

Rabbi Claudio Jodorkovsky Installation Sermon

Dear friends:

Thanks so much for being here. I feel much honored for this wonderful celebration and I have so many people that I would like to thank for having prepared this night. I will do it at the end of my words but I want to start saying thanks to Rabbi Steven Wernik, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, for having officially “installed” me as the Rabbi of Agudas Israel.

As you know, I come from far away. I was born in Chile, and then I moved to Argentina to study at the seminar, then 2 years in Israel, then 2 in Medellin in Colombia, and then 7 additional years in Colombia but in Bogota, the capital city.

If you know a little bit about South American culture you will know that there is a huge difference with the North American culture. I know that I can't generalize when talking about culture, but I want to highlight the point that in the South part of the continent we are very, very informal, so synagogues don't use to have installation ceremonies for their rabbis. Of course there are for presidents and ministers, but not for rabbis. The synagogue welcomes the new Rabbi very warmly, maybe with a social activity the first Shabbat he or she arrives, but never with a formal installation ceremony.

So when I was told about an installation ceremony I was very excited. Agudas Israel will be my third congregation as a Rabbi but I will be officially installed for the first time!

But some days ago, after Rosh Hashana, our New Year celebration, I was wondering: Why, after all, is it necessary to have an installation ceremony? I have been officially participating in the Synagogue as the Rabbi for almost two months, I was present in the General Meeting, in a board meeting, in the Hebrew School, I have met several families, and also I already officiated the Rosh Hashana services! So, why it is necessary to do an installation when in practice I already have been working as an installed “piece” of this building?

So talking about that with a member of our congregation, he answered me: “It is not for you Rabbi. It is for us. We were working very hard for finding our Rabbi and we found it, so we want to celebrate”.

And when I heard that answer it reminded me what we lived the four days we were here in March for the interview weekend. It was very clear you were working very hard for finding the appropriate rabbi. Nothing was improvised: With whom to meet, when to do it, launch here, supper there. I remember it was absolutely exhausting!

But I also know that in addition to working for choosing the right candidate you also worked very hard to fulfill the goal of having a rabbi, and that's speaks strongly about your commitment for Jewish continuity: Sometimes we tend to stay in our comfort zone, thinking that change is not good or it is dangerous... and you were brave enough to follow your vision of future, to risk for a change and dream about a future with growth and new horizons for the Jewish Community.

I feel honored and privileged for having been selected as the best candidate for Agudas Israel, and I am happy to share the joy of the community. I take this privilege with enormous responsibility in order to fulfill the goals the community proposed for me.

The installation is the ceremony where the congregation celebrates for receiving their new rabbi. And even though that is certainly true, for me as a rabbi and for us as a family is also a time for celebration and being grateful.

Our community search process also implied making important decisions and working very hard, and we are happy for having found which we think is the right community for us. So we have too important reasons for celebrate:

After all the visa process in Colombia we arrived safely to Saskatoon, things are going generally well, we were well received, we are living in a nice place, our belongings arrived in time, Amiel and Yoel are doing good at School, I passed the driving test with a little but not so much suffering (only after 1 failed try, and some of you already know that was traumatizing), and also it seems that another reason for celebration is that we arrived at summer!

I don't know why since our arrival every one says to us: So good you arrived in summer! We have to figure out why they were so happy... but seeing their reaction, I suppose it is a good reason to celebrate.

You know, when a Rabbi decides to leave his congregation and move to another one, people start to ask: Why? What happened? Are you ok? When do you leave?

But in my case it was different. After knowing I was going to Canada, to a city called Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan, their eyes opened immediately:

Where?! How do you pronounce it? "Sask...ka- chun"? It was impossible for them! But why there? It wasn't your only option, so why from all the Jewish communities in the world precisely there?

And then we arrived to Saskatoon and we thought the questions will be different: Maybe about Colombia, violence, insecurity, etc... But not, the question was still the same: Why did you choose to be the rabbi precisely here in Saskatoon?

So what I want to do now, very briefly, is trying to answer that question and to explain why we decided to come here and accepted the proposal of the board of Congregation Agudas Israel.

1) First of all, because Agudas Israel is relatively a small Jewish community and for a rabbi that fact gives him the opportunity of being in close contact with its members.

There are huge synagogues with hundreds of members, in some cases up to 2000 families. And I always ask myself how a rabbi can have success in a so large congregation? How can he teach Torah, being a role model and show them passion for Jewish tradition if he is so far the majority of them.

And also I understand that community is about solidarity (in Hebrew we say Arevut Hadadit, mutual responsibility), and also about intimacy, friendship and a sense of family, and in order to preserve those values we need small numbers.

I know Agudas Israel represents those values. You enter here and feel the warmth of being in family. And for a rabbi that represents a lot of opportunities: Being in close contact with all the members of a congregation gives a rabbi the blessing of making a real difference in their lives.

The weekly section of the Torah that we read today's morning has the perfect example: Moses was going to die and give his last speech to the people: "Vayelech moshe vaidaber et kol hadvarim haele el kol benei Israel" – And Moshe went to speak these words to all the people of Israel".

And our sages asked: Why the Torah says that Moses spoke "to all" the people and not just "the people". Because he went to speak directly to every one of the people of Israel. He didn't spoke from a stage, he wanted to be close to them.

I know that I can sound like contradicting myself because Moses was the rabbi of more than 1.000.000 people. But that was Moses, not a normal rabbi, and that beautiful interpretation belongs to the idyllic world of the Hagada, the fables of our sages, not to the real world...

I think no rabbi would say he can be close to thousands of people in his congregation, and the story wants to highlight the fact that for Moses was very important to know his people and being close to them, and that's why he addresses everyone in his final speech.

But this truth about Agudas Israel is not complete, because in addition to being a relatively small community, there is something amazing about this congregation, and it is than proportionally to its membership it is maybe one of the most active synagogues in the world.

It is absolutely remarkable how many activities this synagogue develops:

- Religious services, Hebrew school, the Schlichim program – a Young couple brought from Israel specially to work with the community -, The Sisterhood, Benei Brith, Hevra Kadisha, Wizo, Israel on Campus, BBYO, a wonderful bulletin, the spectacular website, Launch and Learn, Breakfast club, Silvers Spoon Dinner, Silver Plate Dinner, Cemetery, Holocaust memorial program, the Folk fest, support for different local causes, active participation in national and international organizations... and I am sorry because I am sure I am forgetting several more.

It's really impressive: There is something here that doesn't happen in other Jewish communities, and is a proof that taking about "small" or "large" communities is not a good way of measuring success.

Numbers are very tricky and led us to false conclusions: Rabbi Marshal Mayer, the founder of the South American Rabbinical Seminary of Conservative Judaism and the teacher of my teachers, he used to ask his rabbinical students about their success in the High Holidays services: "In had 500 people in the Synagogue – said one, I had more than 1000 said another one." And Rabbi Mayer used to answer: "I didn't ask how many people attended, I asked about success: Do you think your congregation connected with G-d during services? Do you think they connected with Teshuva- Repentance?"

Numbers don't represent necessarily going in a good direction. But we know that also from our history: We always have been a minority, a very small minority (we are less than 0.2% of world's population) but we are all proud of have given important contributions to the world.

2) And now I want to talk about another truth that attracted me to this place: The understanding of what is a Jew and what is his mission in life:

Rabbi Marshal Mayer also used to say that a Jew must always have the Tanach, the Hebrew bible, in one of his hand, and in the other hand the local newspaper.

And I learn from that teaching two lessons:

The first one is that a Jew must understand the time in which he or she lives. The world is in permanent change: The universe change, our bodies and minds change, ethics change, and so religion As everything in life, if you don't change and adapt, you die.

A Jew should preserve is tradition and live attached to the Bible and Jewish sources for sure, but when changes presents us challenges, we have to use our sources to transform challenges into new understandings of life. That's how Judaism always has been.

Last week we read Parshat Nitzavim – The weekly section called Nitzavim - "to be firmly standing". And today we read Vayelech "To walk". The Torah says to us that is important to stand and to walk.

The challenge of a Jew is to be standing in his tradition but at the same time moving permanently.

It is not an easy challenge, but it's nothing new: It is why we have been successful in surviving and renewing ourselves for 3.500 years.

And the second lesson of having the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other one, is that a Jew should work for enhance the Jewish identity of his family, to support the synagogue and assure continuity, and at the same time (and with the same effort) to work for improve society.

For a Jew, it is not more important coming to the synagogue than fighting for a social cause. Both are equally important. That is the message of the Torah and our prophets.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, teacher at the Jewish Tehological Seminar of the Conservative Movement and one of the most important theologians of the Twentieth Century, walked with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Selma Civil Rights marches in 1965 in the United States. And after some years he was asked about his participation and he answered: "When I marched in Selma my feet were praying".

To pray is not only what we do here in the Synagogue. It has value only if we "use" prayer outside, in the real world.

And that's how I think Agudas Israel understands what is to be a Jewish community: From all the programs where people work here, several of them are intended to improve society, or tikkun olam as we say in Hebrew, repairing or mending the world.

And at the same time it believes in the importance of confronting the challenges our times, being firmly standing on our values and traditions. As our mission statement says: "We are an evolving link in the historical traditions of the Jewish people. We are a progressive, democratic and sensitive congregation responding to the widest spectrum of Jewish thought and practice".

3) And finally (finally only because I don't want to take more of your time) the third reason why I wanted to be the Rabbi of Agudas Israel is because I felt from the beginning a deep sense of goodness and tolerance from its members.

It is true we were here only for four days, but even since before in our Skype meetings, or when we met Heather and her family in Florida, we felt that you have a real understanding of what differences are and how to be flexible and open to changes and discussions.

You know, the rabbinical search process both from the community and also from the rabbi's point of view it is a real schiduch, a dating process.

And exactly because of that every side could tend to idealize the other: Many people want the perfect rabbi (and that means a different perfect rabbi according to each one), and also the rabbi could expect the perfect synagogue. And only experience tells you that there is no such a thing called perfection and a marriage and a good relationship is based on tolerance and willing to grow together, and that implies adapting one to the other.

And as in every marriage there are moments where that tolerance is very easy to achieve and the rabbi and the congregation feel closer each other and there are other moments when it is not so easy and they feel more distanced. That's normal and it has to be that way, because is the only way to build a strong relationship.

But I think from the beginning both the community, represented by the search committee and I understood there are some differences between us but we demonstrated openness to sort them and try to make this relationship work.

I remember when the board was interviewing me at the end of my visit, talking about some of that differences Mrs. June Avivi said "We are a family and as in every family, you need to give up on some things".

Being open to grow, discuss and challenge ourselves with new understandings is the only way of creating a strong relationship and building a family.

And now, taking on account that I was already installed as your rabbi and we have sealed our relationship, we need to start working together for building a stronger Jewish community and dreaming with the most promising future...

I want to thank all Congregation Agudas Israel for having chosen me as your spiritual leader. I assume that with responsibility and commitment to give the best of me in achieving our goals.

I want to thank the board of the congregation. To Mrs. Marsha Scharfstein our president for her permanent support, and to Mrs. Heather Fenyes, past president and head of the rabbinical search committee, for having trusted in me as the best candidate for our community.

I also want to take advantage of this moment to thank to all of you who have helped us from our arrival to the city, taking care of the basic things you need when you arrive to a new place, to every one of you who have invited us and opened the doors of your homes.

I want to thank specially our two honored guests who came to Saskatoon especially for this event:

Rabbi Steven Wernik, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, institution that represent all the Conservative synagogues in North America.

And Mr. Harold Jacobson, member of the board of trustees of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the most important institution where Conservatives Rabbis are prepared and ordained.

Having Mr. Jacobson is especially significant for us: We lived the past 9 years in Colombia and our children were born there.

I was rabbi in Bogota but I was very involved also with the Jewish community in Cali, where he is from.

Thank you very much for coming especially for this night (and I also know your opinion was important for the community's decision about me, so an additional thank you).

I want also thank my family: It is not easy to make a so big change in your life. And being the family of the rabbi it implies some sacrifices. I am very grateful with Rosy my wife for her permanent support and companionship, and with my kids, for the big efforts they are doing accommodating to this new life being so young.

Thanks to all of you who came to celebrate with the community and with me, thank you very much.

And finally I want to thank G-d who sheejevanu keviimanu vehiguianu lazman haze, for having protected us during this process, supported us in our decisions and brought me to this moment and to this beautiful community.

May God bless us, our families and every member of our congregation, with health, joy, sustenance and peace, and may God grant us a year of fulfillment and growth, a good and sweet year.

Shana Tova and Gmar Tatima Tova