Choosing Nuance

Inauguration Address

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As I formally assume the chancellorship of JTS, a role I assumed two years ago at the start of the pandemic, I feel a sense of gratitude to so many. I have the privilege of building on the achievements of my two immediate predecessors—Chancellor Emeritus Arnie Eisen and Chancellor Emeritus Ismar Schorsch—as well as the five previous leaders of JTS. I am honored to join their ranks, all the more so as the first woman in this role. I am grateful to our board of trustees for their support and confidence in me; to my senior team, who partner with me in developing the vision for JTS's future; to our faculty, students, administrators, and staff, whose dedication to learning, to each other, and to the wider community enables us to thrive; and to our extraordinary alumni, who not only offer their counsel and support, but who every day demonstrate the impact of a JTS education on strengthening the Jewish community and bettering the world.

My devotion to JTS stems from my own family—individuals whose love of JTS, of Judaism, and of service to the community brought me to this institution and to the position I now hold. It is 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 were drawn to JTS, as was I, 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; 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 fifties, 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 eighteen years ago, I, too, experienced the premature death of my beloved husband, and also of our adored son, within five 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, gradually refueling my soul through the embrace of my family and of the JTS 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. As we recite in the Grace after Meals: *'al hakol, adonai elohenu, anaḥnu modim lakh umevarkhim otakh.* For everything, God, I thank You and praise You.

We are 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 World War II. We worry about the climate crisis; the unbridled power of technology; challenges to reproductive rights, privacy, and 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 with whom we disagree, we lose the desire to come to the table at all; we dig in our heels and resist relationship building and collective problem solving.

Second, 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. 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.[1] 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 Berakhot*, or *Book of Blessings*, printed in Vienna in 1736, which 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

[1] Louis Finkelstein, "A Jewish University in America: Its Aims and Functions," *Jewish Exponent* (September 14, 1945), cited in Michael Greenbaum, *Louis Finkelstein and the Conservative Movement: Conflict and Growth* (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, Binghamton University, 2001), 66.

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 of 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 *ḥevrutah*, learning with others, for as Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, taught, based on the phrase in Proverbs 27:17: *Barzel bevarzel yaḥad*, "iron sharpens iron." Study partners sharpen one another (b. Ta'anit 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, 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 found-

ed 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.[2]

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

[2] Henrietta Szold, "Henrietta Szold's Letter to Haym Peretz on Saying Kaddish for Her Mother," Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/media/henrietta-szold-s-letter-to-haym-peretz-on-saying-kaddish-for-her-mother.

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, we must educate 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. And we will ensure the greatest possible reach by inviting people to join us both in person and online. As we attract many more people, we're going to give them compelling reasons to stay. How?

- 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.

- 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, it will also attune JTS students to the dynamic possibilities that can emerge through the integration of Judaism with the broader cultural milieu.

- JTS will nurture a mature and nuanced relationship between North American Jewry and Israel.

- JTS will bring leaders from various faith traditions together to address the moral issues of our day.

- 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 famous talmudic story in tractate Menahot 29b. When Moses went up Mount 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: *Rabbi, minayin lakh?* My teacher, from where do you derive this [teaching]? Rabbi Akiva said to them: *halakhah leMoshe miSinai*. 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, *nityashvah da'ato*. 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 the extraordinary JTS community to achieve our goals. Together, we can jumpstart the change that fuels Judaism's longevity.

May we succeed in our efforts.

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