

On behalf of the Duke administration and faculty, which I serve as Vice Provost and Adjunct Professor of English, I want to welcome you to the Jewish graduation service in the beautiful Freeman Center for Jewish Life.

This weekend the focus is on you amazing graduates, who have worked hard to earn the baccalaureate degree from Duke University. You have been here four years, and I, about a million. The older I get, the more acute my sense of history becomes.

Thus, in acknowledging our graduates today I want to acknowledge as well the two Jews who graduated from Trinity College in the class of 1911, perhaps the first Jewish students on campus. The continuity between one of them, Fanny Gladstein, and the Duke of our time is embodied literally in a cousin of Fanny's who serves as assistant to the vice provost for library affairs over in Perkins. But Fanny, and Louis Jaffe, the other Jewish student in the class of '11, are also linked to you, our graduates of almost a century later. How happy they would be to see such a vital contingent of Jews at this university, as well as the numbers of Jewish alums, parents, grandparents, and assorted other relatives and supporters of Jewish life at Duke.

I think about the émigré scholars of the 1930s and early '40s, escaping a nightmare in Europe. Duke gave them a home where they could advance their already-distinguished careers and bring luster to the university. Duke has given you students a home as well, where I hope that you have found community and nurturance of your many talents. You have brought us luster too.

I think of Duke's first Hillel chapter, in 1937, and the connection to the good programming this year spearheaded by the student board.

Finally, I think about Gil Scharf's idea for a Jewish Center on this campus, which he broached to President Keith Brodie in the late 1970s—a project in which I was immediately enlisted. It took awhile to get this facility actually up and running, with lots of bumps in the road,

but here we are. Over and above its beauty, the Freeman Center is the concretization of the fact that Duke provides a home for Jewish students, faculty, and staff, not only in this building but in the classroom and on the quad.

I said that I have been at Duke for about a million years and some days it feels that way; but in truth my life has been intertwined with the life of this university for more than three decades, and with Jewish life at Duke for almost as long. I am now on the eve of retirement from administration, so you will pardon me if I wax just a bit nostalgic as the FCJL stands poised on the eve of its tenth anniversary. Before we had this beautiful facility I spoke at the Jewish baccalaureate in the Nelson Music Room and in the Baldwin Auditorium: lovely spaces, but not Jewish spaces. I served as rabbi and cantor at high holiday services in Gross Chem auditorium, with the periodic table behind me: not a lovely space at all, and less conducive to prayer than to reminding worshippers that they had an organic test to study for! Now, for the last many years, I have served as a cantor or rabbi every Rosh Hashanah in this welcoming setting. Having worked for so many years, along with so many others, to see this facility come to fruition, I do not take it for granted. I know too much history to be blasé about our presence in this room today.

The university architects' office and facilities management department scurried to ensure that the Freeman Center would be ready to open by commencement 1999. The Jewish Baccalaureate was held at 4pm on May 15 of that year, with a standing room only crowd of almost 600 people. The year before, in Baldwin Auditorium, my remarks at that Jewish Baccalaureate referenced the facility then being built and I will close with the first and last sections of that 1998 address because in my nostalgic mood here today I find them doubly meaningful: reminding me of how I felt then, and resonating with me—and I hope you—in 2009:

Duke is a fairly young institution (created as a university only in 1924), and as one Duke trustee said on Friday, apropos of something else entirely, the benefit of being a young institution is that

we don't have "hardening of the categories." Hardening of the categories leads to a certain kind of death, we all know that. My greatest hope for the Center for Jewish Life is that it will not become a home for only one sort of Jew – or, God forbid, an empty symbol of a Jewish presence here – but rather that it will help to loosen the boundaries between categories, including boundaries between Jews all along the spectrum of observance. I also hope that Duke as a whole will continue to work toward becoming a place where all students can flower intellectually, socially, emotionally, spiritually. As you prepare to leave this place that you have called home for the past four years, I hope you do so with your own feeling of bittersweetness I hope you were happy enough here to regret going – indeed, that you already feel somewhat nostalgic toward it. Yet I also hope these four years have been a maturing enough experience that you are ready to go.

The only thing I would change about the concluding section of my 1998 remarks would be to make explicit a particular hope about the "loosening of categories": a hope that the Freeman Center would be a welcoming presence not only for all Jews but for all religions and, more, a locus for inter-group discussion and activism toward peace. This seems to me a critical and urgent imperative in our present world and I would encourage all the graduates in the room today to take heed of it. As for the first section of my 1998 address, what can I say but that *you* represent the "Jews to come" for whom we labored long and hard to get a significant Jewish space on campus.

So it is that you graduates take your place in the great chain linking the Jewish past with the Jewish future at Duke University and in the great world beyond. Your university is extremely proud of your accomplishments and, on behalf of that university, I say welcome, "mazel tov," and Godspeed to all of the students and their families assembled here today.