

## **Charge to the Graduates of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership**

Brandeis University, May 17, 2009

Ellen Frankel, on the occasion of receiving the Bernard Reisman Award

Congratulations to you all! Ye-yashair kokhekhem!

After much hard work of mind, heart, spirit and body, you have earned the right to call yourselves Jewish leadership professionals. You will now go forth into the world to lead Jewish communities who are much in need of your talents and skills, and who will greatly benefit from your efforts. The North American Jewish community is fortunate to have you as its newest leaders.

What can I now tell you now that you haven't already learned in your studies here at Hornstein? You've had the privilege of studying at the preeminent program in Jewish leadership leaders in the country. Your professors are distinguished scholars in their fields. You are probably better prepared for the work that lies ahead than many of those whom you will succeed. So, what is there left to learn?

Most of your studies here at Brandeis focused on the outer life: the world of action, strategy, benchmarks, measurable objectives, getting things done. Or putting it another way: you have been prepared to work within a community to enhance the physical, mental and spiritual welfare of members of that community. I have no doubt that wherever you work, you will do just that.

But there is one member of your future community who may escape your notice, whose vulnerability is usually not recognized, yet whose welfare and resilience are critical to your success as a Jewish leader. That person is you. The rest of my brief remarks concern the inner life of a professional leader, especially a Jewish one.

When I first started my job as Editor-in-Chief of The Jewish Publication Society, my friend Rachel told me that she had promised herself years before never again to work professionally for the Jewish community. Rachel had begun her career in Jewish communal service, working with the elderly and the disabled. She burned out young—not from the work itself—in fact, she went on from a Jewish communal setting to get an MBA and work as a nursing home and rehab administrator, and for the past several years has directed an interfaith program for homeless families. No, Rachel burned out because her life as a Jewish professional overwhelmed her life as a Jew. Boundaries between work and her personal life all but disappeared. Some of her clients or their family members sat next to her in synagogue. Some of her supervisors did, too. Five days a week she worked for the Jewish community on salary; on weekends, she did the same but as a volunteer, attending and helping to lead services, driving her children to Hebrew school, volunteering on synagogue committees. In time, weekend and weekday blurred together. It was as if she never left the office.

Today, though she still works incredibly hard, her Jewish life is once again her own.

This dilemma will face many of you as you start your professional careers in the Jewish community. If you're an active member of a synagogue, you'll find yourself regularly on a busman's holiday. In addition, you'll now be facing the added pressure of diminished institutional resources, fewer jobs, increased workloads, and greater communal needs. Even though most, if not all of you entered Hornstein to do good, not necessarily to do well, you may find your idealism dampened by these stresses.

So, rather than send you off discouraged, I'd like to offer you some personal as well as traditional Jewish insights which I hope will carry you through some rather tough times ahead. My charge to you today is that you need to care for the inner as well as the outer life, to see your work as a vocation—literally, a calling, even if the voice is a still, small one—in order truly to succeed in your chosen career.

Even though the name of your program has been changed from Jewish Communal Service to Jewish Professional Leadership, I want to focus today on the word “service,” which remains integral to leadership. I hope to persuade you that service, though no longer a formal part of your program's name, is just as important to your life as a Jewish leader as your MBA, if not more so.

The Hebrew word for service is *avodah*. But what exactly does it mean? The English word derives from the Latin, possibly even the Etruscan word, *servus*, which means “slave.” Its earliest English connotation referred to religious services. Over the centuries, the word took on additional meanings: providing help to others, as in “to be of service”; performing military service; doing work on machinery and cars, as in “servicing an engine”; providing customer service; engaging in forced labor as punishment for criminal acts, known as community service; even using the implements dedicated to steeping and pouring tea, as in “tea service.” In fact, the term has taken on so many meanings that it's even come to mean its opposite. So, when we say that something “serves a person right,” we are actually wishing him ill.

Where, then, does Jewish communal service fit into this Chinese menu of meanings?

I think we'll find the best answer by looking in Jewish sources. The Hebrew word for service is "avodah." There are only three meanings for this word in traditional sources. Avodah can mean slavery, work, or worship, also translated as holy service. I'd like to suggest that these three meanings refer not only to outer activities in the world, but also to inner attitudes. As you leave here with your degree in Jewish Professional Leadership, you will also carry with you many feelings and thoughts about what this degree will mean in your life. I'd like to ask that you consider these three meanings of avodah as possible guiding frameworks for handling these feelings and thoughts, and that you choose one meaning in particular, holy service, as the best *kavvanah*, the lodestar of your career.

Like the English word, service, avodah derives from a Hebrew word *eved*, meaning "slave." You may be familiar with the passage in the Haggadah that we sing: *Avadim hayinu*, "We were slaves to Pharaoh." To be a slave means to be deprived of the right to make your own choices. To be a slave means to surrender your moral freedom to another. To be a slave means to wake up wishing it were already bedtime. To be a slave means to have no stake in the value and consequences of your work. To be a slave means to dream of survival, not happiness.

Unfortunately, there are millions of people on the planet who fit this job description. Most of them have no choice; they have been born into the role as were their parents and grandparents before them. Some people, however, actually choose this role for themselves, working as though they were shackled to their jobs, not invested in their own or their organization's success, not striving to become more skilled in or more

knowledgeable about what they do, alienated from their own labor. Please do not become like them.

Another meaning of avodah is work. Like its English equivalent, it has a broad compass, referring to a job or to any kind of labor. To the ancient Rabbis, working at a “real job” as a carpenter, tailor, cobbler, or vintner was as important as studying Torah. To the early Zionists, this kind of avodah, especially if it was manual labor, was superior to the sedentary life of the stereotypical Diaspora Jew, who worked with his brain while his hands remained soft and idle.

And to the vast majority of humankind, work is what adulthood is all about. To work is to be self-sufficient, to pay your way, to earn your keep. To work is to give your life a discernible shape, to enhance the pleasure you get from not working on weekends and vacations. To work is to bring you together daily with a community of colleagues, to spare you from loneliness, to share successes and failures.

Most people choose this role for themselves, regarding their work as a means to an end, eagerly anticipating days off so they can be free from what they spend most of their waking hours doing, then counting the years until retirement, thinking of their work as a job, not a career or vocation; imagining that they would like working more if only they made more money. Like the *eved*, the slave, they feel they have no stake in their own or their organization’s success, and are alienated from their own labor. But unlike the slave, they regard this role as their own choice, the price of adulthood. As my 27 year old son would say, “That’s why they call it work.” Please do not become like them, either.

Then there is the third meaning of *avodah*: worship or holy service. During the time when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, *avodah* referred specifically to the sacrifices performed there by the priests. Once the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the sacrifices were replaced by prayer; *avodah* came to mean “worship.” However, if words are truly meant to replace gifts of animals and grain, they need to represent a genuine sacrifice, the forfeit of something of personal value in exchange for being drawn closer to God, which is the literal meaning of *korban*, the Hebrew word for sacrifice. But how can we give up something through our words? How can we sacrifice something so intangible? How can we make our work into “holy service”? What do we need to give up in order to serve a higher purpose in our lives?

Jewish tradition offers several wise answers to these questions. I’d like to conclude by sharing them with you. I invite you to carry these teachings with you as you take up your work in the world. They have stood me in good stead in my career and in my personal life.

The second century rabbinic anthology known as *Pirke Avot*, one of my favorite Jewish books, teaches that giving up something can be the key to gaining something even more precious. Rabbi Ben Zoma asks: “Who is wise?” And he answers: “The one who learns from everyone.” He goes on: “Who is strong? The one who conquers his or her impulses. Who is honored? The one who honors others” (4:1). In other words, to be wise requires that we give up the pretense that we have all the answers, listening instead for other truths. To be strong requires that we sacrifice our willfulness, making room for the needs and desires of other people. To be honored requires that we subordinate our ego,

acknowledging that we live in a community filled with people likewise created in the image of God.

To do these things is to engage in holy service.

As you take up your positions as leaders in the Jewish community, I urge you to consider your work as this last kind of avodah. Do not regard yourself as a slave, indentured to an institution or a particular manager or a board of directors. You can choose to fight for another way if you believe it is a better way. And you can always choose to leave. Neither should you regard yourself merely as a worker, whose efforts don't matter much either to you or to those affected by your labors. You can always choose to invest your work with meaning and consequence, and strive to perfect your skills.

Rather, consider your work as holy service, giving fully of yourself to a purpose greater than yourself, offering your talents, energy, intelligence, and commitment to those you serve. Much needs to be done to repair our troubled world. There are many broken hearts and spirits in need of mending. Our community is now particularly hurting from economic losses and betrayals. Each one of you can make a genuine difference—if you engage in holy service.

The beloved hasidic master, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol, was quoted as saying not long before his death: “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not more like Moses our Teacher?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not more like Zusya’?”

Each of you has something precious to offer the world, a great gift that is only yours to give. Give it wholeheartedly but don't forget to enjoy the fruits of your labor: wisdom, strength, and honor. Don't forget that you, too, belong to the community you serve.

I wish you well.