

## **A New Chancellor, A New Era, A New Message**



On September 5, I had the distinct privilege of attending the inauguration of Dr. Arnold M. Eisen as the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS). JTS is the central institution of Conservative Judaism in America, and the Chancellor is often referred to as the “titular head” of the Conservative Movement.

AJ has a special connection with Dr. Eisen and with the Seminary. Dr. Eisen’s father Alan is a devoted member of AJ, joining us when Oxford Circle Jewish Community Centre-Brith Israel became part of our congregation. At age 96, he is a regular *Shabbat* morning worshiper. How wonderful it was to see him beaming with pride, especially when his son introduced him to the throng of people assembled there.

AJ was founded in 1858, and with the *Sukkot* holiday, we began our 150th year. We were here twenty-eight years before JTS was established in 1886, and fifty-five years before the United Synagogue of America was founded in 1913. AJ was one of the twenty-two founding synagogues of this organization of Conservative synagogues which today is known as the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

When Rabbi Max D. Klein, of blessed memory, of the class of 1911, came to AJ, he began a tradition of almost one hundred years, that AJ is led by graduates of the Seminary. My predecessor, Rabbi Yaakov G. Rosenberg, of blessed memory, and I are both graduates of the Rabbinical School of JTS. Cantor Davidson and Hazzan Glantz are both graduates of the Cantorial School of JTS, and many of our educators have been JTS graduates. In addition, six of our members have been ordained as rabbis by JTS, and many of our young people have attended the joint undergraduate program between JTS and neighboring Columbia University.

The link between JTS and AJ will be solidified further with the participation of Chancellor Eisen as the featured teacher in an academic symposium we are planning as part of our 150th anniversary year, which will be held on September 7, 2008.

With the beginning of the processional, we knew we had entered a new era. Instead of the usual music typical of JTS convocations for years, the assembly was brought to attention to the beat of drums. The Djembe Drum Ensemble, garbed in colorful, native African costume led the distinguished participants, who were wearing their equally striking doctoral robes of their various colleges and universities.

And the theme of change and transition was in the air. Dr. Eisen spoke of how his priority will be “a clear formulation of message” for Conservative Judaism. And the center of this renewed and refocused message will be a grass roots “conversation” on the theme of *mitzvah*, commandment, which he will spearhead. This will not be a prescriptive lecture. Dr. Eisen’s goal is to engender discussion within our congregations about what we really believe about *mitzvah*, what obligates us, what animates us, what we do out of conviction, and what we do out of love for God. The goal will be to develop a common language that involves us all; to hone a message that will be able to embrace us all.

Dr. Eisen had already begun this process with a conference call involving over two hundred rabbis, in which I took part, and a teaching session following his inauguration that began to explore the meaning of *mitzvah* for us today.

For me, one of the most moving moments was the passing of the Chancellor’s Medal from the outgoing Chancellor, Ismar Schorsch, to the new Chancellor. Dr. Schorsch, whose twenty-year tenure in this position was one of the most formative in the Seminary’s history, spoke about the JTS motto which was inscribed on the medallion. It is the verse from the book of Exodus, describing God’s appearance to Moses in the image of the Burning Bush. The verse reads, “And the bush was not consumed.” Dr. Schorsch pointed out the polarity of the image in that usually a fire consumes a bush and destroys it. But in destroying the bush, it will also consume itself. When the fuel is finished, the fire goes out.

The mystery of the burning bush is how a bush can burn, but not burn up. These two oppositional forces, instead of consuming each other, sustain one another. So it is with Conservative Judaism today. We do not all agree on matters of law, theology, or practice. But we are sustained by the “conversation” when we can engage each other with the passion of the divine fire. We do not consume each other, but help strengthen each other.

May Dr. Eisen’s tenure as Chancellor help us to engage each other and grow in the process to make a stronger movement intellectually and spiritually.

CONGREGATION  
ADATH JESHURUN



7763 Old York Road  
Elkins Park, PA 19027  
215.635.6611  
[www.adathjeshurun.info](http://www.adathjeshurun.info)