

Chancellor Arnold Eisen, JTS Commencement Address May 21, 2009

I begin this charge to the graduates of 2009 by talking about the obvious.

This is a time of great challenge and transformation for all institutions of higher education in America, as it is for all Jewish institutions and organizations. The economic downturn has accelerated processes long in the works and rendered urgent a need for rethinking that has been recognized for some time. It is clear beyond doubt that at JTS as elsewhere innovation is no longer a good thing to strive for but rather a necessity of survival. Whereas academic leaders like me have long sent forth graduates like you to an uncertain future, the uncertainty is greater this year than in recent memory, the speed of change more rapid.

So whether rabbi or cantor, educator or scholar, lay leader or professional, the institutions in which you will be working next year will soon be far different than they were only a few years ago. All the more reason to do what we have had to do this year at JTS: focus on core mission and core values, figure out what you *need* to do as opposed to what you would *like* to do, and communicate why your doing it matters to you and to the world.

I was assisted in that task a few weeks back by a piece in the *New York Times*: a pointed critique by Edward Rothstein of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. I am not concerned here with the pros and cons of the museum or of Rothstein's review. For me the piece highlights an urgent question to which JTS must respond daily: how should we remember the Jewish past in a way that is true to the complexity of what our people and our tradition have been, that helps to keep Judaism alive, sustains it, and enables it to reach North American Jews and the world with meaning in our time and in the future? Three aspects of the article and the question are especially salient.

First: the museum, like much Jewish history, like much of Jewish life today, is overwhelmed by the shadow of the Holocaust. The Libeskind wing of the building—jarring, jagged, intentionally off-center and displeasing to the eye—looms large over the neoclassical structure, all symmetry and repose, that houses exhibits tracing other periods in the history of Jews in Germany. Jewish educators, like Jewish historians, face this problem constantly. We must remember the Holocaust and make sure that others do not forget it. But how do we see our past for what it was—good and bad, success and failure—rather than as a step on the way to inevitable persecution or destruction?

How do we get Jews to face up to the fact that we still have enemies (as today's headlines about the plot to bomb synagogues in Riverdale remind us) and must defend against them, without letting this truth prevent us from seeing possibilities for partnership, pluralism, dialogue, and trust?

Most important of all: how do we convince American Jewry, and its funders, that Jews cannot survive—let alone thrive—if our goal is survival alone? There must be content, purpose, higher meaning; we at JTS would say: there must be Torah. Our *raison d'être* here at JTS is to articulate and teach that Torah, and to train leaders like those graduating today who can, in a variety of ways, transmit Torah to and model it for North American Jews.

JTS has always believed that any authentic vision of Judaism must be firmly grounded in deep learning. You have to know the past, really know it, in all its complexity and nuance, in order to be sure—when you make the changes needed to take it forward—that it really is this past, this tradition, that you are carrying into the future, rather than a new thing of your own invention. One of Rothstein's criticisms of the museum is that it does the opposite, offering only "scattered explanations of Judaism." It tells the visitor that learning and scripture were highly valued, but provides "no real sense of their content or how they shaped Jewish life." And, "It is as if intellectual and religious substance had been drained from Judaism."

Let's be honest: a great deal of Jewish education is like that these days. Solomon Schechter was merciless in his critique of such efforts when he addressed the graduating class of 1909. The very different sort of education pioneered at JTS is what enabled him to say, "A more sacred duty than that you have taken upon yourselves today cannot well be imagined. It means nothing less than the very existence of Judaism." JTS stood then and stands now for a Judaism that is at once rooted firmly in the Jewish past and at the same time—not in spite of Torah, but in fulfillment of Torah—fully embraces the society and culture in which American Jews play such a major part. JTS established and still practices a kind of learning that is rare: one that combines commitment and criticism, devotion and analysis; unfettered pursuit of knowledge and fervent desire to use that knowledge for the good.

Scholarship and teaching at JTS in 2009, for all the new methods we employ and the new conclusions we reach through those methods, remains a form of *talmud Torah* that leads to *ma'aseh*, to action. Our faculty disagree on many things, this too a virtue on which Schechter insisted. But we are all committed to a Judaism that respects other faiths as well as other forms of Judaism—and is determined to learn from them; a Judaism that seeks out the insights of the sciences and the arts, knows that Torah can make a difference to this planet and that it *will* make a difference if our devotion to it matches our honesty and our skill measures up to our conviction.

One needs *institutions* to accomplish such things, styles of learning developed over time, a culture strong and distinct enough to attract fine minds to it year by year so as to keep that culture vital. Rothstein's reflections on the Jewish museum of Berlin, particularly his call for more truth in its exhibits about Jewish life in Germany and for a view of the past that is "more troubling," provoke reflection on what any Jewish museum should be—and on what JTS should be: we who must in some sense be the very opposite of a museum.

For the kind of memory we seek to practice and stimulate is the sort that Jews intend when they call virtually every major occasion on the calendar *ze'cher le-yetziat mitzrayim*. We remember the Exodus on Shabbat not by telling stories about what happened back then, but by enacting commitments founded on the Exodus and the story we tell about it. God remembers us at Rosh Hashanah, according to the liturgy for the day, by giving us renewed life—and we remember our Covenant with God by working to fight evil in the world, to do good, and to understand the difference between these two.

Institutions like this one, and particularly this one, are essential to that effort. The Jewish community has during my lifetime as a scholar funded Jewish Studies programs at virtually every major college and university in America. I served on the faculty of two such programs for nearly thirty years. They constitute a development of major importance: the transmission of the Jewish past, for the first time in Jewish history, is now entrusted to scholars who for the most part are not employed by Jewish institutions. The impact of this change on the agenda and direction of Jewish learning, for better and for worse, has been immense.

Let us recognize, as Schechter did, that Judaism would be poorer without the sort of learning and living of Torah that JTS has taught and modeled since his day—a type of learning that has no equal anywhere else. No secular university can match our institutional commitment to Torah, no matter how extensive its Jewish Studies program. None can work as single-mindedly as we do to bring Jewish convictions and cutting-edge Jewish learning to bear directly on the issues and challenges of the day. No other seminary combines the immense resources that JTS invests in the training of Jewish leaders like today's graduates with the unique approach to learning that I have described. These resources, this approach to learning, exist to prepare leaders who are uniquely qualified to teach Torah and to model it. We owe this responsibility to Conservative Judaism in particular, to the Jewish people in general and—as Torah commands us—to the world.

That is our core mission, our core value. I hope, newest alumni of JTS, that it is yours as well. We want to work with you, teach you, learn from you, for many years to come. May all of us prove worthy of the task of learning Torah deeply, teaching it well, living it faithfully. And may the personal meaning you derive from this work fulfill Schechter's promise that "a more sacred duty than that you have taken upon yourselves to-day cannot well be imagined."