

Presidential Address - C.C.A.R. Convention
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Long Beach, California

Boker tov. This is an exciting day. This morning, I asked Susie, “In your wildest dreams, did you ever think I would be CCAR President?” And she said, “You’re not in my wildest dreams.” We had no such exchange, of course, but my predominant emotion today is gratitude, so I begin with Susie, my wife of nearly 44 years. I cannot imagine my life or rabbinate without her love, loyalty, and patience, or her occasional exasperated critiques. She is my choicest blessing.

Eight years ago, when I first assumed a Conference office, my parents were alive. I miss them especially today. To the extent that I have helped the CCAR move forward, much of the credit goes to the education my parents worked and sacrificed to provide me at Wharton and Yale Law School and my dad’s wise counsel when I needed it most. I am also profoundly grateful to Susie’s parents, who supported us unstintingly, even when our choices took us, and our children, far away.

I am humbled at the presence of so many dear ones, including Susie’s amazing mom, Henri, who is 93, our sons, Josh and Zach, whom we love and admire beyond the power of words to express, my fellow clergy at The Temple – Tifereth Israel, whom I adore, numerous colleagues and almost half of the congregational presidents with whom I have been privileged to partner over the years, and other family and close friends, who mean the world to Susie and me.

In assuming the Conference presidency, I salute my distinguished predecessors, among them Harry Danziger, Peter Knobel, Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, and Jonathan Stein who helped oversee the CCAR’s renaissance, together with Arnie Sher, who held the fort when it needed holding, Steve Fox, whom I cherish as partner and friend, and the terrific team he has built and led. With apologies to so many others who deserve acknowledgment, a last thank you to Asher Knight, Debbie Prinz, and their committee and our staff, for planning a convention of extraordinary depth and cohesion.

Next Shabbat’s Torah portion, *VaYakhel-Pekudei*, concludes the book of Exodus. *VaYakhel* details the materials and talents needed to construct the Tabernacle and its furnishings. *Pekudei* adds up the gold, silver, and copper collected for that exalted project, to the last half shekel. This was the Jewish People’s first audit, teaching the importance of fiscal integrity, transparency, and accountability, a lesson that is eternally relevant. The portion emphasizes that our ancestors’ gifts were expressions of their hearts and spirits. So, too, the *mishkan* that is the CCAR. It was built by generations of colleagues who sought to ensure that rabbis would always provide bold, visionary leadership to our Movement and the Jewish People. I pray that we, in our turn, will prove worthy.

The Tabernacle was a dwelling for the Divine presence, a place of intimate encounter between our People and God. For Jews, existence is fundamentally relational. As Martin Buber wrote, “All real living is meeting.” That is true of the Conference, too, as a rabbinic community of colleagues and friends.

In *Hilchot De’ot*, Maimonides describes three dimensions of friendship: *davar*, *da’agah*, and *de’ah*. *Davar* is utilitarian – the practical things we help each other obtain. *Da’agah* connotes mutual emotional support. *Deah* involves shared commitments that transcend our personal needs and desires.

As *chaverim l’davar*, our needs include placement, pension, publications, spiritual and professional development. For 124 years, the CCAR has helped rabbis find fulfilling positions, provide for their families, develop leadership skills, learn and transmit Torah, and retire with dignity. In every aspect of its sacred work, the Conference is more productive and vital than at any time in memory. But we cannot rest on our laurels. As Treasurer, I spoke with discouraged and disillusioned colleagues who were unemployed, underemployed, or unable to advance, or were experiencing another source of deep pain. Some, rightly or wrongly, felt we had let them down. Others said they are unable to use our services and programs, or choose not to do so, perceiving little relevant to them. Even as we celebrate how much we do so well for so many, we must strive relentlessly for improvement and become, increasingly, a Conference that esteems all types of rabbinate and in which every rabbi matters.

One essential task is maximizing engagement with and by our members. While hundreds of us give of and enrich ourselves by participating in the work of the Conference, many who would like to do so don’t know how or haven’t been asked. That, too, is changing, as we foster new, more inclusive, less centralized paradigms of involvement, including various communities of practice, which we’re calling *mattot* or tribes, and two joint projects of our Justice and Peace Committee, chaired by Seth Limmer, the Religious Action Center, led with such distinction by David Saperstein, and URJ’s Just Congregations, led by Stephanie Kolin and Lila Foldes: Reform California and Rabbis Organizing Rabbis. You can join Rabbis Organizing Rabbis in this very room, immediately following the service.

A better served, more engaging, embracing, and participatory CCAR is not just a presidential sermon theme. It is the foremost aspiration of an intensive, goal-setting process by our Board and staff. As our primary goal through 2017, we declared, “The CCAR leadership, staff and structure will be accessible and responsive, recognizing that we serve a membership of diverse rabinates and diverse needs, and will foster a culture that supports meaningful relationships between the CCAR and its members, as well as among our members.”

As our Conference theme suggests, our world is changing rapidly. The organizations we lead confront enormous pressures as we compete for people’s commitment. Experiences synagogues once monopolized – Jewish education, bar and bat mitzvah, high holy day services– can now be had elsewhere, even online, for far less than the

cost of affiliation. A glance at the Sunday New York Times reveals how many Jews are married by someone who bought an instant clergy credential or was appointed for the occasion. It is a rare funeral nowadays when the rabbi delivers the sole eulogy. Non-denominational ordination programs proliferate. Ranging from legitimate to bogus, most offer more flexible or less demanding curricula than ours, or both. Their graduates compete with us for jobs, even in some URJ congregations, where we see a contraction in the number of rabbinic positions, downward pressure on compensation and benefits, and a disturbing number of dismissals of long-serving colleagues.

The root causes of these phenomena are numerous and complex, but they suggest a marked deterioration in *kavod haRav*, diminished respect for the rabbinate, and the skills, knowledge, experience, and wisdom properly-trained rabbis bring to Jewish life. Thus, the historic mission of the Conference - to advocate for rabbis, foster rabbinic excellence, and amplify the rabbinic voice – must be pursued ever more vigorously and effectively. In that endeavor, we can count on the support of lay partners who know the difference between genuine rabbis and ersatz ones and recognize that when rabbis are devalued, so are the institutions of Jewish life that they, too, work so hard to sustain and enliven.

This also has implications for us as *chaverim l'da'agah*, as a caring collegial community. To be a rabbi is an awesome privilege. Sermons and teaching enable us to open hearts, change minds, and transform lives. And beyond their specific content, the passion and conviction with which we express them conveys something of the enduring relevance and resonance of Jewish tradition, in whose name we speak. It never ceases to amaze me how grateful people are for our efforts – our warm presence on an occasion of loss or joy, our counsel when they're troubled, our belief in them when they doubt themselves, our being fully present, as if they're the most important person in the world to us at that moment. In such ways, we help people transcend the transactional paradigm so prevalent in Jewish life and embrace a covenantal one.

Yet, rabbis, too, can succumb to the allurements of our consumerist, self-serving culture. I worry we are becoming a rabbinate of convenience. As actively practicing Jews, naturally, we prefer to live and work in mature Jewish communities, for the sake of our personal fulfillment and that of our families. But a rabbinate worthy of its name, like any noble calling, demands risk-taking, inconvenience, and sacrifice. Far too few of us are willing, even for a few years, to serve the Jewish people in a smaller community, as a military chaplain, or in a congregation abroad. By that refusal, we forego tremendous opportunities and abandon people to those with whom they have no natural affinity. Reform rabbis also ought be a dynamic, Movement-sponsored presence on college campuses, alongside Hillel and Chabad. At Rutgers, colleagues led by Bennett Miller and Arnie Gluck have made that happen. As a Movement, we should encourage colleagues to undertake pioneering assignments by alleviating the burden of debt that weighs down their *semicha* and providing special placement consideration thereafter. Above all, it is time to revive, reaffirm and renew the sense of mission that was once a proud hallmark of Reform Judaism.

When we conclude the *parsha* this Shabbat, we will recite traditional words of encouragement: *Chazak, Chazak v'nitchazek! Let us be strong and strengthen each other!* This phrase resonates because rabbis, too, need rabbis. Like those we serve, we may undergo personal, professional, and family crises. And only another rabbi can fully understand the stress, occasional loneliness, and emotional whiplash that complicate our immensely gratifying work, and the despair we feel when, like Sisyphus, we find ourselves yet again at the bottom of the hill of Jewish commitment and continuity. *Chaverim l'da'agah* strengthen one other.

Mutual support also involves sharing our most fervent convictions, even, or especially when our perspectives differ. For example, I have long believed we need and would benefit from an openhearted, Conference-wide conversation about the impact of gender on our rabbinates. A recent salary survey made clear how far we've come and how far we've yet to go to reach full equality. Yet as Jackie Ellenson reminded me, it is a mistake to think about gender in terms of pathology. As women and men, the questions we ask, the role models we emulate, the hurdles and expectations we confront, the support systems we have or lack, the optimal work-life balance we seek or don't, and our conceptions of the rabbinate itself often vary widely. The thought-provoking issue of the CCAR Journal edited by Elyse Goldstein demonstrates how complex and multi-faceted gender is and how much we have to talk about. Tonight's dinner conversations and our NY seminar in May are just a start.

Another supremely important subject is Israel. Even as we hold a range of views on specific issues, we must remain united in our passionate devotion to Israel's wellbeing, its character as a Jewish and democratic state, and a vision of Israel at peace with its neighbors, within secure and recognized borders, where all citizens and all expressions of Judaism are recognized and equal.

By being a safe place to listen, learn, and reflect on sensitive issues, the Conference helps us be *chaverim l'deah*, committed, as one, to God, Torah and the Jewish People. Neither our ancient ancestors' gifts nor the Tabernacle were ends in themselves. They served the Highest's purpose, symbolized by the inscription that adorned Aaron's priestly headdress: *Kodesh L'Adonai*, "Holy to the Eternal One." In every age, rabbis have grappled with unprecedented existential challenges, and we are no exception. In modernity, when religious identification, affiliation and practice are optional, the sanctions that once compelled Jewish observance have long since dissolved, the range of choices seems infinite, and the ability of existing institutions to satisfy them is in question, our task is to construct what Peter Berger calls "plausibility structures," the frameworks and settings in which Jewish observance makes powerful sense and infuses people's lives with meaning and purpose.

That task is daunting, but invigorating. Change is disruptive, but essential to renewal. Competition, though unsettling, makes us better by shattering complacency and stimulating innovation. The very technologies that facilitate escape from commitment are powerful tools to attract, connect, reach and teach.

Though some contend Jewish denominations are passé, I remain convinced that Reform Judaism offers powerfully appealing and sustaining avenues of Jewish possibility: because we embrace both tradition and innovation, both individual autonomy and religious obligation; because reform is not an aberration or an artifact of modernity, but a defining characteristic of Jewish history and a key to our survival; because we affirm that intellectual freedom and scientific truth validate Judaism; because we address creatively the tension between the aspiration to self-realization and the need to sustain sacred communities of meaning; because we champion justice, diversity, equality, and inclusion, and are committed to partnering with God and with others to repair and perfect the world.

Our sacred mission, however, requires more than a compelling offering. It demands robust, dynamic, and visible leadership, which the CCAR has a special responsibility and opportunity to provide. As president, I believe we should “amplify” our “rabbinic voice” to articulate a new conception of what it means to be a Movement. Even as the Conference, Union, College, and sister organizations pursue individual aims, we must partner differently and minimize the parochialism, competitiveness, and institutional inertia that hamper our progress.

As one example, I envision a collaborative Lifelong Leadership Initiative for the Reform Movement. It would begin by identifying promising teens, encouraging their Jewish development during high school and college with grants, internships, and personal mentoring, and recruiting them to become rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators, as Amy Perlin does so brilliantly. It would mean a sharpened focus on leadership and management at HUC in partnership with gifted colleagues, an enhanced CCAR mentoring program for newly ordained rabbis, incentivized rabbinic positions with underserved communities, which offer distinctive opportunities to grow as leaders. It would mean a comprehensive, lifelong program of leadership learning and skills-building, with short and longer term courses, in person and online, customized materials, individualized coaching, and joint leadership seminars for rabbis, cantors, educators, executive directors and lay leaders. Special intensives would be presented for rabbis reaching inflection points in their careers – a first solo pulpit, undertaking a position supervising other professionals, becoming senior rabbi of a large congregation or CEO of a Jewish non-profit. In a Lifelong Leadership Initiative, placement would be among an integrated set of functions overseen by a Career Development Office, one that could ultimately serve all Reform clergy and professionals.

If we think entrepreneurially, work collaboratively, and act decisively in areas of critical importance to the Jewish future, I am confident that funders will invest eagerly in our efforts and that the results will be truly transformational. We are limited only by our will and our imagination.

In the the Robert Aldrich film, *The Frisco Kid*, Gene Wilder plays Avram, a young rabbi traveling from Poland to San Francisco in 1850. After his train fare is stolen, Avram journeys on horseback with Tommy, a lovable scoundrel played by Harrison Ford. Along the way, Avram loses his self-confidence and declares, “I’m not a rabbi.” “But you’re a

good man!" Tommy replies. "I am a good man. I am." Avram answers, but "I'm not a rabbi." Tommy protests, "Don't say that!" Avram repeats, "Tommy, I'm not a rabbi." Tommy thunders back, "Don't SAY that! You *are* a rabbi. I'm a bank robber. I'm a card player and a whoremonger. That's what I am. YOU are a *rabbi*. You can fall in the mud, you can [fall] on your [butt], you can travel in the wrong direction. But even on your [butt], even in the mud, even if you go in the wrong direction for a little while, you're STILL a rabbi! THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE!"

"A rabbi" is not just what we *do*; it's what we *are*. "Holy to the Eternal One," despite our flaws and failings, however and wherever we serve, we are rabbis, thought leaders, change agents. Our lives are devoted to a cause far greater, nobler, and more enduring than our mortal, transitory, sometimes lost and bewildered selves. *We are rabbis* - guardians of the Jewish past, guides to the Jewish present, generators of the Jewish future. Just as inspired rabbinic leaders have been key to the survival of Judaism and the Jewish People, Jewish destiny depends on rabbis sharing priceless gifts of mind, heart and spirit. Let us go forward then, together, as colleagues and friends, confident we can rise to the summons of our calling, because we must, and because we have each other.