

The Blessings of Haran: Celebrating 25 Years of Jewish Studies at UVA

Fifty years ago, John Charles Thomas graduated from the Law School of the University of Virginia. Less than 10 years later, he became the first African American appointed to the Virginia Supreme Court. A trailblazer at this university and within this state, Judge Thomas observed firsthand the injustices of the American legal system and chose to go boldly into the field that seemed to have no room for a person like him. He wrote in his memoir, “Almost all law students in those days used *Black’s Law Dictionary*. ... I always thought that was funny since it seemed to me that nothing about the law was for Black people.”¹ He believed – rightly – that he could make a difference, and he inspired countless others to follow in his footsteps.

Consider another Virginia alumnus of that era, Rabbi David Ellenson, *zichrono livrachah*, former professor, president, and chancellor of the Hebrew Union College. Rabbi Ellenson grew up in Newport News, attended The College of William and Mary, and in 1972 graduated as UVA’s first Religious Studies M.A. student. Rabbi Ellenson always identified as a Virginian, though he admits that, as a Jew, it was hard to feel completely “of Virginia.”² Still, his Southern upbringing indelibly affected his Jewish life and philosophy as well as his scholarship and career, and he would model not only for fellow Virginians like many of us but for aspiring Jewish leaders across the country the power of curiosity, respect, and *menschlichkeit*.

These are also hallmark qualities of UVA Jewish Studies, which brings the best values of the university into the Jewish Studies curriculum. Scores of faculty and generations of alumni have benefited from and contributed to the unique environment of Jewish exploration here, leaving an imprint on the place that also stamped us with its own special seal. The experiences of Justice Thomas and Rabbi Ellenson and countless others have demonstrated that UVA isn’t a utopian haven of tolerance and discovery; but it has been a place of transformation for students, for members of the academic community, for the State of Virginia, and for the world touched by those transformed for the better by UVA’s commitment to integrity and truth.

Imagine a *darshan* with a UVA Jewish Studies degree considering this week’s Torah portion. *Parashat Lech Lecha* opens in the land of Haran, where Abram and Sarai and their family have settled after departing their native land of Ur.³ This becomes the staging ground for the rest of Abraham and Sarah’s journey. They had come at the

¹ *The Poetic Justice: A Memoir*, ch. 12. Accessed online so no page number.

² See his comments during the public program “A Jewish Journey from UVA to Hebrew Union College: Rabbi Dr. David Ellenson in Public Conversation” (Feb. 4, 2021): “I was really in Virginia, but part of me never felt that I was completely of Virginia. Or another way to put it is that I was always very mindful that being a Jew, I never felt 100 percent comfortable in that Virginia setting.” <https://jewishstudies.as.virginia.edu/jewish-journey-uva-hebrew-union-college-rabbi-dr-david-ellenson-public-conversation>

³ See Gen. 11:28, which refers to Ur as מִלְכָּהּ.

initiative of Abraham's father, Terach, who, we can imagine, was motivated by the same drive toward holiness that would later lead his son to complete the trek to Canaan.⁴

Abraham spends the first 75 years of his life with Terach, which is mirrored by the last 75 years of his life spent with Isaac.⁵ Indeed, Terach is still living in Haran when Isaac is born;⁶ and when Abraham insists that Isaac take a wife from Haran,⁷ Terach had died there only five years earlier.⁸ Though Abraham wasn't born in Haran, it became his new "home base," the place of his young adulthood and early education and the springboard from which he and Sarah would launch their spiritual quest. What's more, Jacob's famous dream befalls him as he approaches Haran,⁹ the birthplace not only of Rebecca but also of Leah and Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah; and it's the place in which this family will transform into the prototype of the entire People of Israel. Though Canaan is the Promised Land, Haran is the place of our maturation, where our spiritual ancestors grew up and learned how to direct their destinies.

Now, I'm not saying any particular professors or alumni of the University of Virginia are as significant as Rebecca or Leah or Abraham or even Rabbi David Ellenson. But as we celebrate the unique character and impact of our Jewish Studies program and the special place it holds in all of our lives, I think we can find more than a few poignant parallels between Haran and UVA. Our teacher, Vanessa Ochs, reminds us that the matriarchs (and – I believe she would allow me to add – the patriarchs) "are [our] ancestors, and their sacred stories are [our] legacy."¹⁰ My relationship with these spiritual ancestors and sacred legends was deeply enriched by my classes and

⁴ See Chizkuni on Gen. 11:31:

ויקח תרח את אברם בנו, ללכת ארצה כנען. כי היה מזרעו של שם ולהם נתנה הארץ למורשה כדכתיב ויהי כנען עבד למו. ויצאו אתם לוט ושרי שהיו אח ואחות עם תרח ואברם שהיו ראשים ועיקר.

Terach took his son Avram, etc.;" he intended to take him all the way to the land of Canaan, seeing that he was descended from Shem and that land had been given by God to the descendants of Shem as we know from Genesis 9:27. Lot and Sarai went with Terach, seeing they were the survivors of Haran's family (Sefaria).

And see Haemek Davar on Gen. 11:31:

ויקח תרח את אברם בנו וגו' ללכת ארצה כנען. אע"ג שלא הי' עוד מאמר הי' לא"א. מכ"מ כבר הי' הערה מן השמים וראה מרחוק קדושת הארץ וכמש"כ להלן ט"ו ז' והא דכתיב ויקח תרח וגו' אע"ג דעיקר רצון אותה יציאה הי' אברם ובעצתו מכ"מ כיון שהי' אברם שקוע ברעיונות אלקיות או חכמות ולא יכול להנהיג נסיעה הוא וביתו ע"כ נמסר הנסיעה לאביו והוא לקח את אברם וכל הכבודה על ידו: Terah took Abram his son...to go to the land of Canaan. Even though there was not yet a divine word to Abraham our Father, still there was a heavenly illumination and he saw the sanctity of the land from afar...since Abraham was immersed in Godly ideas or wisdoms and was unable to direct the journey for him and his household he delegated the trip to his father who took Abram and all the baggage upon himself (Sefaria).

⁵ "Abram was **seventy-five years old** when he left Haran" (Gen. 12:4). "Now Abraham was **a hundred years old** when his son Isaac was born to him" (Gen. 21:5). "This was the total span of Abraham's life: **one hundred and seventy-five years**" (Gen. 25:7).

⁶ "The days of Terach came to 205 years; and Terach died in Haran" (Gen. 11:32).

⁷ Rebecca is the granddaughter of Nahor (Gen. 24:15), Abram's brother (Gen. 11:27), who remained in Haran after Abram and Lot left (see Gen. 11:29-31).

⁸ "Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebecca" (Gen. 25:20).

⁹ See Gen. 28:10 and 29:1.

¹⁰ *Sarah Laughed*, p. xiv.

communities here at UVA, and I know I'm not alone. We have come to know ourselves, and our place in the world and in our tradition, through the unique perspective of this program, which is committed to diversity, creativity, and exploration.

Despite its Gardens, UVA is not Eden. Torah comes forth from this place, but it is not the Zion of Biblical lore. And while so many beloved faculty have made their homes here, most whose lives have been touched by Jewish Studies don't see Charlottesville as our Promised Land. But like Haran, this is a treasured place of learning and growth. Like Haran, this has become a kind of substitute homeland, intellectually if not by family. And like Haran, UVA Jewish Studies symbolizes a journey of betterment and hope, a path on which we can, as Thomas Jefferson encouraged us, "follow truth wherever it may lead,"¹¹ especially when it leads us to build bridges of understanding and goodwill and nuance and respect. This is a place, and this is a program, from which so many can "go forth ... to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1).

Twenty years after his own graduation, Justice John Charles Thomas delivered the commencement address at UVA's 1992 Final Exercises.¹² He warned the graduates, "wherever you go, there will always be mountains," yet he also affirmed that "you are part of a plan." "Make no mistake about it," he said, "the forces that would rend this nation asunder are loose in the streets. ... But I am certain of this, that with each of you acting with fairness, honor, and determination in your own sphere, and I in mine and others in theirs, that we can collectively reform America." We might wish those graduates three decades ago had made more progress, but we can also hear Justice Thomas's words today as an everlasting challenge. The power and the promise of Haran lie in its ability to incubate sensitive, wise, and moral leaders who are ready to set out on meaningful journeys. Like all who pass through that mythic land, we, too, wander and stumble; but in staying true to the vision of forward progress, we make good on the charge handed to us by our forebears.

May this be the path all of us continue to tread in the years ahead. May we embody the principles of UVA Jewish Studies, committing ourselves to innovation and insight. And may the program celebrate many more milestone birthdays, continually enriching the minds and hearts of teachers, students, and beloved friends for generations to come.

¹¹ <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-16-02-0404>. Quoted by Justice Thomas (see below).

¹² <https://majorevents.virginia.edu/finals/archive/thomas1992>. See also *The Poetic Justice: A Memoir*, ch. 17, "Wrestling with Jefferson and Confronting Racism."