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What is our theory of Jewish journeys?

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Dean, Keren, Hal, Tal, Elana, Rabbi Bauman, graduates, family members and friends,

A huge mazal tov to all of today's new graduates,
and to your family members and teachers and everyone here today.

Want to say a special word of thanks to Tal Rosen – you and your wife and your father have each been dear friends to me and partners to Hazon over many years. Thank you so much for who you are and all that you do.

Now, first: some of you may have assumed that today is the first day in 25 years that I've worn a cap and gown. Not so: Liz and I dress like this every Sunday to watch *Downton Abbey* and then *the Queen*.

But thank you so much for inviting me. These are unique programs, in a unique institution, and a unique city.

I'm delighted and honored to be here, and especially since I'm from Manchester, the Midwest of England. It's so important that Jewish leadership doesn't just come from New York or the coasts. The Talmud we learn is the Bavli, not the Yerushalmi. The sages survived in Yavneh, not in Jerusalem. This is the heartland of America and it's a good place from which to reflect on the big question that I want to address this morning.

And that question is:

what is our theory of Jewish journeys?

What is our theory of Jewish journeys?

So before I explain what I mean by "a theory of Jewish journeys" I want to tell you a story.

This is about Debbie, a frum holocaust-survivor, a significant layleader in the orthodox world, and Jacob, her 20-something grandson.

The story began for me when a senior federation leader sent an email to me and to Debbie

saying, you two should get together at some point. It wasn't exactly clear to me why, but I said ok, and some while later when Debbie was next in NY we went out for breakfast.

The story she told me was that Jacob, her grandson, had been at Adamah, one of Hazon's programs, and was living at Isabella Freedman, Hazon's retreat center.

Debbie said to me, *I love my grandson so much, but Jacob seems to have gone completely off the deep end, he's rejected everything that I and my family stand for, and I'm very sad and very confused – and can you explain this to me?*

So I told her a bit about Hazon and Isabella Freedman and Adamah and Teva, and tried to explain that philosophically we certainly weren't about rejecting Jewish life, but that our participants and staff sometimes learned and expressed Jewishness in different ways. But mostly I just listened – asked Debbie about her childhood and coming to America and building a family and so on.

So then I came back and said to Jacob, hey, I had breakfast with your grandmother.

Jacob has a large tattoo on his forearm, amongst other things.

And he said, *oh, it's very sad, my grandmother just doesn't seem that interested in me or what I'm doing, it doesn't feel like she listens to me, she's just in her orthodox bubble.*

So I listened to Jacob also and asked him about his story. He'd grown up in the orthodox world – day school, orthodox summer camp, YU – and more and more he struggled with it and finally left. Started cooking downtown and after two or three years he was fairly out of Jewish life in most ways. And then someone, because he was so involved in food, had invited him to Isabella Freedman and it took off from there – he spent time at Friedman and did our Adamah farming program and then our JOFEE Fellows program and stayed on to work for Hazon.

A few months later, with the permission of each of them, I took Jacob and his grandmother out for breakfast. And I watched as Debbie listened to Jacob try to explain who he was and what he was doing and why; and in particular that this wasn't him *rejecting* Judaism or his family so much as starting to find his own way.

And just as I watched Debbie start to get a glimpse of her grandson's journey, I also got to see Jacob register that it wasn't that his grandmother didn't love him or care about him, she just literally didn't understand what he'd been doing. It was very hard for her to see past the big tattoo on Jacob's arm, but in fact, and of course, she did love him, very much indeed.

And I begin with this story because it illustrates all five points I want to make about a new theory of Jewish journeys.

It starts by revealing the implicit theory of Jewish journeys from the last two or three generations. It was a theory in which you were born Jewish, you lived Jewish, you married Jewish and you died Jewish. So we needed a synagogue and a day school and a yeshiva and if we as parents, we as communal leaders, provided those institutions, and put you in them, everything else would sort itself out.

That was the theory of Jewish journeys that underpinned the world that Jacob grew up in, the world of his parents and grandparents. And this was true of my parents and my grandparents also. They didn't know this was their "theory of Jewish journeys" – they just took it for granted. It was the Jewish air they breathed.

Institutions build over long periods of time, and it's very hard to change them, so they almost always *lag* a changing reality. Eventually they catch up with this changing reality and try to adapt to it, but that process can be hard and painful.

As I know you all know, we're living through precisely this radical change right now. It's the world we're living in, it informs your learning at Spertus, and it's the backdrop to the choices and challenges and opportunities that you will face in your future careers.

Which is how and why it is that we now need to tease out a new theory of Jewish journeys.

The good news is that it *is* starting to come into focus.

Explicating it will help us to learn from it and to some extent to shape it, so that we right ourselves – that we get back to some kind of new balance, in which Jewish leadership and Jewish institutions and Jewish life flow a little more easily.

There are five key points. Hazon's work encompasses them, and the story of Debbie and Jacob helps to illustrate them.

Number one: *We have to recognize that Jewish life is itself a journey, always has been and always will be.*

And so people change and institutions change too.

The institutions of American Jewish life in the last generation – we or they assumed they were immutable but they weren't and they aren't. JCCs and federations are a hundred years old – which is to say *blink-of-the-eye-recent* in terms of Jewish time.

And note that even in that period of organizational continuity, generational conflict has often been part of it. It was the story of *Marjorie Morningstar* in the 1950s. And *Fiddler On The Roof*, in the sixties and seventies. And *Fiddler*, of course, began with generational conflict in the original story of Sholom Aleichem from the 1890s.

And of course it's much much older even than that.

It's the stories of *Bereishit*, all these stories we're reading at the moment.

Avraham setting out on a very different path from his father Terach.

Jacob becoming Yisrael. The hero's journeys of Yosef and Yehudah.

So that's the first thing – **a theory of Jewish journeys begins by recognizing that Jewish life genuinely is a journey. It doesn't happen in a straight line.**

It's hard for our institutions to accept this, because it's hard for *people* to accept this.

It's hard for the biblical Yitzchak, seeing his kids fight, and then for Yaakov, seeing *his* kids fight.

It's hard for Tevya. It was hard for Debbie, in relation to Jacob. It will have been hard for Jacob's teachers at YU and elsewhere. It's sometimes especially hard in relationship to Israel – people are figuring out new ways to relate to Israel, and that's not happening in a straight line either, and that's hard and complicated – but it's part of the journeys that we're now tasked with stewarding.

Note also that not *everyone* goes on this journey. That's also why it's easy to pretend that Jewish life is not a journey - some people really *do* stay put.

Yitzhak in *bereishit*, in Genesis, is representative of these people. Alone of the avot, of our biblical progenitors, he lives and dies where he grows up. He redigs his father's wells. He marries his cousin.

Some generations *do* stay in place – my parents and my grandparents actually did, and so did Debbie's kids, Jacob's parents.

But the fact that *some people* don't feel the need to change doesn't alter the fact that for most people Jewish life is a journey. And so *our* theory of Jewish journeys needs to recognize that.

The second thing flows very strongly from that first recognition – **we need to have genuine respect for people's journeys, which means we need to listen, and which also means that part of our job is to help people on their way.**

And doing this may be quite different from teaching or leading as it has been traditionally understood in Jewish life.

Some of you may know of Yisroel Campbell, a great stand-up comic now in Israel.

Yisroel grew up Catholic, got interested in Jewish life, converted Reform, got a bit more interested, converted Conservative and then made aliyah and had an orthodox conversion.

Today he has peyos and wears a black hat and a black coat.

There was something very beautiful that happened along the way that played a critical role in his journey. He had a reform rabbi who said to him at one point, *I've loved having you in my community and my temple. But I actually think you're starting to outgrow us. So although I'll be really sad to see you go, I want to introduce you to rabbi so-and-so at the Conservative shul – because I think that's going to be the right place for you.*

That's what I mean by respecting people's journeys. Really listening, and paying attention, and helping them on their way. And it can go in any direction. It's not about "more observant" or "less observant." In Yisrael's story he went one way; in Jacob's story, he seemed to go another.

But in both cases, those of us who are "Jewish leaders" – our role is to listen, to know the landscape perhaps a little better than the people we're interacting with, and instead of having a sense of turf loyalty, we need simply to help people move forwards on their Jewish journeys.

Note that that's what the Federation leader was doing when he made the introduction between me and Debbie in the first place – he knew Debbie, he knew me, he had heard some of her pain and he realized that it might help Debbie in *her* journey if he introduced us.

The third thing is about inclusive communities.

This is absolutely critical to a theory of Jewish journeys.

Our old theory of Jewish journeys was based on something like

"Jewish life is great. And the outside world is hostile to us, and we're hostile to it."

So then it would make sense to put up big barriers around Jewish institutions.

And we did indeed have those presumptions, and so our institutions weren't very friendly.

We expected you to read Hebrew and know the words and know the tunes.

We expected you to know when to stand up and when to sit and when to bow.

We didn't welcome your non-Jewish girlfriend or boyfriend because we were pretty clear we didn't want you to have a non-Jewish girlfriend or boyfriend in the first place.

But our theory of Jewish journeys today has to engage with the fact that we are now living in the most open society in human history and certainly in Jewish history.

One of the reasons that Isabella Freedman and Hazon and Adamah, the institutions that Jacob found his way to, had such a powerful impact on him, is that *we don't make those earlier presumptions*. We're deeply committed to inclusive community.

We welcome you if you're Jewish or not-Jewish, queer or straight or anything else, and in relation to denomination we see on a daily basis that the old lines are almost meaningless.

Jacob was orthodox and then he was secular and in the time I've known him I've seen him

move steadily back into vibrant Jewish life, albeit expressed in a somewhat different way from how he grew up.

But the commitment to inclusive community – that’s on each one of us, every day. Welcoming people. Listening. Making introductions. Furthering Jewish journeys. Framing Jewish life because we believe in its richness and value, not because we presume that you *have* to be Jewish. Welcoming people who didn’t grow up Jewish and who may in many cases be at the start of *their* Jewish journeys.

And also being able to hold the pain we ourselves sometimes feel when it looks like people’s Jewish journeys are taking them away from where we are or what we believe in.

So that’s the third thing – a really deep commitment to inclusive community.

The fourth thing is in tension with the third thing, which is why this is so very very important, and this also connects to your learning here and why it’s so great that you have taken the time to study for the degrees we celebrate today.

The fourth thing is about grounding us Jewishly.

Being deeply Jewishly serious.

I think there are some people who just assume that a commitment to inclusive community and a commitment to being Jewishly serious are mutually contradictory.

It’s an easy mistake to make because there are places where it’s true.

Much of the ultra-orthodox world is Jewishly serious but not committed to inclusive community.

Some of our liberal communities are committed to inclusive community but they’re not necessarily so Jewishly serious.

It is *not* the case, by the way, that Jewish life is synonymous with “tikun olam” and that tikun olam is synonymous with western liberalism. If that were true then why bother being Jewish in the first place?

Hazon is very committed to inclusive community, and we strive in all that we do to be Jewishly serious. In relation to Jewish environmentalism – we’re taking difficult texts, not just easy ones. We want to really engage the text, struggle with it, own it – not just do a greatest hits summary. We have Jewish learning or guest speakers at staff meetings. We take the Jewish calendar seriously. We encourage growth and learning for our staff and participants and at our programs – and in a wide Jewish range. And we’re connecting to land and food and the world that sustains us through a profoundly Jewish lens.

Jacob went to Adamah. If you're doing Adamah – Hazon's 3-month Jewish farming program – we will indeed teach you farming and ecology and leadership. But you're out of bed by 5.30am, *because at 6am we have shacharit*. Every morning, five days a week.

Now it's not the same shacharit that Jacob grew up with. A lot fewer words; more chanting; some meditation; sometimes some movement.

But it's a compulsory part of the program, like the Jewish learning we do, or stopping on Shabbat – integral to what we do, not optional.

It's similar with Hazon's bike ride in Israel – if we did it from Sunday to Friday it would make us more money. But in fact we do it Tuesday to Monday, in order to rest and learn together over Shabbat. We add an extra day of costs, because it's central to our overall educational goals that we spend that Shabbat together.

This, by the way, because the Jewish world is short of acronyms and we thought it needed another one, we call "JOFEE" for short. It stands for Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming & Environmental Education. It's short-hand for being Jewishly serious in relation to a vital and vitally compelling part of contemporary life.

One final thing about being Jewishly serious – it again starts with each one of us. Fundamental to Spertus's approach, for instance, which I strongly share, is the belief that *anyone can play a key leadership role from anywhere in an organization*. And so as Jewish leaders, just like we need to walk the walk in respecting people's journeys, and building inclusive community, *we also need to walk the walk in being Jewishly serious ourselves*. This is not necessarily about observance narrowly construed, it's about how we model Jewish leadership, the way that we convey *why* it makes sense to be Jewish in the 21st century and why to be Jewish is always to be learning and striving to grow. It's about engaging with "Torah" in the deepest and broadest sense that we possibly can.

The fifth, last and perhaps most critical part of a new theory of Jewish journeys is about the wider world. **We have to very radically retool our engagement with the wider world.** And in doing this we must also deepen our explication of *why* being Jewish matters.

I've been quoting recently the definition of the optimist and the pessimist. The pessimist says: *I just don't see how things could possibly get any worse*. And the optimist says: *oh, I think I can....*

We're dealing right now with immense global and civilizational challenges. Ten of the hottest years in human history happened in the last fifteen years.

We're suffering extreme weather events with increasing frequency, and the human toll is considerable, including the record number of deaths and the four Jewish camps that burned down in the recent California fires.

And the future toll may be far far worse. Species extinction is at record levels. The ice-caps are melting. Asthma rates are going up very sharply. Industrial meat production is inhumane to animals, unhealthy for humans, and a huge contributor to anthropogenic climate change.

We're physically abusing the world that sustains us and every country, every human culture and every religion now needs to address these issues.

We have a clear moral obligation to address these issues.

And, by the way, the best and the brightest of our young people think about these issues every day.

If Jewish life doesn't care about these issues they will say – and they will rightly say – *why on earth should I care about Judaism?*

And of course it's not just the environmental issues, the ones that Hazon directly engages with, as critical as those are. It is also gun violence and social inequality and racism and student debt and voting rights and a whole raft of issues that this country presently faces.

Jacob in growing up was in a Jewish bubble that mostly seemed to him to ignore these wider issues, and walled off Jewish learning from any real engagement with them.

By contrast at Hazon we're leaning into them every day.

We don't see it as a choice between Jewish engagement and making the world a better place.

We believe that to be Jewishly engaged is, by definition, to strive to make the world a better place, for real, and not just our little corner of it.

And also conversely – we believe that when we take these wider issues more seriously, it actually helps us to learn and relearn and re-respect Jewish tradition through fresh eyes, and it reconnects us to Israel (and its challenges and successes) in fresh ways.

I'm teaching a session here this afternoon where we'll do that – we'll learn a Talmudic text that will shed light on the world we're living in today; and we'll use that as a springboard for a conversation about education, action and advocacy in the 21st century.

Spertus, by the way, models this in a number of ways.

This isn't *just* a beautiful building – it's also LEED certified, a deliberate and specific choice by the leadership of Spertus, that creating a place for Jewish learning requires also a building that models what it is to live more sustainably.

Shouldn't all of our buildings in due course become LEED certified buildings?

And Spertus's Critical Conversations program similarly models connecting Jewish learning with wider societal issues.

JUF in Chicago, through its Breakthrough Fund, recently supported six Chicagoland institutions in joining the Hazon Seal of Sustainability – the Hillels at Northwestern and the University of Chicago; Kol Sasson and Skokie Valley in Skokie; Sketch Pad, the new Chicago shared Jewish workspace, and Spertus itself. The Hazon Seal of Sustainability is a framework to help Jewish institutions systematically integrate greater sustainability into all that they do – education, action, and advocacy.

And note that the Hazon Seal doesn't disaggregate our twin goals, it absolutely assumes that they're intertwined – that being Jewish *requires* that we address environmental sustainability; and that addressing environmental sustainability in its turn actually strengthens Jewish life. As you head back to the many institutions you work for, part of your own Jewish leadership will involve helping them to turn outwards.

Any building you're in can become more sustainable.

Any institution you work for can join the Hazon Seal.

I want to note, before I finish, that this new theory of Jewish journeys is a hopeful story.

On this seventh day of Chanukah, we're here to celebrate light in the darkness.

The schools and camps and college that Jacob attended gave him a solid base of Jewish education that has ultimately stood him in good stead.

The Federation leader was a helpful shadchan.

Debbie and Jacob came to understand each other better.

And Hazon and I continue to play our role in fostering people's journeys, strengthening Jewish life, and helping make a more sustainable world for all.

As we leave here today, each of you is now a vital leader for the Jewish people in fostering other people's Jewish journeys. Your degrees and their certificates represent commitment, determination, money, finding time in busy schedules, family members pitching in to enable you to get to this point. Hard work on the part of Spertus, its faculty and administration and its board and its funders. This is what it is, together, to live out this new theory of Jewish journeys.

This is what it is to embrace these five things:

to know that Jewish life is *always* a journey;

to facilitate people's journeys, our own and each others';

to build respectful and inclusive communities;

to ground ourselves Jewishly in serious ways;

and to put our menorah out there in the window, so that we're bringing light

and making a difference in the wider world.

One final thing.

I told Tal more than three months ago that my topic this morning would be about a new theory of Jewish journeys.

But just this last Friday morning I got an email from Jacob, which provides a rather extraordinary postscript to my speech here today:

I hope this email finds you well, (he wrote)

The season has begun to shift up at Freedman, and there is now a little bit more time and space for reflection on the past busy season here, and just reflection on life in general. This has been a wild year with so much happening- beautiful, painful, sad, hopeful, regenerative, and healing.

I am writing you to let you know that after much deliberation, I am applying to, and plan to attend Rabbinical School this coming fall season.

Making the decision about this next life step comes with a lot of emotion attached, as I have been really sitting with my decision, to go through this process. I cannot yet fully wrap my head around the idea of not being at Freedman/Hazon, and while the thought of not living here makes me sad, I know that this is the right next step to continue my path. A path towards learning more about myself and my Judaism, with the goal of continuing to do the work of helping to hold as wide and as loving of a space as possible - both Jewishly and beyond.

As you know- While growing up, I had contentious relationships with rabbis and other authority figures in Jewish spaces (mostly at school). As I think back to some of the more impactful people in my life in relationship to my spiritual, intellectual, and Jewish growth, most of them are people closely affiliated with my time spent at Freedman from Adamah almost three years ago, up until now.

My time with Hazon/Freedman has been beyond transformative, and I cannot even begin to express in words how grateful I am to be/ and have been a part of this family and greater community. It has enabled me to grow, learn, connect and deepen in so many ways- as a friend, colleague, leader, human, and Jew.

I am excited about continuing that work, as I move forward in starting Rab school this coming fall.

So – to Jacob in absentia, and to each and all of you:
Chodesh tov, Chanukah sameach, mazeltov, thank you –
and b’hatzlacha on the next stages of the journey.