

The Commencement Address of Dr. Ismar Schorsch,
(then) Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary – New York
at the 112th Commencement Exercises on May 18, 2006

Trustees, faculty, distinguished guests, graduates and friends:

Others are more worthy to speak on this auspicious occasion than I, and I regret their silence. Still, there is poignancy to this commencement as it is my last as Chancellor, and I have reluctantly heeded the wishes of my trustees. After all, it is they who over the years made it possible for me to leave my post at this time with pride and satisfaction.

I am particularly touched by the record number of students receiving degrees with me today, more than 140. The Seminary does many things, but none more important than enlarging and elevating the ranks of Jewish leadership — lay, professional, religious and academic — in the Conservative Movement and the total Jewish community. Growing that number has always been my top priority and the number graduating today is almost double what it was twenty years ago. In the process, we have tripled our endowment, grown the faculty by fifty percent, including the hiring of many women, and renovated our campus. The selection of Professor Arnold M. Eisen of Stanford University as my successor confidently acclaims the academic preeminence of the Seminary.

Yet this is not the moment to herald my record, but rather to restate the convictions that have impelled my actions. It is a moment that I have been mindful of since I took office because I believe in the wisdom of living life from the end. Is that not the salient lesson of the High Holy Day season: to remind ourselves of our mortality and to urge us to make the most of the days allotted us. Someday when I will meet the founders and shapers of The Jewish Theological Seminary in the academy on high, will I be able to convince them that I was a good steward of their legacy? Will they say of me as we say of Abraham each day in our prayers, ומצאת את לבבו, "And you, God, found him at life's end to have been unswervingly faithful to your vision?"

For me, the job of Chancellor has been nothing less than a calling. The Seminary embodies a brave, if fragile experiment to prove the compatibility of אמת ואמונה, of truth and faith, where אמונה signifies the eternal and אמת the ephemeral, a nexus where the divine and the human, the ancient and the modern intersect. This blend of piety and skepticism, of allegiance and integrity, of observance and critical scholarship is precisely what distinguishes the Seminary from a university or yeshiva, and to preserve it in all its tenuous complexity has been for me a sacred duty. The cultural forces eroding that mix are intensifying.

A few months ago, a light snowfall covered the quadrangle of the Seminary with a pristine white blanket. My fifth-floor office fronts on the quad and when I happened to look out I noticed that someone had written in large letters "Wissenschaft," the German word for science or short for "Wissenschaft des Judentums, the academic study of Judaism pioneered in nineteenth-century Germany. To his credit the student had spelled the uncommon word correctly, perhaps part of my legacy. But the word had an edge to it as if to say: "Chancellor, Wissenschaft may stir you, but it leaves us cold." As if to confirm my hunch, a kindred spirit soon added beneath the term in equally bold, in-your-face letters "folk", while still later a third hand added to "folk" a dash followed by the word "rap."

The rebuke could not have been more comical or stinging. As opposed to the dense and demanding discourse of scholarship, students crave instant gratification. The way to the heart is not through the circuitous and arduous route of the mind but the rhythmic beat of the drums. The gate is now determinative in the Conservative synagogue. The primitiveness of rap and the consumerism of the mall threaten to trivialize the literary culture that is the pride of Judaism. Kitsch has become kosher. A synagogue out of sync is deemed bereft of spirituality.

And yet a rich tradition of spirituality, never estranged from the life of the mind, has long animated Jewish practice. At the Seminary, as at Breslau before it, critical scholarship is but the latest phase of the spiritual aquifer of Judaism's halakhic landscape. In the language of the late Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard, the meta-halakhic realm addresses "the need to anchor the religious *vita activa*, the life of mitzvot, in some form of intellectual-contemplative-spiritualizing activity."

The cogency of this insight struck me this summer when I visited the gravesite of Moses Maimonides in Tiberias. To my astonishment, I discovered that Isaiah Horowitz, the author of a sprawling compendium of Jewish law called *שני לוחות הברית* The Two Tablets of the Covenant, was buried just a few feet away. I could not imagine an odder couple.

Maimonides, who had died in Egypt in 1204, consummated the rationalism and worldliness of Sephardic Judaism. He had written his superbly ordered codification of the totality of Jewish law, the Mishnah Torah, in a fluent Hebrew that was pithy and supple, but chose to compose his theological masterpiece, the *Moreh Nebukhim*, in the more universal language of Arabic. In contrast, Horowitz, who had died in Tiberias in 1626, embodied the insular but integrated world of Ashkenazic Judaism. He had begun his Hebrew compendium in 1621 as an ethical will to his children when he left his birthplace in Prague to settle in Israel to slake his thirst for kabbalah. Published in 1649 by his son, the *Two Tablets of the Covenant* systematically expounded the far-flung, evolving ritual of Judaism in terms of the worldview and symbolic language of kabbalah, and given its quick diffusion, the work became a major wellspring for the popularization of kabbalah. Thus fate had paired for eternity the Ashkenazic mystic and Sephardic rationalist.

What linked them to my mind was that each personified a distinctly different expression of *emet ve-emunah*. They shared a common *emunah*, that is a religious life animated by halakhah, which served to set communal norms, modes of relating to the other and sacred times for experiencing God. They diverged in the realm of *emet*, that is the spiritual aquifer which invigorates observance by rendering it meaningful. For Maimonides, Judaism operated historically to end the perversion of idolatry, with intellectual perfection leading to the love of God. For Horowitz, it operated ontologically to diminish the disorder that marked the existence of God and man. Observance did more than recall seminal acts of a sacred past; it actually restored a measure of harmony to God, thereby alleviating human suffering. In a daring move, kabbalah replaced memory with magic.

In brief, then, both Maimonides and Horowitz strove for what Bachya Ibn Pakuda in the eleventh century had called *שלמות הנפש* or soulful piety, in which the inner state of the pious complemented meticulous outward observance. That is how he understood the verse in Deuteronomy (18:13), *תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך*, — "You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God." The complete Jew was expected to struggle with the subtleties of *emet* as well as the rigors of *emunah*.

The history of Jewish spirituality is the never-ending effort to keep halakhah and meta-halakhah in creative tandem. Halakhah is the deed; meta-halakhah, the disposition. Halakhah is fixed, meta-halakhah fluid. Halakhah is legal, public and objective, whereas meta-halakhah is theological, private, and subjective. The intent of meta-halakhah is to inform, enrich and spiritualize our fulfillment of the mitzvot. Or to revert to my image of the aquifer, what is concealed is no less vital than what is visible.

And thus it has always been. In rabbinic Judaism, it was aggadah that nourished and sustained halakhah, as did philosophy and kabbalah in the Middle Ages. Time and again, imagination intervened to vitalize performance. With the advent of emancipation, the founders of Conservative Judaism embraced history as their new meta-halakhic worldview. In Zacharias Frankel's classic formulation of positive-historical Judaism, the term positive stood for halakhah while the term historical was its meta-halakhic underpinning. The study of history was to gird afresh Jewish adherence with a radically expanded national narrative that sought to highlight the motifs of exile and resistance, literary virtuosity and cultural contributions, insularity and integration, contextualization and development. Each new discovery added meaningfulness to a religious heritage revered for its evident antiquity. Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, Solomon Schechter's *Studies in Judaism* and Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, all still in print, are but the most sparkling specimens of history as meta-halakhah.

The malaise of Conservative Judaism today, as etched in the snow on the quad, is that its adherence to halakhah is devoid of a spiritualizing meta-halakhah. In the wake of Mordecai Kaplan's wholesale reduction of halakhah to folkways, the function of history shifted to vindicating change. Ever more identified by the inane mantra of "tradition and change," Conservative Judaism lost access to critical scholarship as a source for religious meaning, with nothing substantially spiritual to replace it. For all its emotive power, music is not a surrogate for a vibrant system of meaning. The intense grandeur of Mahler's second symphony, known as resurrection, can surely stir one's soul, but hardly leads to a belief in the mystery at the heart of Christianity.

Our impoverishment is sadly exemplified by the ambivalence toward critical scholarship in *Etz Hayim*, the movement's new humash. As commentary, the abridgement of the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary is so eviscerated as to betray not the slightest trace of the plenitude of the original to generate spiritual meaning through empathetic scholarship. As exposition, the end notes, with a few striking exceptions, are spiritually inert. Their rabbinic authors go through the paces without passion, making no effort to extract religious significance from the scholarship being mediated. While Conservative rabbis often chide the research oriented faculty of JTS for allegedly doing just that in their classes, as transmitters of scholarship, the rabbis replicated what they condemn. Ironically, the rare spiritual voice to be heard in the end notes usually emanates from one or another of the academics in the roster.

The Zohar relates that when Moses beheld the spectacle of the Golden Calf, he did not smash the tablets of the Ten Commandments as scripture records. Rather they slipped from his hands because the letters inscribed on them fled back to heaven. Minus the letters, the stone tablets were too heavy to carry. The image graphically depicts our predicament.

With history no more than an argument for supersession, the halakhic yoke has lost its lightness. Great scholarship has ceased to energize it as it had in the past. Once, the polarity of truth and faith at the Seminary had made it home for the acme of twentieth-century Jewish scholarship, a venue of ferment and fertility. Faith once moved us to study our heritage deeply,

while truth asked of us that we do it critically, in light of all that we know. Willful ignorance was never an acceptable recourse. The interaction set us apart as the vital center of modern Judaism.

But no longer. Our meta-halakhic aquifer has run dry, eroding our halakhic landscape. With frequency, fundamental changes come more easily. Our forebearers embraced history to enlarge and enrich Jewish observance; we wield it, if at all, to shrink it. How quickly have we forgotten the bracing spiritual power of Gershon Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Yehezkel Kaufmann's *Religion of Israel*, Saul Lieberman's *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, Nahum Sarna's *Understanding Genesis*, or Jacob Milgrom's commentaries to *Leviticus* and *Numbers*. Our addiction to instant gratification has stripped us of the patience to appreciate any discourse whose rhetoric is dense and demanding. Mindlessly, we grasp for the quick spiritual fix.

A grievous failure of nerve affects Conservative Judaism. We have lost confidence in the viability of the distinctive polarity that once resonated within. It is not a slick new motto that we need, but a vigorous reaffirmation of the old which gloriously captures our essence. When Schechter left England in 1902 to head the Seminary, he inveighed against Anglo-Jewry for its shallow quest for a decorous spiritual Judaism. What the confounding epoch of emancipation actually called for, he claimed, was more spiritual Jews. To educate and inspire Jews of such sturdy timbre remains the unaltered mission of a vastly expanded Seminary in an age of pampered and promiscuous individualists contemptuous of all norms. A Seminary true to itself still holds out the brightest beacon for the future of Conservative Judaism.