

August 12, 2026

Remarks by President Isaac Herzog at the Presentation of an Honorary Degree from JTS at the President's Residence

An honorary doctorate is, as its name suggests, for the sake of honor. I was not privileged to sit in the halls of JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, America's rabbinical school, or to count myself among the institution's graduates. But I can say with full conviction that I am certainly a student of JTS. I have drawn and absorbed, like so many of the best of our people, knowingly and unknowingly, from the teachings of JTS's giants of the spirit. It is difficult to measure influence in the world of the spirit, but there are institutions whose influence is felt far beyond their walls. JTS is such a case: an institution whose teachings, I can say with confidence, have left a deep imprint on Jewish thought as a whole.

In the eighteenth century, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a striking and, for its time, unusual statement about Judaism. He wrote: 'I shall never believe I have heard the arguments of the Jews until they have a free state, seminaries and universities, where they can speak and debate without risk. Only then will we know what they have to say.' These words hardly need explanation. For hundreds and thousands of years, Jewish thought developed around the world. But certain basic conditions must exist in order to voice a clear, unambiguous message to that world. By the end of the nineteenth century, those conditions were born. First and foremost, the Zionist movement was born, and the fruit of that movement is the state in which we live and flourish today. The State of Israel is not only a secure home for Jews around



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the world; it is also the vehicle that allows Jewish thought and the teachings of Israel to appear in a new and clear form. But Rousseau did not speak only of a state. Alongside the rise of Zionism, and as part of the transformation of American Jewry and the spread of the Haskalah, a Jewish theological seminary was established in New York at that same time: a pluralistic house of study seeking to clarify the message of Judaism at its source, securely and clearly.

Anyone who walked into JTS's magnificent library in the last century could encounter giants of the Jewish spirit, conversing in the hallway or absorbed in research in a corner. Generation after generation, giants worked at JTS, from Solomon Schechter and Abraham Joshua Heschel to Saul Lieberman and Louis Finkelstein. And among its graduates, from Henrietta Szold to Arthur Green and Daniel Boyarin, and so many more, figures who inspired generations across so many fields. This did not happen by chance. From its very founding, the institution placed the whole of Klal Yisrael, the entirety of the Jewish people, at its center: as a goal, an idea, a test, and an aspiration. And it became a magnet for Jews from around the world. Rousseau wondered when the world would truly be able to hear the voice of Judaism. Today the answer is clear. It is heard from Jerusalem. And it is heard from New York. It is heard from the houses of study of Israel, and from the houses of study of the Diaspora. And when these two voices speak with one another, the voice of the Jewish people is heard with clarity and sharpness. I spoke at length about the relationship between these voices, between these worlds, in the address of appreciation and honor that was broadcast at the ceremony held at JTS this past May. I said then, and I repeat now: between these two worlds



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there are gaps and differences, and they are clear and familiar. The State of Israel and Diaspora Jewry are both facing their own challenges, but the Jewish people have a shared destiny and a shared responsibility. This is one of the cornerstones I set for myself in my tenure as President of the State of Israel, and I re-affirm that I am doing everything, and will do everything, so that we stand together in the face of these challenges.

The conferral of an honorary degree from the distinguished institution of JTS in New York upon the President of the State of Israel at the President's Residence in Jerusalem is not only a great honor for me but also an occasion that is in its very essence a bridge between parallel and complementary worlds. It sends a message from Jerusalem that we — on both sides of the ocean — are inseparable. We are one.

It is on this bridge that I have, in fact, moved throughout my entire life, and it is precisely for that reason that I want to say a few words in a personal capacity as well — not only as President of the State of Israel, but as Isaac, son of my parents, Chaim and Aura Herzog, of blessed memory. The Israeli child who grew up in the Tzahala neighborhood, who studied at both a secular school and a religious school in Tel Aviv, in a home where Hebrew and English were often heard intermingled. Grandson of an eminent and formative Chief Rabbi who came from the heart of English-speaking Jewry. Son of a yeshiva student who became an IDF general and served as Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations. A boy who went to study at the Orthodox school Ramaz in New York, and would go up to 122nd Street to study on the campus of JTS, and in the summers would attend Camp Ramah of the Conservative Movement. And



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on the holidays, he would visit, together with his parents, the sukkah of the Jewish giant Professor Saul Lieberman, the Orthodox scholar who was the legendary rector of the Conservative JTS. All my life I have experienced this fascinating Jewish spectrum. I carry on this ongoing and important dialogue. My worldview sees it as an essential component of my own identity, and of the life of the Jewish people. This is another link in the long chain of Jewish tradition that engages and corresponds with the wider world with moderation, generosity of spirit, and depth; with wonder at the Jewish story; and with commitment to the eternity of Israel and the duty to act on its behalf, in Israel and in the Diaspora. For decades I have served my homeland and the Jewish people. As Cabinet Secretary, a role in which I also helped establish Taglit, as a minister in the governments of Israel, including as Minister of Diaspora Affairs and the Fight against Antisemitism, and also as Chairman of Taglit; and subsequently as Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, the largest Jewish organization in the world, which helped establish the State of Israel; and today I am privileged to carry out this same mission as President of the State of Israel.

It is precisely for this purpose that, as President of the State, I established the Voice of the People initiative: to build a diverse Jewish leadership for the generations to come, and a council that examines in depth the challenges of the moment and the future of the Jewish people. The first council, which is about to complete its term, was diverse and told a remarkable Jewish story, and the next council is on its way to being formed. I invite young women and men from across the Jewish world to join — certainly from the Conservative movement.



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And throughout my path, both personal and public, I am constantly searching for solutions and opportunities to build the bridge, to strengthen it, and to establish it: the bridge meant to connect our generation to the legacy of generations past, to connect Judaism to a changing world, to connect Israelis with Diaspora Jewry in all its streams and shades, and to connect Diaspora Jewry with the State of Israel. To connect action with thought, and with dreams. For me, JTS is a model for these connections. And so receiving this honorary degree, from this esteemed institution, is a great privilege for me and moves me in an extraordinary way.

My deep gratitude goes to all of you at JTS: to you, the Chancellor Emerita, Professor Shuly Rubin Schwartz, the first woman to hold this position, who led the institution to new heights with a strong hand. My congratulations, of course, to the incoming new Chancellor, Rabbi Mike Uram. Thank you to the members of the academic committee and to the entire faculty of JTS for the tremendous honor you have bestowed upon me. Thank you to my family — to my dear wife, Michal, who walks this path with me, and to my beloved children, some of whom are here with us, who are part of this wondrous mission. May we all continue to build together that same wondrous chain of the Jewish people: a chain connecting tradition to scholarship, Judaism to the wider world, Israel to the Diaspora, and past to future. This is the mission of JTS, and this is the mission of the State of Israel. It is also my mission, and my life's work. Am Yisrael Chai! Thank you very much.