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# LECH L'CHA GOING FORTH

A GUIDE  
TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATIONS

תורים אלו מלמדי  
תינקות באמונה  
חרוזים אלו התינקות

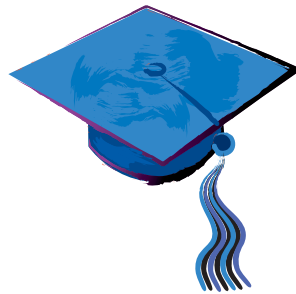
Teachers and school children —  
precious jewels of our community  
MIDRASH RABBAH, SONG OF SONGS

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Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education  
88 Broad Street, 6th Floor  
Boston, MA 02110

# LECH L'CHA GOING FORTH

## A GUIDE TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATIONS

BY DEBORAH STANHILL



### PARTNERSHIP FOR EXCELLENCE IN JEWISH EDUCATION

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"Graduation: Motifs and Meanings" by Walter Ackerman reprinted from **Shofar: Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies**, volume 10, number 1 (Fall 1991).  
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# DEDICATION

## WALTER ACKERMAN 1925-2003

Walter Ackerman was known for his ground-breaking leadership in the field of Jewish education. Through his teaching, writing and mentoring, he educated thousands in the United States, Canada and Israel.

"Ackie" was a powerful and influential figure in Jewish education for over 50 years. His death leaves a professional and personal void for many — a void that cannot be filled.

Born in Boston, Professor Ackerman was one of a pioneering cohort of outstanding educators and scholars trained at Boston's Hebrew Teachers' College in the 1940's and 50's. He simultaneously earned degrees from Harvard College and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His early years were notable for his work as Dean of the Teachers Institute and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He also served as Director of the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, Headmaster of the Bet El Day School and Director of Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire and Camps Ramah in California and Canada. Very few educators have ever directed such a range of programs and institutions.

After making *aliyah* in 1973, Professor Ackerman joined the faculty of Ben Gurion University of the Negev. There he served as Chairman of the Department of Education, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Services, founding Director of the School of Continuing Education and the Shane Family Professor of Education. He was a consultant to the Jewish Education Committees of the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee, and a member of the Standing Committee of the Pedagogic Secretariat of Israel's Ministry of Education and Culture and the Executive Committee of the Joint Authority on Zionist Jewish Education in the Diaspora. He was also on the faculty of the Jerusalem Fellows. At the time of his death he was Dean of the Center for Jewish Education of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.

Professor Ackerman was the editor and author of five books, a textbook on Jewish history, and nearly 100 articles, essays and research studies on Jewish and general education. He was married to Frances Myers Ackerman who also died within the past year. Together they had four children, Shira, David, Miriam, and Naomi, and 11 grandchildren.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PEJE wishes to thank Elana Stern, our Brandeis University Hornstein Intern for the 2002-2003 academic year, whose research and interviews in the winter of 2003 form the basis for this publication.

We are indebted to the schools that willingly shared information about their graduation ceremonies. They are:

Akiba Hebrew Academy, *Merion, PA*

Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, *Rockville, MD*

Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, *Toronto, ONT*

Donna Klein Jewish Academy, *Boca Raton, FL*

Gann Academy – New Jewish High School, *Waltham, MA*

Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit, *West Bloomfield, MI*

Kushner Yeshiva High School, *Livingston, NJ*

Maimonides School, *Brookline, MA*

Milken Community High School, *Los Angeles, CA*

San Diego Jewish Academy, *San Diego, CA*

Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex & Union, *West Orange, NJ*

We also extend appreciation to Josh Elkin, Bonnie Hausman, and Suzanne Kling of the PEJE staff for their assistance and support with this publication.

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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

*“Rituals, traditions and ceremonies...provide everyone a chance to reflect on what is important, to connect as a community.”*<sup>1</sup>

*“The Jewish school ... must create occasions which permit it to proclaim purpose, exhibit achievements, and validate commitments. These occasions ... provide opportunities to project idealized versions of what the school represents and does ... Graduation exercises are perhaps that rite which best tells what a school thinks about itself and how it would like to be perceived.”*<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by the work of Walter Ackerman, and at the behest of Jewish day high schools who have been our grantees, PEJE is pleased to present this publication, ***Lech L'cha: Going Forth, A Guide for High School Graduations.***

*Lech l'cha*, go forth, are the words with which God commanded Abraham to leave Haran and go to the land God would show him. So too, do high school graduates leave behind the familiar, the place of their formation, and venture forth to their own, new and unique, adult experiences.

This publication is intended as a resource guide to the variety of choices available to Jewish day high schools to mark this moment of accomplishment and transition, in a way which best reflects the school's values and purpose.

The contents of this guide are the result of original research conducted by Elana Stern, Brandeis University Hornstein Program intern at PEJE in the 2002-2003 academic year. Thirteen Jewish high schools were initially contacted, and eleven responded. Schools were chosen to reflect a range of denomination, size, age and geography. They shared the information encapsulated within the following pages, along with videos, programs and invitations, some of which can be seen on the accompanying CD.

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<sup>1</sup> Terrence E. Deal & Kent D. Peterson, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1999), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Ackerman, "Graduation: Motifs and Meanings," *Shofar: Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 10:1 (Fall 1991): 72.

# PLANNING GRADUATION: WHEN, WHERE, WHO

## When: Setting the Date

Many schools set their graduation dates a year and a half in advance. Some schools have a fixed formula for graduation; for example, it is always on the first or second Sunday in June, depending on what day of the week the month starts.

Schools noted that they consult the Federation calendar and other local Jewish schools in the process of setting their date.

Some schools hold graduation on weekday evenings, some on Sundays, morning or evening. Schools choose Sundays for logistical reasons, such as the availability of the synagogue space, traffic patterns, not imposing on people's work weeks. One school notes that a Sunday morning ceremony allows out-of-town family to participate, and offers the opportunity for additional celebrations the night before or the afternoon and night afterwards. One school switched graduation from Monday nights to Sunday nights to highlight its importance.

On the other hand, one school whose faculty all attend, holds its graduation on a weekday evening, so as not to interfere with their faculty's weekend. The school schedules an early dismissal the day of graduation so that the entire staff can attend.

## When: Planning

Many schools start planning graduation at the beginning of the school year, although some begin anywhere between December and March. See the planning checklist developed by the Milken Community High School in Appendix C.

Among the planning details schools mentioned are:

### Program:

- setting order
- choosing music
- choosing speakers (student and non-student)
- requesting graduation speeches from speakers

### Location:

- reservation
- logistics
- decorations
- flowers
- security
- chair rental
- reception

### **Printing:**

- invitations
- programs
- tickets
- diplomas

### **Caps and Gowns:**

- collecting student size information
- collecting faculty size information
- ordering

### **Student speeches:**

- determining student speakers
- reviewing speeches

### **Diplomas:**

- checking with students on how they want their names listed
- checking Hebrew names
- printing
- calligraphy

### **Prizes:**

- decisions
- ordering/purchasing

### **Miscellaneous:**

- Ushers
- Rehearsals
- Photography
- Senior class gift

## **Where: Location**

Size and aesthetics play a role in where schools choose to hold their graduations. Local synagogues are often used because they can better accommodate the number of people, although for one school it is the formal ambience of the synagogue and the poor acoustics in the school gym that are the deciding factors. On the other hand, some schools use the school gym or auditorium, even if they must limit the number of guests per family, because the school feels it is important to hold the ceremony on school grounds.

## **Who: Delegating Responsibility**

Each school assigns responsibility for graduation differently. Sometimes the head of school or high school principal has primary responsibility. In other schools, it is a faculty or staff member, such as a graduation advisor, dean of the upper school, 12<sup>th</sup> grade dean or director of student activities. Support staff within the school often assist, sometimes with specific responsibilities such as creating the program and distributing tickets, or seating assignments. In some schools it is a collaborative effort among the staff.

One school relies heavily on parents of graduating seniors. Committees are formed, with two parent chairs, for caps and gowns, invitations, gift to school, reception, flowers for students, pictures. They meet with the high school principal four to five times over the six months prior to graduation. Other schools also use parent help in more limited roles. Some schools look to junior class parents for assistance. In one school, in fact, the post-graduation reception is hosted by junior parents.

In most schools, students are not involved in the graduation planning, other than choosing speakers.

## How much: Budgets and Contributions

The cost to schools for graduation ranges from a few hundred dollars to as much as \$18,000. Some schools have a separate line item or several line items in the budget related to graduation. See Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto's graduation budget in Appendix D.

Most schools charge graduating students to help defray the costs. In 2003, amounts ranged from \$90 to \$225. The school which reported spending the least also had students paying the most. They noted that sometimes one family or a group of families make a donation to help defray graduation costs for all. Some schools collect a separate graduation fee as part of the school registration fee or add it on to tuition. Others charge students separately for graduation costs. Student fees go toward diplomas, caps and gowns, reception, hall rental, photography, flowers, security and parking guards.

## What: The Graduation Ceremony

### Rehearsals

Many schools hold rehearsals, some more than one. For instance, one school holds a first rehearsal in the school gym to establish seating and order, a second in the synagogue the day before and a third the morning of graduation, also in the synagogue. Another school holds a mandatory rehearsal the day before graduation when formal photographs are taken.

### Dress

Every school reported using caps and gowns for students. Some schools also have faculty and/or heads of school in academic robes.

### Language

Graduation ceremonies in Jewish high schools are conducted mainly in English, but each has some component of Hebrew, whether a Hebrew valedictory speech, Hebrew music, "*HaTikvah*", blessings. One school calls its students up by their Hebrew names.

Many schools also use Hebrew in the graduation invitation and program, ranging from the inclusion of the Hebrew date, to wording the invitation in Hebrew as well as English, from listing the graduates by both Hebrew and English names, to quoting rabbinic sources in Hebrew followed by an English translation.

## Judaic Content

Schools use a number of elements to reflect their Jewish character. These include incorporating prayers and blessings into the program; a favorite is the *shehecheyanu* blessing which can be said by an individual student or by parents and students together. Many schools sing "*HaTikvah*" and some have students or choirs sing other appropriate Hebrew songs as well. Some schools include a *d'var torah*; one school has a student-led *siyum*, a concluding lesson. In schools where the graduates receive gifts from the school, these relate directly to Jewish life. One school gives each graduate a Shabbat kit; another gives *mezuzot* or Jewish art work.

Speeches are one of the main avenues by which schools impart their values or reflect on the Jewish nature of the school's education. In one school, every speech relates to the role of a Jewish school and to the Jewish content of its education. In another, student speakers are asked to discuss the concept of *tikkun olam* and its role in school. In yet another, student speeches reflect their commitment to learning, Israel and *tikkun olam*. One school has developed a special phrasing to commence the presentation of diplomas, referring to covenantal partnerships and Jewish values.

## Unique Additions

Schools have developed additional ways of reflecting their values or mission. One school, at the suggestion of their first graduating class, draped an Israeli flag over an empty chair to commemorate fallen Israeli soldiers. Several schools look for ways to highlight their graduates. One school hangs a poster-size picture of each graduate around the room. Another asks each student to write a reflective paragraph or two, which is included in the graduation program. One school creates a computer slide show with pictures of each graduate from baby to senior class picture.

Some schools have students present a class project at graduation. This can take the form of a skit or a series of different presentations. What they choose to do and say reflects who they are. One school has a presentation by students which they call a cantata. It is written by students with musical interludes and sometimes takes the form of a class history from kindergarten through 12th grade. It can also include tributes to teachers.

## Speakers

Schools invite a variety of people to speak at graduations. Speakers can include heads of school, school presidents, principals, teachers, directors of Jewish studies, directors of education, alumni, and, of course, students. Some schools invite outside speakers, but one school noted that they had ceased this practice because the guests generally were not familiar enough with the school to make appropriate remarks.

Every school reported including student speakers, sometimes referred to as valedictorians and salutatorians, but not always. Students are chosen either by academic standing, or by another selection process. In some schools the students elect the speaker, subject to school approval, but one school remarked that they found this turned into a popularity contest. Instead, they invite interested students to submit speeches, the school approves them, and then the students choose the speeches they like best. One school, which has three student speakers based on GPA, said that for valedictorian they are considering substituting highest GPA for the student who best exemplifies the school's values and community service, or having that student as a fourth speaker.

## Music

Many schools have their choirs sing at graduation. One school hires a classical music ensemble, one has live piano music, another hires musicians to supplement their own chamber orchestra. While "Pomp and Circumstance" by Edward Elgar is a widely used piece for the processional, many schools choose upbeat modern Israeli music for the recessional.

## Role of the Faculty

Many schools recognize their faculty by including them in the processional and seating them in front or directly behind the students. In some schools the faculty wear academic robes for graduation.

Faculty sometimes assist with graduation preparation, such as rehearsal, cap and gown distribution, and getting students ready on the day. One school also asks faculty members to chair committees planning the senior class trip, class gift and graduation.

## Awarding of Diplomas

Typically, the honor of conferring diplomas is given to heads of school and principals, sometimes deans. In one very large school, rotating faculty read the names and rotating department heads hand out the diplomas. In another school, the students choose a staff member to hand out the diplomas; although it is often a teacher, one class chose the school janitor, with whom they had a close relationship.

One school noted that during the ceremony they hand out only the diploma covers. Students receive the actual diploma when they return their cap and gown.

## Points of Pride

Two themes stand out when schools describe their graduations. One is highlighting the students, whether that means having their voices dominant, giving them each time alone in the spotlight (e.g. entering one at a time, or receiving their diplomas one at a time), or keeping non-student speeches to a minimum.

Graduations also cultivate a sense of warmth, community and continuity. Several schools invite alumni to speak. A number of schools acknowledge the parents of graduates during the ceremony, alumni who are present, and the faculty. One school acknowledges by name each family graduating its youngest child, as well as all alumni who have children graduating.

# MARKING THIS SPECIAL TIME

## Gifts

In many schools the senior class presents a gift to the school at graduation. Students often make the decision about what to give and funding usually comes from students or parents. In one school money for the gift is part of the graduation fee paid by parents but the students decide what to give. In another, a staff member works with students to help them raise their own money. In another school, students use funds they have raised over their four years.

The kinds of gifts students give the school include Torah scrolls, a megillah, a podium, outdoor furniture, video equipment, artwork, an ark for the Torah, a menorah. One school has had some classes choose to contribute scholarship and endowment funds; another has decided to encourage each senior class to give money designated for scholarships.

In one school senior parents host a teacher appreciation luncheon prior to graduation. Some schools also receive special or private donations.

## Other Senior Events

Several schools hold awards ceremonies separate from graduation. At least one has a speaker chosen by students. One school holds a siyum ceremony the Friday before graduation. This includes communal prayer (including students, faculty and parents), some readings, and an awards ceremony.

One school reported that it eliminated its awards ceremony at the request of students. Too many students either felt embarrassed at receiving an award or upset at not receiving one. The school now notifies students by mail of any awards received, and a list is published in the school newspaper.

Other activities around graduation include a pre-ceremony dinner at one school, where families bring as many guests as they want and pay for it separately. Usually several hundred people attend. Another school has an informal dinner and senior roast attended by students and teachers on the night after graduation.

Several schools hold proms. In one school, the prom is planned by seniors and attended by juniors and seniors, with juniors paying a larger amount. It is held in a hotel or similar venue and lasts from 8pm to midnight. Teachers love to chaperone. Security is very important and the school has a policy of calling the parents of any student who hasn't arrived by 8:30 pm. Another school holds a prom for its 9-12<sup>th</sup> grades, in honor of the seniors. Costs are held to \$25 per person or \$36 per couple and there is financial assistance available. Students are encouraged to attend with or without a date.

Senior classes do some fundraising for senior year events. In one school, each senior class raises money for the prom through activities such as car washes and cooking and selling pancakes for breakfast. Recently they held a concert of student bands and called it Promapalooza.

Other special senior events include graduation night at Disney World for a school in Florida; lasting from 11 pm to 5 am, it is semi-formal and limited to seniors and their chaperones. One school has taken its seniors kayaking, and another to a kosher resort hotel overnight.

## Senior Year Transitions

Many schools have non-academic programs for their seniors towards the end of the school year. Some send a number of their students to Israel. Others have internship programs in which students pursue their interests in either a community service or business-oriented arena. One school encourages its seniors to go on March of the Living.

A few schools conduct some form of exit interview with their graduating class. In one small school, the principal meets with each student informally to discuss their goals and accomplishments. The conversation can also touch upon academics in college or familial relationships. The principal takes this opportunity to encourage students to keep in touch and visit often. In another school, a dean conducts informal exit interviews in small groups. This school also holds an optional Separation Workshop for seniors and parents in which they do group exercises concerning their feelings at this transition, and then come back together and share the comments anonymously. It is very well received by those who choose to attend. Another school has a series of discussions with students about certain programs and is thinking about transforming this into formal exit interviews.

One school has a two-day retreat for seniors at which they talk about leaving high school. One of the activities allows each student to speak to the class and say goodbye. Another activity gets students to think about and then discuss what kinds of values and ideals they would pack to take with them. The retreat also has a lot of "hanging-out together" time.

# ALUMNI RELATIONS

Alumni offices are often incorporated into the development office of schools. A few schools have a dedicated person, either within the development office or stand alone. Many acknowledge that fundraising is the main goal of alumni relations, but schools also report that they use their alumni office to keep in touch, keep graduates involved and informed, educate and recruit teachers. One school invites recent graduates to a college panel for seniors to talk about the college experience, and the parents of recent graduates to an informal event for senior parents to talk about separation and the transition to college.

Schools have different strategies for introducing seniors to the alumni office. These can range from a breakfast at graduation rehearsal where seniors write down which college they are attending and their present email addresses to simply changing their status in the school's database and making sure they receive school mailings and have access to the school website. Some schools ask seniors to fill out a form for the alumni office sometime during the school year.

Alumni/varsity basketball games are highly popular alumni activities. They often take place around Thanksgiving or winter break. Other alumni gatherings include reunion-type events for 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> year classes etc. One school is hoping to create a home-coming type of event, possibly around the time of a significant anniversary for the school. Another school hosts a Thanksgiving reunion for college-age alumni that is very well attended. Other schools host random events in a geographically concentrated area, particularly New York City. Some schools invite alumni to graduation and specifically acknowledge them during the program.

Contact with alumni can take a variety of different forms. Sending newsletters or other school publicity materials to alumni is common. One school includes class notes twice a year in the school magazine. Other schools have an alumni link on their website or produce an annual alumni directory. Some schools send gifts to their college freshmen. This can be a mug filled with candy for Rosh Hashanah or a Chanukah package. One school sends all its college students a Chanukah package; when Chanukah coincides with college exam periods, its package includes stress relievers.

An updated and comprehensive database is vital (keeping up with moving alumni is a huge job), and captains for each class, along with good, committed chair people can be important tools for good alumni relations. Email connections are important, especially with more recent graduates. One school is contemplating an alumni email newsletter. Schools also note that they make an effort to keep in touch with alumni parents as well.

# WORDS OF WISDOM

"Graduation is not difficult; it is just lots of details. Start early. The more elements of the school included, the warmer it will be."

"Make it special and classy so that all students in the school want to attend. It creates a great sense of community."

"Student and parent ownership is critical. Their input makes graduation more meaningful, even if it is more work for school staff."

# A P P E N D I C E S

A	“Ritual and Ceremony: Culture in Action,” from <b>Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership</b> , by Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1999, pages 31-45. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ....	12
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## Appendix A

**Shaping School Culture:** The Heart of Leadership, by Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, "Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1999, pages 31-45. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

# Ritual and Ceremony

## *Culture in Action*

Imagine our lives without ritual and ceremony. Do away with morning coffee, the noon lunch break, the evening social hour, the late-night walking of the dog, or whatever the special breaks are that you look forward to each day. It's a chilling thought; our daily or weekly rituals provide a welcome chance to reflect and connect. We renew ourselves, bond with others, and experience life's deeper meaning in our everyday liturgy. Think of the hollowness we would create if we were to cancel Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Cinco de Mayo, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Easter, Passover, summer picnics, or New Year's Eve. Without ceremony to honor traditions, mark the passage of time, graft reality and dreams onto old roots, or reinforce our cherished values and beliefs, our very existence could become empty, sterile, and devoid of meaning. Without ritual and ceremony, any culture will wither and die. Without periodic expressive events, nothing makes much sense and we lose our way.

Ritual and ceremony allow us to act out what otherwise is hard to touch and comprehend. In doing so, we touch base with our core values and bond with each other. Ritual and ceremony are to culture what the movie is to the script, the concert is to the score, or the dance is to values difficult to express in any other way (Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

Now shift from our personal lives to life in the organizations where we work. Imagine school without such symbolic interludes.

In the world of education with its multiple challenges and complex goals, ritual is probably more important than in a business with a tangible product or service. Schools run largely on faith and hope. Students and teachers don't leave their humanity behind when they come to school. They need special moments in the daily grind to reflect on what's really important, to connect with one another, and to feel the common spirit that makes technical routine more like spiritual communion.

In the past few decades, in the name of educational reform, we have managed to sterilize schools of the symbolic acts that help culture survive and thrive. Some ritual and ceremony has fallen victim to political correctness. Some has been dismissed as fluff in favor of structure and rationality. A lot has just been overlooked and ignored, allowed to wither away. More than ever, we need to revive ritual and ceremony as the spiritual fuel we need to energize and put more life back into our schools. Learning is fostered in large part by strong traditions, frequent ritual, and poignant ceremonies to revitalize cultural cohesion and focus.

## Rituals

Rituals are procedures or routines that are infused with deeper meaning. They help make common experiences uncommon events. Every school has hundreds of routines, from the taking of attendance in the morning to the exiting procedures used in the afternoon. But when these routine events can be connected to a school's mission and values, they summon spirit and reinforce cultural ties.

Let's look at a couple of examples. In one rural midwestern school, food service workers make toast for staff and students every morning—even though it's not in their official job description. As a routine it feeds people and provides carbohydrates and calories, but as a ritual of "breaking bread" together, it energizes the communal spirit for the coming day. A recent attempt to eliminate the morning ritual failed, as hundreds of past students,

staff, and parents recalled the fond memories and wanted the tradition to continue.

In a large urban school, staff meet for coffee and doughnuts once a week to share stories about their experiences with new curriculum ideas and to renew relationships and recharge batteries with colleagues they see only occasionally.

Rituals become significant traditional events with special history and meaning. The tradition unfolds year in and year out. Traditions provide a vital tie to the past, reinvigorate the present, and offer a welcome promissory note for a robust future. Special events touch the hearts of parents and others in the community who can recall with feeling their own experiences in school. When people honor traditional rituals, it gives them a cultural foundation to weather challenges, difficulties, and change. Rituals are the daily comings and goings that create the mortar that binds people and activities; rituals hold a school together.

Schools have a variety of rituals that do culture's symbolic work:

*Greeting and goodbye rituals are value-embedded ways of connecting people.* At Audubon Elementary School the workroom is filled with teachers each morning, and greetings are boisterous, usually taking place over homemade treats. At Ganado Primary, newcomers to the school are taken around by an articulate Navajo tour guide who shows them student work, rugs from local weavers, and awards the school has received. In a Beaverton, Oregon, elementary school the official greeting of teachers and students is an animated "high five"—a behavioral testimony to the school's commitment to "Reach for Excellence." Bob Herring, the principal of Nativity School who is described in Case 2 at the end of the chapter, uses deep rituals to greet and to say goodbye to students and staff.

*Transition rituals provide the symbolic support to bridge changes in practice or procedures.* In one school where more traditional textbooks had given way to trade books in language arts, the staff gathered to remember the good and the ridiculous about the texts. They

were then boxed up and sent to a needy traditional school in another state. In another school, older technologies—from pens to Pentiums—are placed in a special cabinet to show the progression of technology used in the school.

*Battle preparation rituals give staff and students with the needed armor to face threatening challenges.* In one school just before the state-mandated tests are given, staff and students gather around an enormous cake that has “We Will Succeed” written in huge letters across the top. This ritual prepares staff and students to do their best in the face of a challenging, high-stakes examination. In another school, teachers and administrators fill care baskets with cards, notes, stuffed animals, and other small items when teachers are facing graduate exams or other stress-filled times.

*Initiation rituals connect newcomers to a school's community.* These rituals can be as simple as a significant introduction of a staff member's past successes and special attributes at the first faculty meeting. Or they can be more complex: meaningful mentoring relationships that involve reflection on professional values and philosophy, shared group participation at commonly attended conferences, and extensive discussions on the history and core values of the school. In a New York elementary school, the old-timers—veteran teachers who have been at the school for an extended period—take over the newcomers' staff development. They share the school's history and traditions. As the principal observed of the rite's impact: “It's worked both for the newcomers and old-timers. The only thing worse than not learning the ropes is having great traditions to share but no audience of initiates.”

*Closing rituals furnish the needed support and compassion when things end.* In one elementary school, teachers and students create “Big Books” featuring the year's special events, surprises, and accomplishments. Poems, pictures, and stories fill the history that is ceremonially placed in the library. As we describe shortly, the Nativity School cements ties and copes with endings by recognizing the contributions people have made to the school and releasing balloons into the spring sky.

Rituals are the daily interactions that are infused with meaning. Ceremonies are larger, more complex social gatherings that build meaning and purpose.

## Ceremonies

Most schools have some formal ceremonies that mark transitions in the school year. These periodic events bind people to each other and shape unwritten cultural values and rules. The traditions shape and mold new recruits and give seasoned staff a welcome spiritual boost.

Ceremonies are complex, culturally sanctioned ways that a school celebrates successes, communicates its values, and recognizes special contributions of staff and students. Each season of the year can provide time to communicate ceremonially the deeper symbolic glue that binds a school together. In an urban school, before classes start in the fall, staff gather together to share their hopes, ideas, and dreams for the coming year. This shared experience creates connections that last throughout the year, despite the predictable ups and downs of the academic calendar.

In another school the staff hold a special art night; each student has a piece of artwork matted and displayed. Parents and community members are invited to appreciate students' creativity. Special awards are given to parents and others in recognition of their cooperation and help. The contribution of teachers is singled out for special attention in the carefully and artistically designed brochure that outlines the evening's festivities. This ceremony knits a diverse community together in celebration of the collective successes of children. It builds, bonds, and cements organizational esteem.

In another school, staff hold an end-of-the-year ceremony to recognize the individual and group contributions of teachers. In sometimes funny and sometimes serious ways, the school communicates how it values the ways teachers work together.

## Types of Ceremonies

Schools with unique cultures convene ceremonies for several purposes during the year:

*Opening-day ceremonies rebind staff to the school and its mission.* These events reinforce core values, remind people of the hard yet rewarding year ahead, and celebrate their commitment to the growth of young people. In one school, staff and parents represented on the school's council come together for a beginning-of-school potluck. Each person brings a dish that represents something they did over the summer—Texas chili from a parent who attended a summer conference in Houston or an Irish stew from a teacher whose summer was devoted to developing a new teaching module on immigration. Eating good food and trying to “read” the food's deeper meaning creates fun times and renews ties for the coming year.

*Community renewal ceremonies revive connections and reinforce shared values.* These special events can rebuild and recharge the energies of staff and students as well as parents. Beginning a new school year always conjures both anticipation and dread. Educating students is a complex and daunting task. Renewal ceremonies can build trust and faith to face the year's next 180 days. At one school, for example, the mission statement is reviewed each fall. It is refined or reworded to match current values. Then the statement is redone in a new calligraphy by a local artist and signed by everyone. This makes the mission statement alive, vital, connected to everyday experience, and evolving, rather than one that's dead, moribund, and gathering dust as it hangs on a wall.

*Seasonal ceremonies take advantage of cyclical celebrations outside the school.* Reitzug and Reeves (1992) found in one school that the principal, Mr. Sage, has a Thanksgiving tradition in which he cooks and serves a large turkey, using the activity to teach about weights and measures but also to renew teachers in the middle of the first semester.

*Management ceremonies ease the hard work of formulating plans and deciding on new programs.* Professionals often gather and make improvement plans through brute force of rationality. But infusing these times with a collaborative spirit and shared collegiality fosters even greater accomplishment. A Kentucky high school working to restructure its educational program held its planning retreats at the principal's rustic cabin. The principal, a strong and insightful leader, knew the importance of shared thinking and planning. But she also recognized the other side of the equation. She cooked incredible food and encouraged play as the core planning council hammered out new directions. They often referred to their gatherings as “an advance” rather than a “retreat.” In a Connecticut school, it was not a rustic cabin but a hotel with a reputation for lavish buffets that made the planning retreat a meaningful group tradition.

*Integrative ceremonies provide ways to meld the various social, ethnic, and religious groups in a school.* As schools become more and more diverse ethnically, socially, and economically, they need to rediscover or invent traditions that knit people together—integrative traditions that help everyone develop understanding and appreciation for others. At Piccolo Elementary School in Chicago, African American students learn Spanish songs to sing during Cinco de Mayo; Hispanic students learn rap to participate during African-American-week festivities. These are more than music lessons, as students develop friendships and learn about different values and ways. In the Tucson, Arizona, school district, opening day brought all its employees together to kick off the new year. At various places in the large arena, student groups were featured playing ethnic music. The music helped unite diverse subgroups into a shared commitment to building a cohesive learning community.

*Recognition ceremonies pay tribute to the special accomplishments of individuals and groups, thereby forging pride and respect.* Schools, like other organizations, too often avoid recognizing and celebrating important accomplishments. Sometimes it is not part of tradition; quite often, negative members of the culture want to diminish praise

to hide their own mediocrity. But successful cultures find ways—both small and elaborate ways—to celebrate, commemorate, and salute the accomplishments of others. For the school, this heightens the feeling of being on a winning team, of being part of something greater than themselves.

In the Beaverton Elementary School mentioned earlier, the daily “high-five” rites are supplemented from time to time by a special recognition event. Teachers, students, and parents gather in the school’s “hall of fame” to recognize those who have shown notable merit in “reaching for excellence.” The principal calls a student forward, reads the accomplishment, and paints the student’s hand. The student slaps the wall with a high-five, leaving an imprint. The principal then writes the student’s name and his or her accomplishment.

There are many other examples of this recognition: student awards ceremonies, volunteer lunches, graduation ceremonies, and honor roll dinners. At Joyce Elementary in Detroit, students who make the honor roll attend a formal ceremony with their parents. This ceremony has been held yearly for over a decade. Students, caregivers, parents, and staff come dressed in their finest clothes, share an elaborate meal, and hear the prideful words of their principal and community leaders. Students receive a medalion of achievement and a t-shirt with every honor student’s name emblazoned on it. Teachers write a personal comment about every child for the banquet book, which is ceremonially presented to each student. Photographs capture the event, thus creating a memory trace of the accomplishments that graces many refrigerators in local homes. In a community facing great challenges, the honor roll dinner is a powerful message of hope, accomplishment, and pride.

Like many schools, Audubon Elementary has a yearly art auction, but the auction is also a time to recognize achievements of other sorts. There is a printed brochure that describes the auction but also lists the accomplishments, awards, and grants received by

staff and students for the past year. This brochure is an artifact and symbol of the triumphs and hard work of school members.

*Homecomings are for alumni, who gather to tell stories of hard work and success.* Returning graduates show a connection to the past and proof that their hard work has paid off. In a high school located in a low-income area, adults who have regular jobs return to remind students of the possibility of economic success. In another school, returning graduates offer to mentor struggling students and return to the school some of what the school gave them.

*Special ceremonies mark the beginning or end of unique events.* Transitions are important times in the lives of people and of schools. They mark the beginnings and endings of unique temporal and social events. Transitions need to be marked. They cannot go unnoticed or their importance and meaning are lost. Successful cultures find ways to highlight transitions to reinforce and build cultural values. One school celebrates the end of a planning year with a brief talk about accomplishments and challenges, followed by the awarding of pens and coffee cups to the members of the planning committee. Increasingly, schools are holding reading “challenges” to encourage summer reading. Principals mark reaching the goals in many bizarre but symbolic ways. Some have been known to eat fried worms, kiss hairy pigs, or spend the day on the roof to celebrate the school reaching its reading goals. Adding an exclamation mark to the end of special events or activities can buoy spirits and bolster values.

*Memorial ceremonies are times to remember the contributions and trials of others.* Most strong cultures remember those who went before. It is a way to recognize the contributions of others and connect to the history of one’s school. Some schools bring back retired teachers who developed core curricular approaches or developed the special approach taken in the school. Other schools remember those who faced tragedy. At East High School in Madison, Wisconsin, students and staff place flowers on a fence where several students were killed by a reckless driver. Other schools have named

scholarships or awards for student leaders who died tragically in war or in the line of duty in their professions. In a Wisconsin school, a scholarship is given each year in honor of an Irish teacher who died of cancer at a young age. The award certificate is wrapped in green and khaki—just like the green and khaki that appeared in some item of clothing the teacher wore almost every day of his career.

### **Elements of Successful Ceremonies**

Each ceremony, tradition, or ritual works effectively if it communicates deeper values and purposes, is well organized and run, and has a touch of grandeur and specialness. Successful ceremonies often combine a meaningful set of elements (Trice and Beyer, 1985; Deal and Peterson, 1994; Deal and Key, 1998).

Special elements in ceremonies can include the following:

- A special and value-linked purpose
- Symbolic clothing and adornments
- Symbols, signs, banners, or flags
- Stories of history, accomplishment, unusual effort
- A distinctive manner of speaking or presentation
- An invocation of deeper purpose and values
- Attention to who is invited and where they sit
- Recognition of those who have shown exemplary commitment
- Appropriately chosen and varied music
- A carefully selected, attractive setting
- Quality food or drink
- Value-filled language and commentary
- Meaningful symbols and artifacts
- Ritual acts and ongoing traditions
- The recounting of myths, legends, or stories about the school

Successful ceremonies are carefully designed and arranged to communicate values, celebrate core accomplishments, and build a tight sense of community.

### **Traditions**

Traditions are significant events that have a special history and meaning and that occur year in and year out. Traditions are part of the history; they reinvigorate the culture and symbolize it to insiders and outsiders alike. They take on the mantle of history, carrying meaning on their shoulders. When people have traditions that they value and appreciate, it gives them a foundation to weather challenges, difficulties, and change.

There are numerous types of traditions in schools, including

*Traditions that build professionalism.* It is important to nourish professionalism and effort for one's students. This can happen in many ways, for example by holding retreats where energetic, collaborative planning occurs, by holding professional conferences at the school that spotlight innovative teaching by existing staff, or by acknowledging professional accomplishments in words or displays.

*Celebratory gatherings where the community recognizes in story, songs, or awards the special and significant contributions of others.* At one school, staff hold a storytelling contest; staff members recount stories of success or humor that occurred that year. Awards for the best story are highly sought after. When Fran Vandiver was principal of Coral Springs Middle School in Florida, many faculty meetings began with the presentation of coffee mugs to staff who had made some special attempt to serve students. Strong cultures hold a variety of ceremonies to mark special occasions, continue meaningful traditions to reinforce values, and perpetuate rituals that provide connection.

## Rituals, Traditions, and Ceremonies: Two Cases

School leaders develop rituals, traditions, and ceremonies that fit with their staff and communities. The following examples show how a group of principals working with staff reinforced culture. (The first is adapted from Deal and Peterson, 1990.)

### Case 1: Hank Cotton, Cherry Creek High School

Hank Cotton was principal of Cherry Creek High School in the 1970s and 1980s. The school was a large, public, secondary school located in an affluent Denver suburb. The students came from well-educated and advantaged backgrounds and were generally high-achievers; over 80 percent went on to college.

Cotton made extensive use of ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and symbols to reinforce some new priorities when he became principal. One was the behavior at graduation. At Cotton's first graduation at Cherry Creek, students threw cans, tossed paper airplanes, and were generally inattentive. Cotton told the seniors the next year that the graduation ceremony was a problem and that it needed to be revamped. He involved them in reshaping graduation to elevate its importance. Students and staff met extensively to redesign the graduation ceremony to make it meaningful and serious. Students started wearing caps and gowns in a more formal atmosphere. The ceremony became a valued occasion for students and parents.

Cotton gradually increased the number of ceremonies that celebrated academic and extracurricular success. These ceremonies were made more formal and structured and were carefully orchestrated to denote the importance of the event. Although he routinely dressed in a coat and tie, Cotton deliberately changed his "uniform" for these ceremonies. He brought a dark suit to school to change into for honors assemblies or evening award ceremonies.

As the school achieved new successes, Cotton related each to the belief in Cherry Creek's "tradition of excellence." Bumper stickers were printed stating simply, "Let the tradition continue!" and

"The Legend Lives On!" He referred to success as part of a "tradition," stating, "We traditionally send many seniors East" or "Our football team is traditionally one of the best in the state." Speaking of routine behavior as "traditional" signaled to others that these were part of a valued pattern—desirable and even inevitable.

The principal used overt school symbols with commitment and pride. An avid jogger, he would not run without the school's "bruin" on his exercise shoes. He had a set of lapel pins depicting the bruin logo of the school and wore one regularly on his sport coat. In the school, the Cherry Creek bruin is still displayed all around the buildings, on the athletic fields, and in administrative offices. Bumper stickers "advertising" the school or individual activities (the state championship tennis team, for example) are on cars throughout the district.

When the district developed a poster, "Onward to Excellence," Cotton made a mock poster for the school that read, "Beyond Excellence to Greatness," which he displayed in his office. The prevalence of these symbols and the pride with which they are worn cement the bonds among school members and communicate school spirit.

### Case 2: Integrated, Yearlong Traditions

Bob Herring is principal of the Nativity School in Cincinnati, Ohio. The school is urban and serves a diverse clientele from kindergarten through eighth grade. The principal, along with his staff and the community, keep the seventy-five-year history alive and well by filling the year with ritual and tradition. The beginning and the end of the year have significant, linked ceremonies filled with history and meaning. Interspersed throughout the year, the school connects through smaller, focused traditions.

The beginning of this religiously based school starts before the first day of school. Herring gathers the new eighth graders before school to plan the opening ceremony—one that is deeply tied to the mission of the school. A procession with banners heralding the values of the school starts it. Students deliver readings and reflections

on the coming year. All new staff are introduced, from administrators through custodians; they are given a bouquet of flowers and introduced to the community. A band made up of students, alumni, and friends of the school plays music and provides background to the festivities. All new students are asked to come forward—from thirty-five-inch kindergartners to upper-level students—to receive from one of the eighth graders a ceremonial carnation and school button recognizing their membership in the school. The principal recounts some of the school's seventy-five-year history, tells about leaders and graduates who have been exemplars, and invites everyone present to become partners with the school in its quest for learning and the right life. The ceremony ends with an environmentally safe balloon launch representing, as the principal says, "We're here, we're open, and we're ready to go!"

The school ends the year with a matching, reinforcing ceremony. Again, the band of students, alumni, and friends plays for the assembled standing-room-only group. Tall, colorful, festive banners signal the core purpose and values of the school. Staff who are leaving are called forward individually for flowers, thanks, and applause. Their contributions are noted and cheered. Prayers of thanks are given to all those who have touched the lives of the students. Staff and parents are thanked for their support and love. The principal and staff look back on the year, recounting stories of caring, of challenges overcome, and of accomplishments achieved. A gospel story is read, reminding students not to hide their talents under a bushel basket. Graduates then talk of what it means to them and how they will use their talents for good and let their light shine in the world. A call to the new eighth graders is given; they are to be leaders and keep the values alive. A procession outside takes participants to a final balloon launch—a symbolic freeing of the hopes, possibilities, and spirit of the new graduates.

Throughout the year rituals and traditions fortify the core values of the school. On Founders' Day the histories of the early principals and teachers are retold in stories and song. Alumni return to

narrate their own memories of Nativity. The school song, written in the 1930s by a student, is sung and pondered. Every monthly faculty meeting is ended by a "Good News Report"—a ritual sharing of positive accomplishments. School assemblies become times for fun and consideration of what everyone is doing to serve each other and the values they uphold. The final faculty meeting is filled with awards for staff: for perseverance through difficult times, for implementing a new tradition, for serving an especially needy student. Each staff member has a story told of his or her contributions that year. These events throughout the year are concluded by a major ceremony in the spring.

The Nativity School leaders make rituals and traditions an important feature of their community. They build commitment and reinforce core values throughout the year while buttressing the culture by powerful ceremonies at the beginning and end of the school term.

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Rituals, traditions, and ceremonies make the routines of schools symbolize what is important, valued, and significant. They provide everyone a chance to reflect on what is important, to connect as a community. These are renewing and enriching parts of a school's life. But key cultural values are also reinforced and extended by the school's history and stories, which we will turn to in the next chapter.

## Appendix B

“Graduation: Motifs and Meanings” by Walter Ackerman reprinted from *Shofar: Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, volume 10, number 1 (Fall 1991) by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. ” 1991.

# GRADUATION: MOTIFS AND MEANINGS<sup>1</sup>

Walter Ackerman

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## I.

The Jewish school, like other client-serving institutions, must create occasions which permit it to proclaim purpose, exhibit achievements, and validate commitments. These occasions, no matter their specific context, provide opportunities to project idealized versions of what the school represents and does. They frame the ground for future activity and are moments of affirmation and definition for all who participate in the enterprise.

Graduations are such an occasion. They are a time when a school presents itself to the community it serves and tells its “story.” Among the ceremonies which punctuate life in school, graduation exercises are perhaps that rite which best tells what a school thinks about itself and how it would like to be perceived by those whose loyalties it seeks. In what follows here I have attempted to compare and analyze graduation exercises at four American Jewish high schools. My purpose is to try to understand and interpret the image projected by each school and to note the differences between them. Looking at schools in this way can, I believe, contribute to our understanding of Jewish education in the United States.

## II.

A graduation is a public event whose immediate purpose is to provide a setting for presenting evidence of achievement—a diploma or certificate—to

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<sup>1</sup>My thanks to all those who helped.

students who have successfully completed a course of study. The origins of the ceremony date back to the universities of medieval Europe; the first academic degree of record was conferred by the University of Bologna in the middle of the twelfth century. From there the practice spread to other institutions of higher learning in Europe, and, over the years, formal patterns of protocol and practice for the occasion were developed. The first college graduation in the United States took place at Harvard in 1642, six years after the admission of the first class. With the passage of time, the idea of a specific exercise to mark the culmination of a stage of study was adopted by high schools and even elementary schools.

The Jewish religious tradition knows two practices which bear a certain resemblance to a graduation. One is the ceremony of ordination (*Semikkah*) which was the occasion of “appointment and solemn public dedication to the office of judge and teacher of the Law.” Originating in the “laying on of hands” which symbolized the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua (Number 27: 22–23), ordination was institutionalized during the period of the Second Temple and became the procedure by which members of the Sanhedrin were dedicated to office. Strictly speaking that ceremony was perhaps more like a rite of initiation. It did, however, testify to the achievement of a certain level of learning. The tradition of rabbinical ordination, particularly in later times, may be considered the equivalent of conferring a degree.

The other ceremony, one perhaps more close related to modern graduation exercises, takes place when an individual or group completes the study of a particular tractate or of the entire Talmud (*Siyyum Ha'Shas: Siyyum Mesikkah*). The occasion, generally celebrated in the synagogue, is marked by a number of fixed elements: a homily which by drawing on both the text just completed and the one to be studied next calls attention to the never-ending cycle of learning; the recitation of a formulary prayer (*Hadran*), “We shall return to this tractate and it shall return to us; we will direct our minds to this tractate and it will remain mindful of us; we shall not forget this tractate and it will not forget us, neither in this world nor in the world to come”; and a festive meal (*Seudat Mitzvah*) which finds its sanction in the Midrash: “. . . ‘wisdom and knowledge are granted to thee’ . . . Straightway he (Solomon) came to Jerusalem and stood before the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord and offered up burnt offerings and offered peace offerings and made a feast for all his servants.’ Said Rabbi Eleazar: ‘From this we learn that a feast is made

to celebrate the conclusion of the reading of the Torah” (*Shir Hashirim Rab-bah* 1:9).<sup>2</sup>

The headings of the printed programs of three of the four graduations I observed<sup>3</sup> used *Siyyum* (either in Hebrew or in English) as a term of signifi-cation; in one case an explanation of the traditional practice was provided. The juxtaposition of *Siyyum* and *Graduation*—as if one were an exact transla-tion of the other—is an interesting example of the fusion of two distinct realms of meaning and experience, the secular academic and the religious. This practice is illustrative of the process whereby modern schools and other Jewish institutions attempt to adapt and fit elements of the tradition to the custom and usage of the majority culture which surrounds them. I do not know whether the rite of the tradition served as a model for the planners of the exercises or as a frame of reference for the participants. Both the *Siyyum* and a graduation are rituals.

A ritual “. . . is an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion.”<sup>4</sup> Rituals are an important part of social life. Commonly as-sociated with religious practice, they may also frame, in form and content, secular events. Both religious and secular rituals may be understood as “. . . an attempt to bring some particular aspect of life firmly and definitely into orderly control.”<sup>5</sup> A ritual, moreover, not only gives expression to certain ideas, but also shapes the way people think about those ideas. Schools, like most other social organizations, abound in rituals.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one might argue that rituals, both those which are repeated at periodic intervals as well as one-time events which celebrate some singular occasion, are essential to the cre-

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<sup>2</sup>Judah D. Eissenstein, *Otzar Dinim U'Minhagim* (New York, 1922), pp. 288–289. An additional source is found in a comment by Abbayi: “May I be rewarded for that when I saw that a disciple had completed his tractate I made a festive day for the scholars” (*Shabbat*, 18b).

<sup>3</sup>Because I was a member of a large audience, the methodological problems as-sociated with the role of “participant observer” are of no significance here. For ex-amples of ethnographic studies of schools see: Sarah Lightfoot, *The Good High School* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Samuel Heilman, *Inside the Jewish School* (New York, American Jewish Committee, 1983); David Schoen, “Inside the Classroom: Reflections of a Troubled People,” *Jewish Education* 48:1 (Spring 1980), pp. 35–41.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara G. Myerhoff, “We Don’t Wrap Herring in a Printed Page: Fusion, Fiction and Continuity in Secular Ritual,” in Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Assen/Amsterdam, 1977), p. 199.

<sup>5</sup>Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Peter McLaren, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (London, 1986).

ation and maintenance of that sense of collectivity without which group association cannot long sustain itself.

High school graduations, like the university model on which they are based, are quintessentially ritualistic. The immediate purpose of the ceremony, as noted above, is to create a public setting which celebrates scholastic achievement. That rather simple function, however, has over the years become embedded in a pattern of formal properties which relate the event to a broader social purpose. An analysis of the ceremony discloses that (a) it is repetitive—it comes at a specified time and is repeated annually, (b) it is not a spontaneous activity but a planned event which calls upon participants to act out predetermined and specified roles, (c) it is replete with symbols—either of a kind whose use is reserved for the occasion or others of a more mundane sort which are assigned new meaning in the particular context or a combination of both, and (d) the “staging” of the event and its public, collective character are intended to evoke certain beliefs, ideas, and values which have social meaning; i.e., the future of the collective, the importance of learning, the discipline required to complete a task once undertaken, the supportive role of the family, individual achievement, and the dedication of teachers and their vital role in shaping the young.

The component parts of a standard graduation are a combination of fixed forms and circumstantial content. The former—processional, opening remarks or invocation, valedictory address, prize awards, musical interlude or some equivalent, distribution of diplomas, charge to the graduates, closing hymn or anthem, recessional—are highly predictable, generally unchanging, and the elements in the ritual which evoke a sense of tradition. The contents of several of the fixed forms, however, may and usually do vary from school to school. Speakers and speeches, recitations and even the music permit particularization and a choice of themes which emphasize those characteristics of the institution which give it unique and individual identity.

### III.

As indicated earlier the analysis which follows here is based on observation of graduation exercises at four different American Jewish high schools: a Hebraically oriented non-religious Community School which is considered by many to be the most intensive and demanding of the supplementary Jewish secondary schools in this particular metropolitan area; an Orthodox Day School which is the oldest and most prestigious of its kind in the region; a Conservative School which draws its pupils from five neighboring congregations; and a Reform Congregational School located in an area which has only recently become a place of Jewish settlement. The structure and spon-

sorship of these schools reflect the unique patterns of secondary Jewish schooling in the United States today.

The four schools differ from one another in such important matters as curriculum, language of instruction, weekly days and hours of attendance, and the number of years of study required for graduation. The latter two are an index of seriousness and determine the level of achievement, factors which are critical to investing a graduation with the importance and authenticity without which secular ritual can have no meaning. Moreover these aspects of Jewish schooling condition social relationships and play an important role in fixing the space a school occupies in the life of a youngster and his/her family. Whatever the reason for the choice of any particular school, the more intensive the school experience the greater the likelihood of friendship and social contacts outside the school among both pupils and their families.

Some of this was clearly evident in the ambience of each of the four graduations. The time and venue of the ceremony varied, corresponding in part to certain characteristics of each school. In the case of the Community School and the Orthodox Day School, each with its own building, the exercises took place in the school auditorium on a Sunday afternoon. The Reform Congregational School ceremony was incorporated into a late Friday evening service in the temple sanctuary. The Conservative Regional School, without a permanent home of its own, celebrated the occasion on a mid-week evening in the sanctuary of one of its sponsoring synagogues—a different synagogue acts as host each year.

Whoever arrived at each location before the beginning of the formal program could not but note the way in which parents, students, and teachers interacted with one another. At the Community, Reform Congregation, and Orthodox Day School exercises all greeted one another enthusiastically and engaged in animated conversation, this in a manner which suggested that the graduation was but one more event—more important than others perhaps but nonetheless part of a series—which brought them together. The easy familiarity with which they greeted one another seemed to imply that the experience of schooling had created a community of sorts, a group of people who over time had commonly shared certain things and were identified with one another around the idea of learning.

The Conservative Regional high school, by contrast, seemed more like a nonce event—an occasion on which strangers who have little or no shared experience gather together on an *ad hoc* basis for the nonce.<sup>7</sup> On entering the sanctuary, parents and their guests went straight to their seats without stopping to greet one another. This may have been due, in part, to the sanctuary itself—a cavernous auditorium in a forbidding modern style whose ca-

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<sup>7</sup>Barbara G. Myerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

capacity far exceeded that needed for the graduation audience. It is also possible that in the course of a youngster's attendance at the school there were few opportunities created for the kind of coming together which transforms schooling from an isolated activity for young people into a conjoint experience shared by students and families alike. The graduation seemed like a meeting of strangers.

The place in which the exercises took place evoked other associations as well. A graduation conducted in a synagogue is invested with the resonance of a *religious* ritual; the event becomes a symbol of transcendence and may be thought of as an act in "the drama of the divine." Totally secular rituals must invent equivalent symbols of their own if they are to generate a similar aura of legitimacy and authenticity. The effect of the location was clearly evident in the audience's perception of the "real" beginning of the ceremony.

The march of the Regional Conservative School graduates down the center aisle and to their seats on the *Bimah*, accompanied by a cantor chanting a familiar liturgical hymn in a stepped-up beat, evoked only a slight turning of heads in the audience. Once the procession ended and the graduates were seated, the principal of the school spoke some brief words of welcome. These remarks were followed by a regular *Ma'ariv* service—albeit at a pace that only seasoned "*daveners*" could match.

At the Reform Congregational School the beginning of the exercise was signalled when the graduates and their rabbi sat at a table and were served wine and challah by members of next year's graduating class—a variation of customary practice on Friday evenings when the rabbi and congregants sit at an extended table before the start of the service. This "prelude" was conducted with the utmost seriousness to the accompaniment of softly hummed Sabbath songs. The setting and "staging" of this "opening scene" anchored the specific event in the context of the larger tradition.

The auditorium of both the Orthodox Day School and the Community School is nondescript space—large, unadorned halls bereft of distinguishing characteristics in which folding chairs are arranged, rearranged, or removed altogether as occasion requires. Neither the flowers at the front of the hall nor the carefully arranged half circle of chairs arching around the lectern on the podium diminish the ordinariness of the place. The atmosphere of easy familiarity which marked coming into the auditorium and finding a place to sit carried over into the procession of the graduates which signalled the beginning of the proceedings. The nonchalant sway of youngsters in ragged double file was greeted by happy cries of recognition, hand waving, reaching out and other movements which confounded all sense of order and joined the graduates with their guests. At the Orthodox Day School the palpable easiness of spirit made the accouterments of solemnity—students garbed in blue caps and gowns and the recording of *Pomp and Circumstance* which trum-

peted their entrance from the back of the auditorium—seem contrived and almost out of place. The rustle and bustle stopped only as the audience was invited to rise for the singing of the National Anthem and Hatikvah—evocative symbols of the two cultures served by the school. The ceremony, it seems, achieved authority only as it joined itself to emblems whose very nature commands respect. At the Community School the scratchy recording of a medley of popular Israeli songs<sup>8</sup> which greeted the audience as it entered the building and casually moved to its seats was replaced by the strains of organ music which did not quite sharpen the sauntering column of students which made its way from the rear of the hall to seats in the front rows. A buzz of animated murmuring continued even as the chairman of the school board delivered his opening remarks; this ceased entirely only as he gave the signal to stand for an invocatory prayer, delivered by the father of one of the graduates. The exercises *really* began only at that moment; all that preceded the appeal to the divine was apparently insufficient to the investment of the occasion with the sanction of seriousness.

At the Reform Congregation School the simplicity of the service framed the graduation and shaped its form. This is the occasion on which each of the graduates delivers a short talk based on a paper prepared during the year under the guidance of the rabbi of the congregation who teaches the class. The ceremonies of the other schools were fairly similar to one another in structure. The various elements, differently placed but all leading to and following the distribution of diplomas and the awarding of prizes—the main features, after all, of a graduation—were opportunities for the different parties involved in the school enterprise—school officials, representatives of support groups such as parents and the school board and the students themselves—to address the audience. The flow of the proceedings with its alternating foci—the person speaking at the moment is the immediate center of attention—points to the fact that the conduct of a school is a complicated business whose success depends on a variety of people and organizations. This sharing of the spotlight, as it were, also suggests something of the various interests—not always in harmony with one another—which contribute to the shaping of the character of a school. The graduation creates an opportunity for each of the speakers to present a particular perception of the school and its purpose.

Of all the speakers the principal, of course, is the one who knows the graduates best and is more intimately acquainted with the work of the school.

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<sup>8</sup>The choice of music is, I believe, not altogether accidental. At the Day School, *Pomp and Circumstance* is intended to signify that no matter its Jewishness, the institution identifies itself with American academic traditions. Israeli songs at the Community School denote its national-Hebraic commitment.

His/her remarks are *the* voice of the school and are obviously intended to present the institution—if not him/herself—in the best possible light. Two themes were dominant in all the speeches made by the principals: the high standards of the school and the hard work required to successfully complete the course of study and gain the “coveted” diploma and the difficulty of separating from the graduates. The first creates an image of the school which justifies the importance attached to graduation. The second topic, the sadness of separation, is, of course, a set piece of all graduation exercises. The universality of that theme, however, did not obscure the fact that the principals knew their students well and that the net of relationships woven during the years of schooling was based on interest and concern, qualities often absent in large public high schools.

Attention to the style and content of each of the addresses by the principals discloses important differences between them. The remarks of the principal of the Conservative Regional School were without reference to Jewish sources and, with the exception of thanks proffered to the rabbis of the several congregations involved in the school, might have applied to any school anywhere. The speech by the principal of the Community School was interlaced with Hebrew words—a way of emphasizing the Hebraic orientation of the school. His counterpart at the Orthodox Day School based his remarks on a familiar Midrash and elaborated on that text by allusion and reference to a variety of rabbinic sources. Intentionally or not, each principal provided an example of Jewish learning and offered the audience a glimpse of the universe of ideas from which he/she draws his/her understanding of Judaism and conception of Jewish schooling.

At least one other adult spoke at each graduation—variously the chair of the school board, the president of the congregation, the chair of the PTA, or the mother of one of the graduates. Whatever the position or office which granted entitlement to participation, all shared membership in an older generation. Their remarks come not only to inform the audience that the existence of the school depends upon the effort and involvement of diverse groups, but also to symbolize a continuity of commitment over time. In addition these speeches represent the experience of life lived outside the schools’ narrow confines and their remarks are intended to introduce the graduates to the new reality which awaits them.

As with the principals, the contents of these addresses are easily categorized: congratulations, the importance of the event, and prescriptions for the future. The congratulatory remarks were all similar and emphasized the “long, hard road” traversed to reach graduation; not one speaker even suggested that learning might have been exciting, rewarding for its own sake, or personally enriching. The occasion was moved in each case beyond the bounds of individual achievement and placed with a wider communal con-

text—"the whole community is proud of you"; "this is an important day for the Jewish community"; and "our school is an exciting, established factor in the community." The repeated reference by each speaker to "the community"—a vague and abstract notion at best—flies in the face of their sure knowledge that the particular event which engages them attracts but scant attention outside the limited circle of the school's clientele and supporters. The overstatement serves several purposes, each of them related to one of the groups participating in the ceremonies. For the speakers themselves and their contemporaries in the audience, the claim of "communal interest" is both a means of self-approbation and an attempt to enlarge the importance they themselves ascribe to their involvement in the school. For the parents of graduates, particularly those who have chosen a more intensive form of Jewish education for their children, the "interest of the community" is a way of saying that attendance at a Jewish school is a matter of public consequence. The claim to "community interest" is addressed to the graduates as well. It comes to tell them that they are part of a collective and that individual effort is most meaningful when located in a communal context.

The idea of community was expressed much more explicitly in that part of the addresses which pointed to the future. The graduates were enjoined, in almost formulaic fashion, to believe that they could meet and best the challenge of an uncertain future if only they would continue to work hard, guard their individuality, remain true to themselves and live their lives in keeping with the values taught by the school. The latter point, stressed in every instance, generally meant the acceptance and meeting of obligation to "our people." This mix of American ethic and Jewish responsibility was couched in metaphors and images drawn from the ethos of each school. The speaker at the Orthodox Day School exercise, for instance, used a verse in the *Sidrah* of that week to define his notion of individuality and bounded the freedom implicit in that idea by repeated reference to the demands of *Halacha* and the duties incumbent on loyal members of the Jewish people. His counterpart at the Community School, herself a graduate of that institution, based her remarks on a biblical verse which permitted a nationalistic interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the group.

The teachings of the school and the picture of the world it paints for its students are probably most clearly revealed in the address of those graduates chosen to speak for their classmates. This, of course, comes as no surprise. Without knowing exactly how the student speaker was chosen—except for those who earned their place on the program because of scholastic achievement—or how free they were of "supervision" in preparing their remarks, it is safe to assume that like most schools the institutions we are examining here chose those youngsters who most closely conformed to their ideals. There is good reason to believe that even if the choice of class representative

had been left entirely to the graduates themselves, as is the case in some schools, they would have chosen that sort of youngster to speak for them.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not the student speakers really believed everything they said is almost beside the point. If we are correct about the kind of youngster chosen for the task, he/she can be counted upon to say the “right” things.

Like the adults who came before and after them in the program, the Orthodox Day School student speakers—a boy and a girl, one speaking in Hebrew and the other in English—based their remarks on a rabbinic dictum. Despite differences in the line of argument, the lessons derived from the “proof-text” were the same in each case. Both speakers were grateful to the school because it had taught them of the need to set limits—“It’s dangerous and destructive to let a child think he can do anything he wants”—and had prepared them to live in two worlds—the future as defined by the school and understood by the speakers, required a discipline powerful enough to withstand the blandishments of personal desire and the attractive press of the demands of a society governed by values different from those represented by the school. The world outside of school is both inviting and threatening.

The challenge of the future was somewhat differently conceived by the Community School student speakers—also a boy and a girl, both of whom, as explained by the principal who introduced them, had insisted on speaking in Hebrew despite a long-standing tradition of one speech in English.<sup>10</sup> The theme of the girl’s address emphasized the importance of Israel to Jewish life and the need to strengthen the ties between American Jewry and the Jewish state “. . . so that we can be friends and help one another. . . .” The second address emphasized the importance of individual initiative and social responsibility—“Do not waste what you have learned here . . . know always that you know enough to speak out against injustice and for justice.” Implicit in both speeches was the idea that personal fulfillment was possibly only as the individual was identified with the collective—the Jewish people—and assumed some responsibility for its welfare. This is exactly what the school believes and teaches.

The pattern of individual speeches by graduates was replaced at the Conservative Regional high school by a class presentation devoted to human rights—a call to join in the fight against poverty, to enlist in the struggle against political oppression and a plea for concern for the plight of the elderly. Any or all of several reasons may explain the choice of format: to provide a group experience as the last formal act of the class, to avoid the sometimes messy problem of choosing a representative, or because the hours of

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<sup>9</sup>Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Coming of Age in America* (New York, 1965), pp. 53–73.

<sup>10</sup>English translations of the two speeches had been distributed before the beginning of the exercises.

preparation created an opportunity for a particular kind of learning. The mixture of song, narrative, and prayer (the audience participated in the latter)—which drew from various sources: biblical verses taken mainly from the Prophets, sayings of Martin Luther King, Midrash, writings of John Locke, reports of meetings and contacts with Jews in Russia—stressed social responsibility and activism. The choice of the theme would suggest that as far as this school was concerned, Judaism meant concern for others—Jews and non-Jews alike. Indeed the principal of the school, in congratulating the class upon the completion of the performance, said exactly that. Torah, used synonymously with Judaism, was presented not as a regimen of *Mitzvot* (as so emphatically stated at the Day School) but rather as a form of generalized behavior which, among other things, conformed to the dictates of the liberal American conscience.

At the Reform Congregational School ceremony the graduates presented excerpts from papers they had prepared as part of the requirements for graduation. An attractive booklet, with an eye-catching cover design, containing the papers in full length, was distributed to the entire congregation. Despite differences in title and content (i.e., *Belief and Behavior, Is This the Faith I Have Chosen?, The Components of My Jewish Identity*) all the papers dealt with one theme: the need for each individual to define his/her Jewishness in a manner most meaningful to him/her. The youngsters spoke of God, prayer, the synagogue, *Mitzvot*, and the community—by and large without reference to traditional sources—in a highly personal fashion and as constructs whose valence in their lives was a function of subjective experience. The parameters of their Jewishness, they were saying, had been set not only by what they had learned in school but also—and perhaps even more so—by what they had been taught by their parents and had observed in the community. Within that broad and, for them, very flexible framework they felt free to follow their own inclinations. While much of what they had to say was adolescent to the core, the papers as a whole reflected a serious effort to deal with important questions. The student presentations here offered the audience more than just a hint of the sort of things that engaged them at school. It would be wrong, of course, to assume that students at the other schools were incapable of producing similar material. Given the opportunity they would certainly not suffer by comparison. The difference lies not in the ability of the students but in the format chosen by the school to display its efforts. The papers delivered at the graduation ceremony reflect the willingness of the school to open itself to its public and perhaps even risk criticism. At the same time, the highly personal tone of the papers tells the audience that in this congregation there is room for many different approaches to Judaism and that each person is free to define his/her ideas of Jewishness.

What we have described thus far is, in a sense, peripheral to the distribution of diplomas and the prize awards, the central feature and main function of any graduation. This part of the proceedings, especially at the Orthodox Day and Community Schools, provides yet another entry into the mind of the school. Whatever formality had been achieved by the opening prayer and the various addresses which followed relaxed perceptibly as the graduates were called to receive their diplomas. Exhortations to refrain from applause until the entire class had come forward had little effect and fell short of quelling the enthusiasm of personal clagues. At the Community School, the principal sketched a vignette of each graduate as he/she was called to the podium; prize winners at the Orthodox Day School were presented in similar fashion. The warmth of manner and detail of description reflected a personal knowledge of each graduate. This is a way of telling the audience that the school cares about its pupils and makes an effort to get to know them as something more than objects of instruction. This picture of the school highlights a quality often absent in large public institutions where huge enrollments and bureaucratic procedures often contribute to a feeling of alienation.

What the principal chose to tell about each graduate was no less instructive. Two items were emphasized more than any others—the students' involvement in extra-curricular activities and the university to which he/she had been admitted. Critics of day schools often argue that attendance at such a school removes a youngster from the mainstream of American life and that the heavy program prevents participation in activities which are important to adolescent growth and development; enrollment in an afternoon school, particularly of the kind which requires as much time as the Community School, is often abjured for fear that it will adversely affect a youngster's chances of being accepted to a prestigious university. To point out that the graduates have participated in sports, drama groups, social service programs, and other extra-curricular activities and to note acceptance by Ivy League colleges is to stress that they are "good American kids" who have not suffered any loss of opportunity because of their commitment to intensive Jewish education.

#### IV.

I have here described and attempted to analyze graduation exercises at four American Jewish high schools, different from one another both in structure and ideology. My assumption was that graduation is a ritual and that even though it is but one of the many rituals which characterize life in school, it was deserving of attention because it is the occasion on which schools publicly celebrate their achievements. Graduation is a story schools

tell about themselves.<sup>11</sup> “Reading” that story can enrich our understanding of Jewish education in our time.

The graduation exercises described here reflect the pluralistic nature of American Jewry. Each of the schools projected a different conception of Judaism. Even though each related itself to “the tradition of our people”—both as a symbol of legitimization and as a source of authority—each differed from the other in the interpretation of that usage and its implications. The world outside of school, that which awaits the graduates, is differentially understood, both by the youngsters themselves and the adult participants in the exercises. The ideas of private obligation and public responsibility mean quite different things in each school.

If the graduation emphasizes the differences between schools and permits each of them to accent its uniqueness, it also demonstrates what they share in common. More perhaps than in any other sense, all the schools are alike in their socializing function. The graduation is important for adults no less than for pupils. The ambience of the event is *haymish*; the participants are part of a community. Sending a child to a Jewish school is an act of identification; for many families involvement in the activities of the school is the only active expression of their Jewishness.

For most of the youngsters the graduation is their last experience of contact with Jewish learning. Those who attended the less intensive schools can hardly be considered learned; formal instruction has not provided them with a mature understanding of Judaism. In light of this fact, the public nature of the ceremony is less a testament to learning than a link of identification and a last attempt on the part of the school to enlist the loyalties of the young. The adult participants provide an example of proper responsibility and illustrate the meaning of continuity of concern. Their remarks emphasize belonging far more than learning.

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<sup>11</sup>For an elaboration of this point see Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 101 (1972), pp. 1–37.

Appendix C  
**Graduation Planning Calendar** from Milken Community High School,  
 Los Angeles, CA



<p><b><u>GRADUATION AND SENIOR EVENTS</u></b></p> <p><b><u>CHECK LIST</u></b></p> <p>AND IMPORTANT DATES</p> <p>2002-2003</p>
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OCTOBER

- \_\_\_\_\_ Meet with Herff-Jones representative
- \_\_\_\_\_ Order diploma covers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Order diplomas
- \_\_\_\_\_ Requisition rooms for rehearsals and graduation

NOVEMBER

- \_\_\_\_\_ Measure seniors for caps and gowns
- \_\_\_\_\_ New teachers fill out cap and gown forms
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seniors fill out forms indicating how their name should appear on invitation and diploma
- \_\_\_\_\_ Meet with class officers and select quote for invitation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Order graduation invitations

DECEMBER

- \_\_\_\_\_ Order caps and gowns
- \_\_\_\_\_ Check senior transcripts to make sure requirements are met
- \_\_\_\_\_ Students bring in baby and recent photo for slide show
- \_\_\_\_\_ Class officers chose music for slide show

- JANUARY
- \_\_\_\_\_ Follow-up with any students who have not turned in required items
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Proof and send back final invitation
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Follow up with student photos
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Meet with people putting together the slide show
- FEBRUARY
- \_\_\_\_\_ Order gowns for new 2<sup>nd</sup> semester teachers
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Check with Community Service coordinator on senior status
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Ask teachers for information about seniors having any difficulties with classes
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Send letter to parents letting them know about graduation requirements and dates
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Contact 11<sup>th</sup> grade parents in MPA to coordinate Senior Breakfast
- MARCH
- \_\_\_\_\_ Order risers, chairs, and riser coverings
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Confirm with graduation photographer
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Send diplomas to calligrapher
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Make sure Nat'l Honor Society advisor has ordered tassels
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Meet temple calendar coordinator
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Send out ballots for senior
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Meet with Director of student Support Services and Director of Student activities to discuss Senior Retreat
- APRIL
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give English teachers guidelines and deadlines for graduation speeches
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Order flowers
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Start working on program
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Order security
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Order stationery for printing programs
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Send invitations to temple rabbis and Director of Education. Send separate letter to ceremony participants
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Order Grad Night buses
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Touch base with parents organizing Senior Breakfast
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Send out ballots for senior awards
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Order senior awards
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Finalize details of Senior Retreat
- MAY
- \_\_\_\_\_ Confirm all Senior Breakfast plans
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Meet with Office Manager to coordinate final details

\_\_\_\_\_ Touch base with temple schedule coordinator on any last minute changes and arrange parking  
\_\_\_\_\_ Distribute invitations. Send 200 to Head of School's office for VIP list  
\_\_\_\_\_ Order a large kosher cake for graduation  
\_\_\_\_\_ Finish and print programs  
\_\_\_\_\_ Print tickets  
\_\_\_\_\_ Send diplomas to the temple for signatures  
\_\_\_\_\_ Distribute faculty caps and gowns  
\_\_\_\_\_ Letter to parents with graduation reminders and details about Grad Night  
\_\_\_\_\_ Select Valedictorian and Salutarian  
\_\_\_\_\_ Select Hebrew speaker (person with 3<sup>rd</sup> highest GPA)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Sell Grad Night tickets  
\_\_\_\_\_ Send memo to teachers and administration with graduation details

JUNE

\_\_\_\_\_ Distribute caps and gowns at 1<sup>st</sup> rehearsal  
\_\_\_\_\_ Distribute tickets at 2<sup>nd</sup> rehearsal  
\_\_\_\_\_ Number seats day before graduation (ask for volunteers to help)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Reserve seats for guest of Rabbi Zeldin

# Appendix D

## Graduation Budget from Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, Toronto, ONT

based on 240 graduates  
Canadian \$

### CHAT Graduation 2002

<b>Expense</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Hire of Synagogue & hall, incl. cost of reception & security	\$ 5,382.00
Printing invitations (850), reply & info for student insert	\$ 971.75
Printing - programmes	\$ 1,396.44
Printing - programme insert	\$ 161.55
Printing - after grad awards naming recipients	\$ 200.00
Printing - certificates	\$ 960.00
Newspaper ad congratulating graduates	\$ 721.00
Trophies	\$ 300.00
School Pins	\$ 660.00
Photography	\$ 326.00
Approx. total school expense	\$ 11,078.74
Rental gowns (Student expense)	\$ 2,078.51