Raised in a small Jewish community in Texas, it was not until I started attending NFTY events that I first met a “real live rabbi.” My first opportunities to meaningfully interact with clergy did not occur until a few years after college while working as the Assistant Director of Greene Family Camp and the regional advisor for TOFTY. So when I made the decision to apply to HUC, aside from the ‘glorious’ images painted by camp faculty and regional rabbinic advisors, I honestly had no concept of what a rabbinic career truly entailed. I have admittedly said on more than one occasion over the past few decades that, had I truly known what I was getting myself into… well...

Boker tov, good morning. Assembled on this first day of April - a date the irony of which I am certain is not lost on any of us, with Parashat Tazria thrown in as an added bonus... it is also a significant moment in the life of the Conference made especially weighty by the recognition of Isaac Mayer Wise’s 200th birthday...and the 130th anniversary of the CCAR... and the approaching retirement of our Chief Executive... and the anticipation of the first woman to professionally lead one of our Movement’s legacy institutions... and the recognition of my ‘great fortune’ to succeed David Stern as President... Reflecting upon all of it, I have admittedly said on more than one occasion over the past few years that, had I truly known what I was getting myself into...well....

Allow me to express collective appreciation to our sh’lichei tzibur, Angela Buchdahl and Ken Chasen, for enabling our individual and communal spirits to soar through your prayerful, intentional, and beautiful leadership. Our profound gratitude goes as well to convention chair Rick Kellner and your entire committee for the time and dedication you have invested in the planning of what is going to be exceptional convention. Thank you to colleagues here at Wise Temple, led by newly installed President-Elect Lewis Kamrass, for sharing your bima with our CCAR family this morning, as well as to your congregational leadership for the yeoman’s efforts they clearly dedicated to the refurbishment of Plum Street Temple over the past several months.

To stand before this kehila at such a momentous time in the life of our Conference is undeniably humbling, overwhelming, and more than a bit terrifying. But I am truly honored by the trust of those who asked me to serve as the CCAR’s next president, and I am deeply grateful to all who have shared
your confidence and support. It is a sincere privilege to return to this majestic and historic bima where almost 23 years ago the College’s then Rosh Yeshiva Shelly Zimmerman took my head in his hands and offered words of blessing... of which I have absolutely no recollection. A striking memory from ordination which I do recall, though, were those stirring moments when the rabbinic parents of classmates joined Shelly before the ark to bless their children. Thus, to be able to share even a few moments on this bima with my wife Jill and our sons Adam and Ben fills my heart with more joy than I can convey. I must especially thank Jill for your enduring love and encouragement, especially at the times when I make it particularly difficult to share; I would not be standing here without you. A shout out of appreciation to all my family members, dear friends, and congregants who sacrificed time, expense, and effort to be here and, likely for the first time in their lives, chose seats in the front of the sanctuary. Your presence reminds me yet again how blessed I am to have you in my life. Were it not for the support of my clergy colleagues and Temple Sinai staff family, several of whom also made the trip from Atlanta, I could not have accepted this role. Samantha Trief and Beth Schafer – thank you for honoring me and the CCAR through your participation in this morning’s Torah service. Phil Kranz and Brad Levenberg – my rabbis and beloved friends -- your presence here and in my life is among the greatest blessings imaginable.

Equally meaningful this morning was receiving the yad from David Stern. As president, David has led the CCAR with profound integrity, inspiring dedication, piercing clarity, rabbinic brilliance, occasional snarky humor, and an unparalleled love for the wellbeing of the Conference. A rabbis’ rabbi and indisputably one of g’dolei hador, David has - for almost thirty years – also been a cherished teacher, mentor, and friend, and I am heartened that the benefit of his wisdom and advice will remain close at hand, along with the sage counsel of all our CCAR past-presidents and teachers upon whose shoulders we stand this morning.

The strength and stability of our Conference, however, are undeniably due in large part to the steadfast leadership of our outstanding Chief Executive, Steve Fox. As he has for each CCAR President with whom he has partnered, Steve has already provided invaluable guidance and instruction. And he has simultaneously been working diligently to ensure a smooth and successful transition to Hara Person’s impending leadership as he prepares for retirement. I look forward to joining with all of you this afternoon for a well-deserved celebration in recognition of Steve’s profound contributions over the past thirteen years to the strength and vitality of the CCAR.
The Torah portion for our Ordination Shabbat service was parashat Naso. Our speaker, CCAR Past President Richard Levy, selected as his sermon topic the dreadful ordeal in Numbers concerning the Sotah, a woman who is forced by an accusatory husband to undergo a traumatic and humiliating public ritual in order to test her marital fidelity. In his drash, Rabbi Levy offered explanation for the somewhat alarming textual selection, something to the effect of, ‘As rabbis who choose words of Torah upon which to expound, we might - with good reason - be inclined to skip over irredeemable passages such as this for more palatable content, but don’t,’ he urged. Instead, “Dirshuni – Interpret me!” he challenged us. Confront that which is unpleasant, delve into difficult and problematic narratives. One never knows when a different interpretation or a fresh perspective might yield new truth. (And if we are being honest with ourselves, ultimately when has avoiding challenges ever availed us?)

Although the verses that begin parashat Tazria do not come close in their severity to that of the Sotah, they still raise yet again a painful trope, embedded in far too many biblical narratives, of girls and women as ‘less than.’ “If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ritually unclean for one week,” the parasha begins. “And after the child’s circumcision, her purification shall continue for another 33 days... But if she bears a female child, she shall be unclean for two weeks.... and her purification shall continue for another 66 days” (Lev 12:2-5). Why, we naturally ask, is the time of impurity following the birth of a girl doubled from that following the birth of a boy? Dirshuni. But, after finding no personally satisfying answers in the midrash or the traditional commentaries of our male sages, I reached out to a few of our women colleagues and teachers for their insights. Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, another outstanding CCAR Past President and mentor, noted that Tazria fell during her presidency as well. In her 2011 convention sermon, Ellen wrote: “I have [always] thought of the double period of impurity for a woman who gives birth to a daughter as punishment... But...having birthed a daughter, who has in turn birthed a daughter, I [now] realize its cosmic significance... So my feminist critique... has given way to my female experience, which enables me to find new meaning [in the passage], and restores the text to me so that I no longer have to shudder when reading it.”

So that I no longer have to shudder when reading it - the Torah, the narrative of our people, the source of mitzvot which defines the rhythm of our lives, the words we have the awesome responsibility of imparting to others. “So that I no longer have to shudder when reading it!” Friends, it is these words which should elicit the same response in each of us this morning. Add to all of the problematic passages
in Torah the reports of harassment and aggression that continue to surface throughout our Jewish community, and can we – especially we men – please finally acknowledge that there is far too much within our sacred text, too much throughout our communities, and sadly, too much within our CCAR family that has subjugated, alienated, objectified, and adversely impacted women colleagues – our teachers, our classmates, our friends, our partners – and caused them to have to shudder throughout their lives and rabbinates.

“The arc of the moral universe is long,” Dr. King timelessly proclaimed, “but it bends toward justice.” With an ever-growing understanding of how much justice work there is still for us to do to create safe and sacred communities, may King’s faith catalyze our efforts and strengthen our commitment to reconcile and repair any elements within our heritage or within our rabbinic community in which a person is disadvantaged or ever made to feel ‘less than’ due to gender. Chevre, this long overdue justice is entirely in our mouths and hands to achieve. And the Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate will unquestionably remain a beacon guiding our critical efforts in this work. Led by Ellen along with Amy Schwartzman, Task Force members have assumed the critical responsibility of raising awareness about gender bias and inequity, educating men on how to become effective allies, and establishing guidelines and training to help our institutions, organizations, and congregations also pursue the actions necessary to achieve gender justice. Complementing their efforts has been the important work of those pursuing justice in regard to pay equity for women, colleagues such Marla Feldman and Executive Director of the Women’s Rabbinic Network (and my classmate) Mary Zamore. I reached out to Mary as well for her thoughts concerning parashat Tazria and found her response to be striking: “I don’t think we need to reconcile [the text]. Perhaps the parasha’s best lesson is that we can talk openly and honestly about difficult…matters through a religious lens. The portion… is about disruption…[and ultimately] finding [new] stasis.”

One hundred and thirty years ago, Isaac Mayer Wise overcame the obstacles in his path and charted a course for the future of the Reform rabbinate in America. Today, while we surely celebrate the CCAR’s countless strengths and blessings, we also recognize that there are other obstacles still ahead of us, such as…

- How, for example, we might strengthen the manner in which we as the CCAR collaborate with all of our Movement partners, appreciating that to do so will ultimately be to the benefit of us all?
And the continued consideration of what additional efforts we can take to meaningfully re-engage our colleagues presently disengaged from the work of the Conference – those who feel unheard or unconnected, those who feel underserved or underappreciated, those who are limited by inadequate financial resources or lack of flexibility in their schedules?

And the urgent question of how we will direct needed resources and even greater attention to placement services as well as to relevant programmatic and educational offerings in order to better engage the significant percentage of colleagues whose rabbinates are fulfilled in careers outside of the pulpit.

For many in our Conference, these are the challenges demanding our attention. And, many of the paths necessary to address them could very well require disruption – hard conversations, confrontations, and taking difficult positions likely to result in uneasiness, discomfort, and even trepidation for some of us. But as rabbis, to be “bearers of light and truth,” as Rabbi Wise charged us, when we possess a vision of what is just and understand what is right, then timidity or a fear of upsetting the status quo can never hinder our pursuit of new possibilities, a new stasis.

Fortunately, critical conversations concerning many of these challenges have already been initiated, and I am eager to focus added effort and energy toward them in the years ahead together with an outstanding new board and our professional partners. It will undeniably be a profound and historic privilege for our board to serve in partnership alongside a professional partner extraordinaire, our Chief Executive elect, Hara Person. Supporting her vision for our Conference will assuredly remain atop the list of our most significant priorities, though Hara is equally, if not more, appreciative of these and other issues demanding serious focus and attention. Through both word and action, Hara is already demonstrating the sacred intention, strategic thinking, creative energy, and relational gifts that will enable her to successfully and confidently lead the CCAR through every obstacle to ever new strengths and blessings.

Following the giving of Aseret haDibrot (the Ten Commandments), we read that the quaking mountain, the dark cloud, and the thunderous voice of the Eternal were simply too much for the Israelites to bear, vaya’amod ha’am meirachok - and so they stood back at a distance, overwhelmed and unable to engage further. Moses alone was left to approach the thick cloud where God was (Ex 20:18). Ashreinu! How blessed and fortunate we are that the foundation of strength and stability upon which the CCAR rests
today provides us with the courage and determination necessary to confront even the most seemingly overwhelming and intractable of issues. Calling upon the wisdom and guidance of the generations before us, the vision and experience of those surrounding us, and the faith and spiritual fortitude within us, may we always feel confident of our capacity to navigate the thickest clouds ahead of us. With any and every obstacle calling out “Dirshuni,” may we persist in our efforts to reveal new truths that will ensure a CCAR flourishing with justice, Godliness, and promise. Ken y’hi ratzon.