

Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D.

Remarks Upon Granting Howard Blitman, P.E, the Presidential  
Recognition Award

September 13, 2020

Howard, there have been times when you and I have been at  
some gathering where we have had to introduce ourselves. I say,  
“I am Rabbi Deborah Waxman.” You say, “I am Howard  
Blitman, Engineer.”

This is one of the things I love the most about you, Howard: You  
are a profoundly straightforward man who broadcasts your values  
and commitments as clearly as you possibly can. From your  
introduction to your lapel pin, the world knows that you are an  
engineer; you are a builder and a problem solver. In a few

minutes of conversation, we know that you are a loving husband and a proud parent and grandparent. We know you are a Renssalaer graduate; we will probably learn your father went there and your grandson too. And, if you are in Reconstructionist circles, you are quick to share about how lucky you were to know Uncle Ira in your youth—that's Rabbi Dr. Ira Eisenstein to the rest of us.

It may take longer conversations to learn some of the more surprising things about you, like your love of gardening or the passion for history and politics that led you to get a master's from the New School in the 1970s and that shapes your ongoing engagement with the Jewish people. It takes a lot of questioning for you to talk about things like your military service in Korea. And you rarely talk about the extent of your board service across

the nonprofit sector or your generous philanthropy to a wide variety of organizations.

Your focus, Howard, if it's not on your family, your focus is on the future. You are a true Reconstructionist, always looking forward, curious and confident. In your board service to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, you chaired the Special Programs Committee, seeking interesting ways to broaden our impact and appeal, and that was the role you played as well on RRC's last Strategic Planning Committee as a stand-alone institution. You were an early champion for our investing in digital outreach; you were firmly (and presciently) convinced this was the path forward. There was one memorable Executive Committee meeting when you vehemently urged us to put more resources into our website because "that was where the young

people were,” and then, at the end of your stirring speech, you admitted that you hadn’t really gone online, but you knew it was important. Howard, you have always built for the long haul, combining vision and creativity with good and careful planning. You have done that for your family, for the Bet Am Shalom community and for the Reconstructionist movement.

For me, personally, I could not have had a more passionate champion. You have nurtured me in my rabbinical work; you and Maureen welcomed Christina and me to Nantucket; you cheered me on in my doctoral studies, asked for and even read my dissertation; and you have celebrated and supported every step of my presidency. And at every single encounter, after asking about my well-being, you also inquired after Christina’s. The generous

support that you have extended to the Reconstructionist movement, you have also extended to me, and I am so grateful.

Howard, I want to close by reflecting on the song with which we opened today's special ceremony. We know that you share Maureen's passion for fine Jewish music, and that, in addition to Rabbi Bronstein's wisdom, Cantor Schiller's voice is part of what has drawn you to Bet Am Shalom. Solomon Hoffman is one of our rabbinical students, and a talented musician and composer. He is also scheduled to visit Bet Am Shalom as a rabbinical intern, with a focus on sharing his music, which will happen whenever public safety conditions allow. We commissioned Solomon to write a song especially for today, and for you. We chose the verse from Psalm 118: *Even ma'asu habonim haytah lerosh pinah*. In our prayerbook's translation: "The stone rejected by the

builders has become this place's founding stone." We sing this line as part of Hallel, the songs of praise we sing on special days. How perfect that we sing it today. Howard, you are the stone, the foundation of strength on whom we have all relied. Howard, you are the builder, who crafts materials into structures that shelter us. Howard, you are the visionary, who sees materials for their worth and draws out their potential. Psalm 118 ends *Zeh hayom asah Adonay nagilah venismekhah vo*, "This is the day Adonai has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Howard, we are so blessed to create this celebration to rejoice in you and all your accomplishments. On behalf of the entire Reconstructionist movement, I want to thank you for your wisdom and generosity and I present you the Presidential Recognition Award.