... I am honored to be with you tonight as you explore the themes of Tradition and Innovation in Judaism. ... You indeed are Keepers of the Flame. The rabbis and cantorial alumni of Abraham Geiger College live each day in their rabbinic callings, living between these seeming polarities of honoring the deepest Jewish traditions while applying them in new situations of our times and imagining these innovations for future generations. After all this is our legacy and history. When the Jewish people, Jewish civilization are knocked down- we rabbis and cantors help it to get back up. Through our holy service we hold not only the memories of people and places of decades and centuries past but we must also hold the dreams of what could be. And then we coach and plead and nudge and prod to make those dreams a reality. Rabbis and Cantors are both Keepers of the Flame and Agents of Change. But we are more than this. We are in the construction industry. Rabbis and cantors are actually builders. Builders of the Jewish now. Builders of the Jewish future. Builders of Jewish civilization. Throughout the long and storied history of the Jewish people-we build again and again and again. Even when we were nearly brought low. Learning from our past while adapting to the future. We must both honor the past—while simultaneously being agents of change. The challenge is not to get mired in the muck of
sameness, and the pull of the past. The challenge we face is to not be afraid to
dare, experiment, sometimes fail, and sometimes succeed.

The Rabbi and Cantor of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century shares much in common with our
holy ancestors and yet the world we live in could not be imagined by those who
wrote down the Talmud. Today we clerics must be armed with the tools of our
trade; the nusach and writings of the Jewish people while being conversant in the
language and tools of our time. We must know Gemarah and Social Media. We
must know Hebrew literature and budgets. We must know liturgy and how to
raise funds. But most importantly we must be willing to dare, to experiment and
innovate. This means we must embody change and be willing to make mistakes.

So tonight I want to explore with you a bit of the rabbinic and cantorial
charge to be both Keepers of the Flame and Agents of Change and the role we
must play to innovate and help our people thrive! And I want to offer you four
ideas that will help ensure success.

First Rabbis and Cantors must see themselves as the rightful inheritors of
the flame of tradition and authenticity. Like our ancestors before us. We must
see ourselves as the rightful heirs of Torah, revelation, prophetic calling, halakhic
innovation. Just look to Pirke Avot: It opens with the most famous of passages
Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a fence for the Torah.

Our rabbinic ancestors saw themselves in a direct line of succession to none other than Moshe himself. They even renamed him” Moshe Rabbenu”, our rabbi, our teacher. As Keepers of the Flame of Judaism. We must see ourselves in this direct line of succession. And we are. We are their rightful heirs. And our ordination, our smicha, our Torah learning as the core of our being attests to this truth.

There will be those who challenge us. Who say you liberal rabbi, you reform cantor, you are not authentic. You are not really a rabbi. They will try to erase you, demean you, manipulate the community against you. But they do this because you are a threat. They know the truth—that you as a Reform Rabbi, a Cantor do what our leaders have done in every age and era and that is innovate and change. We respond to the times and to the varying needs of our people. This is the tension between the past and the present and future. You cannot hold onto the past so tightly that it chokes you. And many do so. Be wary when you
hear “We have always done it this way.” Be suspicious when someone tells the 
rabbi, you can’t do this.” These kinds of holding on will douse the flame end in 
the end.

Where would we be today—if Rabbi Yochanan B. Zakai had not defied the 
leaders of his time? We would be a people who died at the hands of the Roman 
Empire. But he saw literally a way out. You know his story as revealed in the 
Talmud Gittin 56a. By pretending to be dead—he had his students carry him out 
for burial from the besieged Jerusalem in the year 70. He had to fear not just the 
Roman authorities on the outside but Jerusalem was held hostage by the Jewish 
zealots inside as well. It was they the zealots who wanted to pierce him on his 
way to burial to ensure he had died. His own people. Rabbi Yochanan was 
threatened not just from the outside world but from his fellow Jews.¹ But did he 
let that stop him? No. He did not cow tow to those Jews who would foil the 
Jewish future with their narrow thinking of preserving only the past. If he had 
only been a Keeper of the Flame—the Flame of the Temple—he like most of 
Jerusalem would have starved to death.

But Yochanan B. Zakai was also an agent of change. An agent who was 
willing to see the world around him not just fetishize the past. And he had the
chutzpah to confront the Roman General, Vespasian to save a remnant of his students and their families. So that they could figure out together a Jewish future. A future that was different- adapting to Yavne – post Temple. He and his students created together. Was he a keeper of the flame? Was he an agent of change? Did he challenge the powers of his time? The answer to all these questions are yes. Because he challenged conventional wisdom—and he dared to imagine a new kind of life without the ancient temple at our core. He could see clearly what was happening around him even when others could not. And he dared. He had courage to imagine a different future and another chapter. And then he set about creating that renewed Jewish life.

There were Jews who stood in his way—not just the Romans. Jews in Jerusalem that were fighting against the Romans that would have killed him just as much as the Romans would have. And yet he dared to dream, dared to create a future. He saw himself as the inheritor of our tradition and as the innovator. And today we remember him as both.

Like Yochanan B. Zakkai—we rabbis and cantors must have vision to see and to adapt; the vision to dare and always to have chutzpah. We must never look over our shoulder at the so called “Orthodox” who seem to many to be the
authentic Jews. You must see yourself in the line of tradition. And assert your authenticity.

If you only attend to the flame of tradition—you may stay warm but you will never harness the power of the flame.

Second know your community. To succeed between the polarities of tradition on the one hand and innovation on the other—you must know your community. Eat with them, pray with them, become a part of them. See yourself as one of them. Even as you know you will never fully be one of amcha. For you are a rabbi. You are the cantor-called to holy service by God and our people. That too is a balancing act. We must go between heaven and earth. Carrying their prayers with ours to God while listening all the time to the voice of our people. It requires a delicate balance and it can be fraught with dangers on our part. We can get too egotistical. We can get too familiar forgetting our noble and sacred calling. Like the great Chasidic Master Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Peschischa who taught as follows:

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: "For my sake was the world created."

But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes."
That is why we are the ones who must know our selves. We must lead the change while remaining humble as part of the people. This can lead to great difficulties. It can lead to loneliness and isolation. Who can really understand our realities of both keeping tradition and rebuilding Jewish life to confront the realities of our time? This is why you must do what rabbis have always done—gather together. Rabbis must meet and study, learn and share with each other. How fortunate we are to live in an era when technology allows us to meet across the miles and still see and be with each other. Listen to one another. Learn from one another. Don’t be afraid of sharing with one another. Gathering in conference in person to study and learn is ideal. But when that can’t be—use the technology—and Aseh l’cha rav—find yourself a study partner and make time to study. And be open enough to think out loud with each other.

This leads me to my third point; to be both keeper of the flame and an innovator and agent of change you must study. You must be a learner. You must gain new skills, read, think. Our rabbinic and cantorial studies were limited. But to face new realities in whatever way we work—we must continue to be learners. Put yourself in places and in webinars and classes and study sessions that will hone your craft, your skills as well as teach you new ones. Traditional skills, brushing up your Hebrew, studying texts you haven’t before, meditation, as well
as practical skills. If you don’t know anything about money or philanthropy—then take a class. If you don’t know how to use social media, then find someone to show you. Subscribe to newsletters and magazines and READ THEM. And most importantly set aside a regular time to read and reflect. This is part of our work! It shouldn’t be just hit or miss. And the lay people we work with must understand that the cantor and rabbi must have time to engage in their own ongoing soul building. We can’t serve our holy communities if our own wells are dry. We will be better at keeping our tradition alive and innovating with new and creative ideas when we are exposed to best practices, to what others are doing not only in our own field of synagogue and Jewish communal life but what others are doing in business, music, the arts, technology, and education and leadership. We might have specialties. We might be experts in one area or another. But we as innovators and change agents must also have a wide swath of knowledge on which to draw from. To adapt Jewish life for not only this century but anticipating the next we will have to know how the world works.

Today’s liberal rabbi and cantor cannot simply lead services and life cycle ceremonies. It is a small part of our calling. If this is all we do—then we are merely keepers of a flame that will grow cold. We have to reimagine what Jewish life will look like as we head into the 3rd decade of the 21st century! And the 4th,
5th and 6th and 7th decades and beyond to the 22nd Century. Like your North American and Israeli counterparts, we have to create new networks beyond the walls of the synagogue to connect our people to each other. Increasingly in North America—the Jews are not in the pews. They don’t pray. They don’t come to Temple...They don’t belong to the formalized Jewish community. But many are still proud of their heritage and are hungry to connect. It is up to us as rabbinic and cantorial leaders as Jewish educators to go out and meet them where they are. Will you teach Torah in a café’? Will you have Shabbat in a restaurant? Will you partner with Christian clergy to find those who are interfaith families in your neighborhood? These daring ideas can only happen when you get out beyond the walls of your synagogue. It can be daunting to do so. But for success in these days and times, we will have to change the way we have traditionally sat in our rabbinic studies and offices waiting for them to knock on our doors. It isn’t going to happen that way and isn’t any more. We have to be seekers and seek them out. We have to offer in new ways deep wells of Torah beyond the walls of our communal centers.

Which brings me to this fourth area; And that is partnership with our lay leaders. We Jewish professionals—must seek out lay leaders and help them grow and understand these challenges of being both Keeper of the Flame and Change
Agent. We can’t do any of this alone. We need our lay leaders to share in the vision of a vibrant, living and breathing, sustainable Jewish life. They of course want that to happen. But sometimes we have to help our lay leaders understand our challenges. We have to be articulate and to teach them of our sacred responsibilities to both honor tradition and innovate at the same time. Change is hard. It is hard for everyone. But if we don’t adapt, it will stagnate and we will all be left in the dust. We have to be consummate communicators. We cannot assume that they know or understand this dialectic. Our responsibilities as Jewish leaders demand that we share our vision, our responsibility as we understand it and then to do what is often hard for Jewish professionals to do—listen and be willing to make changes based on their input! One of the most important lessons we can learn early on—is that our lay leaders often possess great insight that we may not be able to see. Make sure you find in the community you serve-lay leaders with whom you can partner in this building of our Jewish future. And if there aren’t any—make them. Teach Jewish leadership. Partner with the World Union and other organizations like Shalom Hartman Institute that help lay people learn and grow their leadership skills and deepen their Jewish knowledge. We can’t do our jobs of preserving tradition and creating change without them. But
they need skills as well and we as Jewish professionals have to help them gather those kinds of skills.

There are many more things we could say about the rabbi and cantor in this post-modern, 21st century era. But we can say this. Our way of life is ancient and yet contemporary. Our way of life ennobles the mind and heart and soul. Our Jewish way of life creates better citizens and better more compassionate human beings. And we as Jewish teachers and cantors and rabbis have the greatest honor and sacred calling to help sustain, and grow our covenant with the Eternal.

But it takes devotion—not just traditional devotion as is Avodah—prayer and worship. It takes devotion to the art and skills of our professions and learning new skills. It takes devotion to Am Yisrael. The Jewish People. It takes devotion to Torah. And it takes a devotion experimentation and a willingness to act b’chol levavcha, uv’chol nafshecha u’vchol meodecha to this project of building the Jewish Civilization. May the work of our hands be strengthened by being together. Thank you.
Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai did this. Rabbi Eliezer entered from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other side to take him out. When they arrived at the entrance of the city on the inside, the guards, who were of the faction of the zealots, wanted to pierce him with their swords in order to ascertain that he was actually dead, as was the common practice. Abba Sikkara said to them: The Romans will say that they pierce even their teacher. The guards then wanted at least to push him to see whether he was still alive, in which case he would cry out on account of the pushing. Abba Sikkara said to them: They will say that they push even their teacher. The guards then opened the gate and he was taken out.