

Rabbi Scheinberg's comments at Interfaith Inauguration Service
and at Inauguration Ceremony – July 1, 2009

Dear friends,

I was honored today to speak twice at Hoboken's inauguration festivities.

First, this morning I spoke at the Interfaith Service at Our Lady of Grace Church, in honor of the new mayor and council people. I was asked to share a text from Jewish tradition and to use it as a basis for identifying some of the leadership challenges for the new mayor and council. My remarks are below.

Second, I was honored to deliver the benediction at the conclusion of the inauguration ceremony this afternoon. Those remarks are also below. (You may notice that some of the wording is adapted from the Prayer for Our Country that we recite every Shabbat during our services.)

The day had many highlights for me. The inauguration ceremony featured a masterful speech by Newark's Mayor Cory Booker, along with speeches by Governor Corzine, Senator Lautenberg, and a very gracious acceptance speech by Mayor Cammarano.

I have to share, though, that the emotional highlight for me was when Councilman Ravi Bhalla spoke immediately after being sworn in. You may know that Councilman Bhalla is now the highest ranking Sikh official in the United States government. I was close enough to see that he took the oath of office with his hand on a book of the Sikh scriptures. After being sworn in, he told the story of how his father had arrived to the United States 40 years ago on a science scholarship, knowing no one and with not more than \$50 in his pocket. His father had been animated by the dream that the United States was a place where people were truly free to be different—and now, 40 years later, his son's inauguration as a Councilman was a fulfillment of that American dream. As he spoke, I was thinking about the first generations of Jewish immigrants to the United States, animated by that same dream, and their excitement when Jews were first able to attain elected office despite their minority status.

Later, on Wednesday afternoon, at the City Council meeting that immediately followed the inauguration, USH member Dawn Zimmer was unanimously elected as Council President, and she took her oath of office with her hand on a Chumash (a Jewish edition of the text of the Torah with commentary). Seeing Dawn's Chumash and Ravi Bhalla's book of Sikh scriptures filled me with pride at the way that our country and our city value diversity and welcome the participation of the various stones in our community's mosaic. That image will certainly be on my mind as we approach July 4.

Bivrahah (with blessings),

Rob Scheinberg

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg's remarks, Hoboken inauguration interfaith service, July 1, 2009, Our Lady of Grace Church

On behalf of my community, the United Synagogue of Hoboken, I bring greetings, congratulations, and best wishes to you, Mayor-Elect Cammarano, and to you, council

members-elect Bhalla, Marsh and Mello. We wish you much success in the leadership of our community. Every week during our services, we'll be praying for your success, good health, and wisdom as you address our city's challenges.

I appreciate the invitation from Mayor-Elect Cammarano and from Father Santora to speak personally, to share a text drawn from Jewish tradition that is connected to some of our city's leadership challenges.

The following is a story from the Jerusalem Talmud (Tractate *Yevamot* 13a), a holy Jewish text from more than 1,500 years ago.

The residents of the town of Simonia needed a leader and teacher and judge for their community. They approached Rabbi Judah the Prince, the greatest rabbi of his generation, for his guidance. He sent them a scholar whose name was Levi.

When Levi arrived to Simonia for the first time, the residents had constructed a huge dais for him to sit on, to honor him. They seated him on the dais and they proceeded to ask him a question of religious law.

But Levi was unable to answer.

They asked him a second question, but again he was unable to answer.

The people of Simonia said to themselves, "So perhaps he is not an expert in religious law."

They then asked him a question of Biblical interpretation. But again, now a third time, Levi was unable to answer.

The people of Simonia reported back to Rabbi Judah the prince: "Is this the kind of scholar you sent to us!?"

Rabbi Judah the Prince responded: "I swear to you, I sent you a scholar every bit as good as myself!"

Now Rabbi Judah arranged to meet with Levi and asked him the same questions that Levi had been asked in Simonia. And to each question, Levi gave an excellent answer.

So Rabbi Judah asked Levi: "Why is it that, when they asked you the very same questions in Simonia, you were unable to answer?"

And Levi responded: "When I arrived in Simonia, they constructed a huge dais for me and had me sit on it, and I became so impressed with my own importance that all my wisdom suddenly left me."

Hoboken inaugurates today leaders of tremendous intelligence and wisdom and political skill, and articulateness and passion and zeal to serve. And our leaders will need every ounce of that intelligence and wisdom to address the considerable challenges our city faces: to bring a government back to fiscal responsibility, to plan for a city's future, to care for the needs of its residents, with a special responsibility to those who are most vulnerable. And meanwhile, to address lingering unresolved tensions, decades old, among sub-communities in our city. If there has ever been a Hoboken leadership team that could accomplish all that—this is that team.

But the story of Levi reminds us that even the wisest of us can have our wisdom suddenly leave us when we're sitting on a dais that's too high. In our country, in our state, in our county, and so regrettably, in our dear city—intelligent and promising leaders have sometimes become impressed with their own importance, forgetting their covenant with their constituents and the sacredness of their task.

When we look at the heroes of the Bible, some of the greatest are the reluctant leaders—Moses leads only after his arm has been twisted. Isaiah regards himself as unworthy to lead until God reassures him. Only then does he say, "Here I am—send me." They are willing to serve, but able to balance their confidence with humility. They know that it's not all about them.

And so, my prayer for the mayor-elect and council members-elect, and all Hoboken's elected and appointed leaders: may you learn the lesson of Levi.

May you balance your confidence with humility

may you balance your decisiveness with careful consideration.

may you balance your zeal to speak with a readiness to listen.

may you balance your loyalty with a willingness to forge creative alliances.

May you remember that any dais of any size can have a distorting effect on your wisdom—and it's your wisdom we so desperately need.

And may you work together to lead Hoboken to the bright future we know we can achieve.

**Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, Benediction at Hoboken Mavoral and Council
Inauguration, July 1, 2009, Howe Athletic Center:**

Let us pray for our city and its leaders.

O Source of Life whom we know by so many different names,
We are grateful to live in a country that strives for liberty and justice,
a country where the people has the privilege to choose its leaders,
and to invest them with their authority.

Holy One, we ask You to send your blessings upon all the residents of our city,
people of all ethnicities and religions and careers and incomes and interests and walks of
life,
who make our city a blessedly diverse mosaic.

Together, in true harmony, may we work to safeguard the ideals and free institutions
that are the pride and glory of our country and our city.

And, we pray, send your blessings upon our new Mayor, Peter Cammarano, and our new
Council people Bhalla, Marsh, and Mello,
together with our city's other elected and appointed officials.

Keep them in good health,

And grant them the wisdom to administer all their duties
with fairness and sensitivity.

May they balance confidence with humility,
and decisiveness with careful consideration.

May they go forth in peace to work together
to bring justice, equity, and prosperity to our community.