effective plans of action in response to the urgent challenges of our times.

In this moment of polarization and lack of deep Jewish engagement, I am also convinced that our nuanced approach is key to opening doors to a rich, meaningful Jewish life for many others in our community. Our educational approach, our programs, and our stellar alumni can influence them to plant both

feet within the Jewish community and ultimately lead it to a robust future.

What concrete steps can we take to achieve these goals?

First, JTS must make its exceptional offerings available to many more people: By developing flexible degree and certificate opportunities both here and online to supplement our signature in-house programs. By expanding community learning and professional development opportunities. By optimizing the virtual platform that proved so effective during the pandemic, when we grew to appreciate the deep hunger for our kind of learning throughout the world.

Second, by educating future leaders who will bring nuanced conversations to the communities they serve and use the skills and dispositions they have developed to ignite transformational change. To amplify our impact, we will convene and model public discourse across the ideological and religious spectrum, bringing Judaism to bear on the major issues of our era.

Our campus provides a spectacular setting for achieving this. Our initiatives will elevate JTS as a vibrant hub for nuanced teaching, learning, and engagement. At the same time, today's festivities speak to the many ways in which we will bring people in.

Hundreds are gathered in our new space and thousands are joining us online, and our programs will mirror that commitment.

As we attract many more people, we're going to give them compelling reasons to stay. How?

1. JTS will bring leaders from various faith traditions together to address the moral issues of our day.
2. JTS will expand relationships among our students and others drawn to lives of service through strategic collaborations with others, including sister seminaries and Morningside Heights institutions.
3. JTS will bridge the secular/religious Jewish divide by providing opportunities for Jewish artists—musicians, writers, actors, sculptors—to access Jewish learning and living. Such experiences will not only deepen *their* art, but it will attune JTS students to the dynamic possibilities that can emerge through the integration of Judaism with the broader cultural milieu.
4. JTS will nurture a mature and nuanced relationship between North American Jewry and Israel.
5. Finally, JTS will bring together a broad range of individuals to articulate the ties that bind us as Jews and generate a confident, courageous, nuanced religious ideology—a Conservative Judaism for this century.

These initiatives are both bold and ambitious. But as a historian, I know that they also build upon JTS's historic strengths: Solomon Schechter's early adoption of Zionism and promotion of Conservative Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan's broad vision of civilizational Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel's political activism, all my predecessors' interfaith engagement, and more.

The North American Jewish community encompasses a wide range of practices, allegiances, and aspirations; Let's prepare all who engage with JTS to become the confident, innovative, moral leaders that the Jewish world needs!

When I think about this moment, I'm drawn to the Talmudic story in Tractate Menachot 29b:3-5. When Moses went up to Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, he found God tying crowns on the letters of the Torah. Moses asked what was preventing God from giving the Torah without these decorative additions. God explained that these additions were important, necessary. That in the future, a Jew would pore over them and derive Jewish law from each and every one of them.

Moses didn't fully understand. He demanded that God explain. So, God sent Moses into the future to Rabbi Akiva's study hall.

Moses listened to the hum of learning, hoping to recognize words of Torah. Instead, Moses realized that he did not understand a word of what they were saying! Dejected, Moses felt that his Torah knowledge was lacking. But then, the story continues:

When Rabbi Akiva was discussing a matter, his students said to him: רבי מנין לך? *My teacher, from where do you derive this [teaching]?*

Rabbi Akiva said to them: הלכה למשה מסיני *It is a law transmitted to Moses from Sinai.*

When Moses heard this, when he heard his name, when he heard a reference to the Torah he would soon deliver at Sinai, נתיישר his mind was put to rest. He recognized that this new teaching would grow from the Torah he was about to receive.

Moses came to appreciate that Jewish learning would and should be ever-evolving. And God taught Moses—teaches all those who look at the letters of a Torah scroll, that evolution is divinely sanctioned, that through this process, Torah becomes eternally meaningful.

That is our task as a people and as an institution—to educate ourselves and others; to probe our tradition for new meaning that will engage our minds and souls, to provide nourishment that will give us hope in a promising future; to cultivate nuance and mature insight, and, most of all, to educate the next generation of leaders who will carry on this tradition for generations to come.

We have much to do; I look forward to partnering with you to achieve our goals. Together we can jumpstart the change that fuels Judaism's longevity.

May we succeed in our efforts.