



## ACADEMIC CONVOCATION AT JTS

November 1, 2010

### RESPONSE ON BEHALF OF THE HONOREES

BY ILANA DAVIDOV

JTS Chancellor, Arnold Eisen, JTS Provost, Alan Cooper, JEA President, Hedda Morton, Faculty, Colleagues, Family and Friends: It is a special honor to have you here today. An added honor is to be able to share some thoughts with you on behalf of my fellow honorary degree recipients.

The Talmud Bavli (Bava Metzi'a 85b) tells us of two great rabbis, Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Hiyya. Like many great Rabbis in the Talmud, these two often engaged in dispute. And whenever Rabbi Hiyya would contradict Rabbi Hanina, Rabbi Hanina would respond in outrage. He would say to Rabbi Hiyya: "How dare you? How dare you contradict me? How dare you even engage me in such a dispute? If, God forbid, the Torah were ever forgotten in Israel, I could re-create it simply on the strength of my argumentative skills. I know the Torah so well that I could reconstruct it in its entirety. Who are you to disagree with me?"

Rabbi Hiyya responds passionately: That may be true, but I work to make sure that the Torah will never be forgotten in Israel. How? I begin by planting flaxseeds. When the seeds grow, I spin threads from the flax, and I make nets from the threads. I use nets to trap deer. I feed the meat to orphans so that they will not go hungry. I use the skins to prepare scrolls of parchment. Then I go to a place that has no schools and no teachers. I write

the Five Books of the torah on the scrolls of parchment, and I teach them to five children. Then I sit with six other children, and I teach them the six orders of the Mishnah. And I say to each of the children: ‘These texts belong to you. You are responsible for telling and for teaching and for recording these texts; each of you must now be the teacher of your book of Torah or your order of Mishnah.’

“Therefore,” said Rabbi Hiyya, “no one person will ever need to reconstruct the Torah. For the Torah will never be forgotten in Israel.”

Whether Rabbi Hiyya was actually involved in all the stages of this complicated enterprise, or whether he was just using it metaphorically – the point he was making was that his merits as a teacher derive not merely from his knowledge of Torah, but from his ability to construct and support the environment in which teaching and learning take place. This includes the care and preparation of those who will continue the tradition.

Hiyya’s greatness as a teacher comes not only from his critical reasoning, or complex analysis, but rather from his ability to transmit Torah in such a way that his students become its teachers. In this way Torah is spread rather than merely re-created.

Another story in the Talmud on the same page tells us about Resh Lakish who was marking the burial caves of the rabbis. When he reached the cave of Rabbi Hiyya, it was concealed from him. He was offended and said: “Master of the Universe, did I not debate Torah like him?” A heavenly voice went forth and said to him: “You debated Torah like him, but you did not spread Torah like him.”

Here again the Rabbis stress the difference between scholars and teachers. It is not enough to be a scholar, even as great as Lakish. Rather, Torah requires dissemination, and to achieve this, a teacher is necessary.

This, I believe, is what Jewish education is all about, and this is what Jewish educators do: Along with preserving the teachings of the torah and keeping Jewish tradition alive, they empower the young generation to carry on the sacred task of transmitting our heritage to future generations.

No wonder that 16 years ago, JTS established the Davidson School of Education to be added to the Graduate and Undergraduate Schools and to the Rabbinical and Cantorial Schools. I had the privilege of studying at the Davidson School in its initial years, served as a mentor to its graduate students in later years, and continue to be involved with it by being a member of its Advisory Board.

I am humbled to be honored today with my colleagues, who, in one way or another have been connected with JTS and the Davidson School either as matriculating students or adult learners, as teachers, presenters or mentors. I am honored to share this award with my esteemed colleagues: Janice Colmar, Cheryl Finkel, Steve Freedman, Jules Gutin, Cecile Jordan, Lawrence Katz, Marshal Kupchan, Lisette Naylor, Rabbi Jim Rogozen, Rabbi Mark Smiley and Roslyn Stein.

On behalf of my colleagues, those who are being honored today, and all of those who are toiling, day in and day out, in the field of Jewish Education, I

would like to thank the Jewish Educators Assembly and the Jewish Theological Seminary for recognizing our combined efforts of planting the seeds, cultivating and tending to our saplings, and watching them grow, strongly rooted in our people's culture and tradition.

**הזורעים בדמעה ברנה יקצרו** - Those who sow with tears will reap with song.

And the Tachles of our labor, in the words of Rabbi Hiyya, is:

**ועבדי לה לתורה דלא תשתכח מישראל** "So that Torah will never be forgotten in Israel"