

Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Graduation
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin
Jewish Community Center of Dallas
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Thank you so much for the honor of participating in this celebration of Jewish learning in our community. Allow me to take one moment to recognize Rachelle Weiss-Crane, who is completing her first year as our site director. Mazal tov Rachelle on a wonderful year of learning and growth under your leadership! I also want to acknowledge the presence of Annie Glickman, who many of us know and love as Rachelle's predecessor, and who is now the regional director of Melton. We are so honored to have Annie here in our community, and to have both of these professionals located in Dallas. I was recently back in my hometown of Cleveland, OH, which is known not only for having rivers that burst into flames, but also for a rather strong, historic Jewish community. I was shopping in a local Jewish book store when the clerk asked me where I was from. I told him that I was born in Cleveland but that I now live in Dallas. "*Dallas*" the clerk replied with amazement; "I constantly hear about what an incredible Jewish community you have there--And huge too, much bigger than Cleveland's right?" I'm not sure that demographically he is correct; but without a doubt his assessment of the excitement and possibilities of active Jewish living here in Dallas are right on the money. *And one of the crown jewels of the Dallas Jewish community is this Melton program.* I have been teaching Melton since my senior year in college, and I can say with confidence that our Dallas Melton program has some of the finest, most dynamic, and qualified teachers in the country. When I taught Melton in college, it was in Florence Melton's back yard...the Leo Yassenoff JCC. Every class was located at the Columbus JCC—mine were in the J's boardroom. But here in Dallas, we have been courageous and strategic enough to branch out beyond these walls, and offer courses here as well as in synagogues and schools across the landscape of the greater Dallas area—without question this has brought students closer to serious Jewish learning than they might ever be had it not been made as convenient and accessible as we have here in Dallas. There is a lot of Jewish education to be consumed here in town, but nothing quite like the sophisticated, ideologically inclusive, text-based, expertly crafted curricula of Melton. And just because you have completed your two years here, that doesn't mean you should stop learning, or stop being a part of this incredible Melton community. My class recently asked me about my take-away from these two years...the one thing that stood out for me after all this learning together. Inevitably it is the beautiful sense of community and friendship that is cultivated as we study together. A room full of relative strangers on the first day evolves into a community of warmth and friendship through this course of study. It's amazing, and it happens beautifully every time another Melton class begins. Well, friends, a whole array of fascinating Gesher classes awaits you, and I hope you will continue to pursue Jewish study in this Melton community for many years to come. I am so proud to be associated with this program, and I am so inspired by each of the graduates, who have dedicated one day a week for two years to furthering your Jewish education. Particularly during economically challenging times, you have committed precious resources to your Jewish

education. I hope that loved ones and friends who are here with us today take a lesson from these spouses, parents, grandparents and friends who have made adult Jewish learning so central to their lives. We recall the words of the great sage Hillel who reminded us in Mishnah Avot, Chapter 2 Mishnah 5:

Al tomar lich'she'epaneh eshneh...shema lo tipaneh.

Don't say, when I have leisure I will study...for you may never have leisure.

I have been thinking about Hillel's teaching in preparation for this day, because I have been attempting to extrapolate one theme, one overarching message from these two years of Melton study. As we have explored the rhythms and purposes of Jewish living, the dramas of and ethics of the Jewish experience...what is the common denominator, the thread that links thousands of years of Jewish civilization...the secret of Jewish survival against all odds and every obstacle?

Perhaps you recall studying the famous story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the leader of the rabbinic community during the great revolt against Rome in the first century. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Yochanan opposed the Jewish zealots who wanted to fight Roman occupation to the bitter end. He thought quite frankly that it was a ludicrous, suicidal plan. As impassioned and faithful as the Jewish resistance was, there was no hope of defeating the Roman imperial war machine. So Rabbi Yochanan determined that the only course that could ensure Jewish survival was diplomacy. The story goes that Rabbi Yochanan had to be smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin...but not to avoid Roman centurions, rather to conceal himself from would be Jewish assassins who thought his overtures to Rome were utterly treasonous. Presenting himself to the celebrated Roman general and future emperor Vespasian, Rabbi Yochanan said, 'you take Jerusalem...we will leave. Make it a Roman fortress, call it Aleia Capitolina...We will all evacuate and surrender the rebellion. Just grant this beleaguered, precarious people one small request. *Give us Yavneh.*' At the time Yavneh was an unimportant backwater town that was populated mostly by non-Jews. Vespasian must have thought it was an extremely small price to pay for Jewish submission...'Take it,' he said, 'Yavneh means little to me, and there are more Romans there than Jewish revolutionaries...how much harm could it possibly be.' So Rabbi Yochanan packed his bags and along with his disciples, resettled in Yavneh. But they did not build an army there; they did not create a training camp for Jewish guerilla fighters; it did not become a hot bed for radicals or zealots. No, in this unremarkable place, the great Rabbi Yochanan *built a school*. He built a school because he realized something that Jews on every continent, in every century, and in every circumstance would come to realize as an eternal truth: The greatest guarantee of Jewish survival is not the sword, it's the book. Rabbi Yochanan was one of the principle students of Hillel—who again taught, Torah study can never be considered leisure...Torah study is life; Torah study is survival. Rabbi Yochanan understood his master's message well. Without an autonomous state of their own, the Jewish people as you well know would wander the map of the world...creating new communities, establishing global trade routes, and attempting to forge new homes. But it would not be their military prowess that

would maintain their faith, their culture, their heritage as a minority civilization in the overarching shadow of Christendom or Islam. The Jewish secret of centuries and millennia of survival was *and is* Jewish learning. The book, after all, is portable. Whole populations could be moved, relocated, expelled; homes, businesses, even synagogues had to remain...but the book was always portable. Our enemies came to understand this—how else to explain their bans and prohibitions on education? Their diabolical book-burnings? They knew that the only true way to choke-off Judaism, to really inoculate it, was to prevent the powerful flow of identity that happens when a teacher and a student engage in study together. There were times when teaching Torah was a capital crime. But our ancestors huddled together in caves and forests and basements and risked their lives so that the lifeblood of Torah would continue to pulsate. They invented clever techniques to disguise what they were doing—like the dreidel game you know so well; They even internalized it so deeply that stories abound of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps reciting by heart whole pages of Talmud ...as they worked...when the lights went out...as they huddled close together in freezing barracks...their spiritual vitality unable to be conquered, even as their bodies were broken down.

And what has been true over the millennia is true today. We don't have priests or prophets any more. If there is a modern Jewish political theory it is LEARNING. Learning is power; Learning is still the primary guarantor of Jewish survival. *Veshinantam levanecha...* 'Teach these truths to every generation' is as potent a directive today as it was in Deuteronomy. Judaism cannot survive simply on feelings, or affinities. What one generation feels may not be interesting or compelling to the next generation. Jewish learning, however, allows each generation to develop their own affinities...their own compelling narratives for carrying on the wisdom and experiences of the Jewish people.

Sitting here in the back of the room today is my wonderful grandmother, who is visiting me from Baltimore. I have told my classes all about my grandparents, and the life changing impression they made upon me. There is no greater example in my life of the thirst for Jewish learning and knowledge than my grandmother...who takes so many classes..including, by the way, Melton...she takes so many classes in shuls, at the JCC, at the local university that she probably qualifies for a PhD already! A voracious reader, and the most intellectually curious mind I have ever met, it is that magnificent, elegant, beautiful lady over there, 85 years young, who taught me that learning is a life-long occupation, a joy, and a most sacred value.

That's why what *you* have done these past two years is such a powerful testimonial of the enduring power of the book...You have been inspired, your minds have been expanded, your appreciation deepened, but only because you had the direct encounter with hundreds of generations of Jewish text and thought. Please share your excitement...share your *aha moments* with others...encourage them to enter into the timeless conversation that is Jewish learning.

I know that I speak for all of the teachers who had the blessing and joy of sharing these past two years with you when I say thank you for your inspiring dedication. Thank you for your probing

questions and penetrating reactions. And thank you for being such great role models to your families and to our community...To quote Hillel again: *Marbeh Torah Marbeh Chayim*: More Torah, More Life! May we all be blessed to share in more Torah learning and vibrant Jewish life together...here in Melton and beyond...

Mazal tov to all the graduates! Thank you.