



## LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

[www.huc.edu/libraries](http://www.huc.edu/libraries)

### Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

*Delivered at Commencement Exercises of the Hebrew Union College, Saturday, June the 4th, 1921.*

## BACCALAUREATE SERMON

עשה אותם דגלים לשמי למה שהם בני שנאמר בנים אתם לה' אלהיכם

**L**et them make standards unto My Name. And why? Because they are my children, as it is said: "Children are ye unto the Lord, your God." (Midrash Rabba to Numbers Par. 2.)

My Colleagues:

It is my privilege this day to stand between the living and the dead as I come to interpret humbly the message of an hour that is fraught with so much of significance and importance to every one of you. It is a matter of grateful recollection to me that I was a member of the last class that was ordained by the beloved founder of our College—Isaac M. Wise, of blessed memory; and I am likewise reminded that I now speak to the last class to be ordained by Dr. Kohler, whose light we trust will grow from more to more, and of whose learning and strength we pray we may be able to avail ourselves for many more years to come. In every sense are we forging new links in the never-ending chain of Jewish tradition, taking inspiration from both the past and the present as we turn our faces to the future. Both the dead and the living have given us cause for undying gratitude. The unforgettable Wise gave us a permanent interpretation of our place in free America as he with his associates called into being the institutions of American Israel that have not alone inspired our activities, but have saved Judaism to the native-born child of him who crossed the Atlantic. While the other sage—thank God still with us—has definitely crystalized our religious philosophy into a theological science, and dignified our position in America by evidencing the scientific basis for our Jewish affirmations. He has worthily, helpfully and learnedly contributed to the rich storehouse of Jewish truth, and very definitely placed his name in American Jewry's Hall of Fame.

You young colleagues whom it is my high privilege to welcome into the American rabbinate, have been endowed with a noble pedigree, that shall not alone qualify you to teach and preach the princi-

ples of Judaism, but will justify you to speak with authority as disciples of a group of Jewish scholars whose learning has shed lustre upon the College founded by the master and teacher of us all. Whatever may be the developments or criticisms of the future, this institution whose loyal alumni you become this day, has been the chief agency that has saved, as it has served the Judaism of America. Had it not been for the Hebrew Union College, the Jew of America would either have been an atheist, or else the follower of a Europeanized Judaism that would have rendered difficult, mayhaps untenable, the place of the Jew in American life. It was not founded to glorify the name of Wise, or any other Jewish servant. It was not called into being to satisfy any desire for personal aggrandizement. It was established to meet a situation, and its glory and its justification are vested in the fact that it has set a standard for our religious life; and please God, it always will.

As loyal disciples of this institution of learning, you are graduating out into life to interpret the Word of the Living God. The claim of this institution to the recognition of Judaism everywhere, has been its successful effort to meet the religious situation created by a new environment. It was a European Judaism which our forebears attempted to graft upon the new soil, forgetting that sound historical science has revealed to us the inescapable fact that Jewish teachers everywhere attempted to interpret the faith in accordance with the demands, the light and the viewpoints of every age and land wherein they dwelt. To the Tanaim and Amoraim, the Bible was no closed book, whose letter was to be imposed upon a later day and another clime. Judaism was for them a religion of life, and life implies fluidity, adaptability, the accommodation of the old to the new, not the abolition but the re-interpretation of tradition to meet the demands of a virile, thinking, active, earnest day and generation. It was because the civic life of his day was hostile to a free expression of a progressive Judaism, that Isaac M. Wise emigrated from his native heath and came to America. A Judaism incrustated with obsolete traditions, that even frowned upon secular learning, that bound the aspiring minds of a generation that wished to look out and forward—was a Judaism with which his soul could not make peace. His migration was an expression of the Jew's agelong insistence upon freedom, life and service.

As every day has added a new message to the storehouse of Jewish truth, so every land has provided its own clothing for the

classic faith. We need make no apology for the phrase "American Judaism." As Palestine, Babylon, Spain, Germany and Russia constituted separate and distinct phases and epochs in the history of Judaism as not alone the legitimate, but the natural right of the Jew to interpret his faith in accordance with his environment, so the Jew of America in the name of the living God, has claimed the right to adapt his faith to the land of his adoption. Not that Judaism is a characterless, chameleon-like religious philosophy which changes color with the hue of its environment, or that it is devoid of universal, permanent and absolute principles, but that the vision of one age may be the reality of the next, and the standard of one land may vary from the measure of another, and life is a state of change, and immobility in religion spells tyranny or death.

According to the Midrashic commentary upon this week's section of Scripture, not even the hosts of Israel encamped around the tent of meeting were to be designated by the same standard.

#### באותות סימנים היו לכל נשיא ונשיא מפה וצבע

"As a symbol, every prince had his own flag, and every flag had its own color." And so, too, the tribes of Israel today encamped around the tabernacle of Jewish truth, are grouped under their own particular standards, each association following interpretations that have been colored by the views of its own day and land. Much vain criticism has been flung at the lack of scholarship among those who have clung to this reading of Jewish life and thought, but I believe that we may lay down the axiom that there is no scholarship but life, and that the religion that is complacently self-satisfied with an ability to read the hieroglyphics of an obsolete age, is a religion that has lost vitality and applicability. The dry-as-dust pedantry that plumes itself upon its ability to read some oriental text, is an exotic growth in Judaism, for the old faith saw more of religious value and more of divine truth in binding up a wounded body and soul, in bringing good tidings, in pleading for the widow and the orphan, in the doing of justice, the loving of mercy and the walking humbly with God, than in the making of learning or mere existence an end in itself.

#### חכם ואין ירא חטא הרי זה אומן ואין בלי אומנותו ביד

The scholar who has not the ability to make moral values real and vital, is an artist without the tools to make his art a living thing.

### אין דור שאין בו כאברהם

Every generation has its own right to live out its own life, to interpret its own ideals—and the measure of its success is not its ability to mimic a forgotten age and its prophet, but to be itself and walk with its own God and be perfect.

### עשה דגלים לשמי

As disciples of a past, but with a mission to the today, you young men go out into a living world to be to your generation what Jephthah was to his day, and what Samuel was to his people.

You aspiring, consecrated young men are to be the makers of spiritual standards, and yours is as much the right to speak and to teach as any generation of leaders who have preceded you. Because you are new, is no reason why your word and interpretation should not be true, for while we reverence what is old, the past has not always bequeathed to us an unmixed truth. Though your career belongs to the tomorrow, you have as much right to create what shall be a tradition for posterity, and to interpret Judaism as a living, progressive force, as have all those classic teachers whose words you quote in the name of him who first spoke them. As they, too, had a situation with which to deal, and a message and a decision to make, so, too, there comes to you both the right and the responsibility to speak to your day with courage, with wisdom and loyalty. As they lifted up a standard because they were the children of God, so too is it your obligation, as sons of the same God of Israel, to make for your generation a symbol that is all yours, whose color to be sure is taken from the stone upon the breastplate of the highpriest, but whose color is the possession and the creation of your own generation.

It is a dignified and a holy calling to which you consecrate yourselves this day, and I would that my humble word might give you to sense the confidence and the hope which an older generation has in you. You speak to the people in the name of God.

### כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא

It is a privilege begotten of a free choice of and love for the calling, of the opportunity of sitting at the feet of the wise, and of an acquaintance with the spirit and the institutions of the faith. But it is a weighty and serious responsibility. As yours is the power and permission to teach, so too are you accountable for what you bring to the people whose religious leader you are to be.

Your alma mater has taught you the history and philosophy of the faith. Here you have learned the story of a rich and boundless Jewish literature. Here, if you please, a group of masters has hung the breastplate of Aaron about your neck and written the tradition of Israel upon the tablets of your hearts. From academy and cloister you go out to the people as the chosen and ordained representatives of the faith. You are to get yourselves up out of the land of your studentship to a people whom God shall show you.

### עולם הפוך ראיתי

It is another world to which you shall be introduced.

### עולונים למטה תהתונים למעלה

It is a curiously inverted world to which you come, a world of striving, active, ambitious, earnest, pushing men to whom you bring the Word. It is not a world of academicians. It is a struggling humanity that craves bread, a humanity that exalts the man who has won, that pities the scholar who is content with but little of worldly means. It is a world with a utilitarian standard, that appraises bigness and loudness for greatness, that acclaims the noisy and voluble demagogue, that evaluates success by the gauge of results. It is no easy task to stem the tide of unspiritual motives; unpopularity and misunderstanding, persecution and contumely await the lot of the moral heroes who dare to speak out a protest. The huzzas of the populace will come to him who soothes the ear with sweet and melodious phrases, who yields to popular clamor, who sees right on both sides of opposing contentions, who agrees with every hue and cry of the clamorous horde, whose angry passions are satisfied only with a human sacrifice; and many a leader ordained to teach and practice justice, to respect not the person of the poor, nor to honor the face of the mighty—has surrendered his ordination and his consecration to the insistent demands of the people who reward with their favor, who punish with their condemnation.

It is not easy even for the stout of heart to resist the importunities of a people who live very close to the earth. The temptation to compromise with your ideals in order to win a smile or a friend, is the daily struggle of every teacher. The tragedy of a minister's life is the conflict between his commission to establish the Kingdom of God upon the Earth and the lazy line of least resistance, which seeks to work out a divine right for every unjust kingdom of the earth. He will be applauded when he speaks of justice and righteous-



ness—those much-mouthed and much-maligned words—but he will be pilloried and scourged if he dares to apply them or to criticize their misapplication.

And yet although God says to Jeremiah

ונלחמו אליך

"And they shall fight against thee," he nevertheless assures him:

ולא יוכלו לך

"They shall not prevail against thee."

כי אתך אני נאם ה' להצילך

"For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee."

אל תירא מפניהם

Do not be afraid of their frowns. The approach of the rabbi to his people must not be motivated by anger or arrogance, nor yet by fear or servility.

דברו על לב ירושלים

"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem." It is a people to whom you are to come in love. The bridge between teacher and people is trestled upon devotion to Jewish idealism and affection for the people. I still hear ringing in my ears the words of the baccalaureate preached upon my ordination day: "You come to a people who care not for religion; therefore all the greater the need for your services. If all the people of the Lord were prophets, then I should have grave doubt of the necessity of this ordination." Though you learn the thought of Judaism at a college, Judaism is no college. It is the religion of a people, a democratic faith whose interests and whose message are conterminous with the needs as well as the aspirations of all the people:

איך אתנך אפרים

Even God's attitude towards his straying children is an attitude of love. Or as Dr. Kohler has shown so well in his "Jewish Theology," the conception of Judaism assigns to God the attributes of condescension and humility, when He deals with His children. Whenever Israel suffers, God suffers with him, as it is written, "I will be with him in trouble." Though they stray, though they defy your preachments, though they grovel in the lotus gardens of pleasure, though they fashion a golden calf and say, "These are thy gods, O Israel," the splendid position of the servant of the people is to be one of devotion to their welfare, of suffering sympathy with their

sorrows, of prayer for their redemption, of love for them even when they sin.

I have experienced and witnessed so many discouragements in the rabbinical office that I fain would warn you against them, knowing full well how difficult is the task I assume. I have sat with colleagues in their dark hour and heard them groan out that pathetic lamentation:

### לריק יגעתי

"For nothing have I labored," and I have chided them, as I have often reproved myself, for their lack of vision, for their failure to appreciate the grandeur and glory of their work and purposes, and for the setting up of false hopes and ideals. In almost every case the heaviness of heart was due to a lack of understanding of the people's weakness and strength, and of the purpose and the dignity of the ministry. He had sought the favor of the multitude.

### קראו לשמטון וישחק לנו

He had aimed to entertain the fickle populace with theatricalisms, with adventitious methods, with wordy epigrams, with unconscionable sensationalisms and self-advertisements, with conscienceless time-serving and compromises—yes, he had even descended to the trickery of faith-healing—only to find that as he had aimed to entertain, he had experienced the fate of the entertainer, for the hero of today is the hated of tomorrow. The people's interests had been identified with their appetites, their pleasures, their selfishly unwise demands.

May I lay it down as a principle supported by history, that the rabbi who seeks the favor of the people and who chooses his calling because he anticipates the joy of being their idolized leader, is foredoomed to failure and despair. He who is incapable of suffering, he who is averse of immediate results, he who cannot wait patiently for a lifetime to ripen one humble seed, is temperamentally and ideally unfitted for the high profession to which you today dedicate your lives.

And there is one other consideration I would lay before you as you go out to what is, after all, a standard-making profession, and that is the passion for prominence which may easily turn many a misguided teacher of Judaism into embarrassments and discouragements. We may, with the old rabbi, elaborate to our people the principle that the only way to live is to slay one's self, and then rush into the rash utterance, the sensational tirade, the unguarded word,



the spot-light theatricalism, the gesture before newspaper reporter and photographer, the undignified pushing of one's name and person before the gaze of men—only to exploit Judaism and make of it a spade to dig therewith, to minimize the cause or rather to employ Judaism in the service of one's glory. All this the old rabbis might have said was the cause of the destruction of the ancient sanctuary. Without sincere self-effacement, without thorough-going honesty, and complete self-dedication to the Cause, without absolute humility and a conception of a minimum of self at the service of the faith and its people—no rabbi's work can ever hope to be enduring. Like a comet, the unworthy and illegitimate method may develop a sudden blaze of light in the heavens, only to disappear more quickly than it came. To win for Judaism is to slay self, to wait with patience, to endure heart-breaking disappointments without bitterness or the breaking of the spirit—to remember in the final analysis that glory comes to him only who runs away from it. In the end, people follow that man only, in whose sincerity they believe. They may for the moment be beguiled by mere oratory and the blandishments of mellifluous speech, but finally the rabbi who influences most is the one who has most selflessly served. When the people saw the face of Moses it shone with a heavenly glow, but Moses knew not that his face shone when he spoke with God.

You are standard-makers, as you are standard-bearers in American Israel. The work of priest and prophet, of sage and scribe, of teacher and philosopher, of poet and rabbi is the only enduring reality of Jewish life. They have all created what is the only wisdom and understanding of which the Jew might boast in the sight of all the nations. The Jew is judged by the standards which your own sincere and genuine words create. Therefore be careful of your words; be circumspect in judging, let your utterances ring true; and speak fearlessly and with power. Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet and show my people their transgression and the house of Jacob their sins. Oh, they may resist, but in the end they are a people of the Lord, who appreciate sincerity, who admire courage, who support the fearless, the conscientious and the self-forgetful preacher. You may not win all—no man ever has or will—but you will have won the remnant whose thought has been the standard of history, whose judgment is the only judgment, and the standard of the minority you will have upheld, will have been the standard for all posterity.