This honor is one of the great moments in my life. It is so meaningful to me that my dear friends Elder Quentin Cook and Elder Jeffrey Holland are here to share this evening.

Robert Abrams, who served as attorney general of New York from 1979 to 1993, has pioneered efforts in civil rights, consumer protection, criminal prosecution, and religious freedom. The J. Reuben Clark Law Society honored him with the 2022 Thomas L. Kane Award for his efforts to build bridges between Jewish and Latter-day Saint communities and for his support of voices of all faiths in the public sphere. The Thomas L. Kane Award honors the legacy of General Thomas L. Kane, of the Presbyterian faith, who was a great friend to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its early history and an influential advocate for the religious freedom of Church members.

These remarks were delivered at the J. Reuben Clark Law Society’s Annual Conference on June 9, 2022.
Thomas Kane holds a unique and important place in the history of the Church, and so it is with enormous gratitude that I receive an award in his name. My appreciation for this recognition is rooted in my awareness of the high standards and lofty vision of the more than 10,000 attorneys and judges who are members of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society. It is widely recognized that Law Society members are noble adherents to the rule of law, committed to their faith, and desirous of doing good in society.

I am flattered and, candidly, a bit intimidated by the invitation to address you. If someone had told me when I was beginning my career as a progressive Jewish lawyer and Democrat from the Bronx that I would someday address a gathering like this in Utah, I might have signaled my incredulity by asking in true New York fashion if they also had a bridge in Brooklyn that they wanted to sell. I would never have imagined that my life’s path would lead me to be here on an occasion like this.

But it is about the work of building (not selling) bridges that I wish to speak to you tonight. I will start by sharing some of my rewarding experiences that have led to increased understanding and friendship between the Jewish and Latter-day Saint communities.

**Connecting Jews and Latter-day Saints**

Although I served for many years as the elected attorney general of the state of New York, it was not until I retired from public office that I became involved in any meaningful way with members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most people I knew in New York were also not well acquainted with the Church despite the fact that New York is where Joseph Smith had his first visionary experience in 1820, published the Book of Mormon, and organized the Church in 1830.

A few years after I became a partner at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, I was contacted by two lawyers from Phoenix, Arizona, requesting that I join them in representing a client in a New York matter. As a result of their monthly visits to New York and our strong interaction over a period of years, we became close friends. They were both members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One day one of the lawyers asked me if I would be willing to bring a delegation of Jewish leaders to meet with Church leadership and visit facilities in Salt Lake City so that there could be better understanding between the two groups.

Throughout my life I have attempted to understand, befriend, and serve people from all types of backgrounds, and so I readily agreed. I organized a group that included rabbis from the major streams of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—as well as representatives from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, the UJA Federation of New York, and the New York Board of Rabbis.

During our trip, we observed facilities where food grown by the Church is packaged and distributed to those in need all over the United States. We visited a bishops’ storehouse, where needy people from the local community receive food without charge. We saw a warehouse filled with clothing to be distributed to those ravaged by catastrophic hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes. These tours demonstrated how Latter-day Saints put into practice the scriptural mandate in the Book of Mormon to “impair of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally.”

During this visit, Elder Holland and Elder Cook also shared with us how Latter-day Saint theology incorporates fundamental teachings found in the Old Testament. It was fascinating for us to learn of the theological significance to Latter-day Saints of Old Testament prophets like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah as well as the importance of Old Testament concepts such as covenants, sacrifice, and temples.

**Easing Tensions and Forging Friendships**

In preparation for the visit to Salt Lake City, I was provided a frank briefing about an issue that created tension between our two communities. Survivors of the Holocaust had been pained by learning that names of those who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis were being submitted to the Church for inclusion in its practice of posthumous proxy baptism.

Having met Elder Cook, I began to work with him and two leaders of the Holocaust survivor community, Ernie Michel and Elie Wiesel, to confront the issues at hand. After many months of intense candid conversation, we were able to create a joint statement and establish a set of practices that dealt with the core concerns raised. The public release of that statement and the implementation of those practices put an end to the circumstances that caused the grievance and anxiety. As these concerns were resolved, the path opened for more joint activity and dialogue.

And walk down that path we did. My wife and I had the privilege of sharing a Friday night Shabbat dinner at our home with Elder Quentin Cook and his wife, Mary; Elder Von Keetch and his wife, Bernice; and John Taylor and his wife, Janice. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik provided a tour of Yeshiva University (yu) for Church leaders. He also hosted Church leaders as they visited his synagogue, Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States. At my request, Rabbi Joseph Potasnik invited Latter-day Saint leaders to appear on his New York City radio show to outline the
wide array of Church activities and programs. Local Latter-day Saints and the New York Board of Rabbis conducted luncheon programs where members of both communities met to get to know each other and share thoughts and experiences. I’ve also had the high honor of visiting three Latter-day Saint temples prior to their dedication in New York City, in the Salt Lake City area, and in Philadelphia.

And when Yeshiva University announced that it was inaugurating a new president, Rabbi Ari Berman, I called him and asked if he would be willing to meet the longstanding president of Brigham Young University, so that a president of one faith-based institution of higher education could provide insight to the new incoming president of another. The response was an instantaneous yes.

Rabbi Berman enjoyed a fruitful meeting in Provo with President Kevin Worthen and also met with members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. I then suggested to Rabbi Soloveichik that there be a continued relationship between BYU and YU. He and those at Yeshiva University subsequently worked with Latter-day Saints in the New York area and at BYU to organize two well-attended symposiums on religious freedom, an issue of mutual concern to our communities.

Additionally, I was privileged to help organize and accompany a second delegation of rabbis from New York to Salt Lake City in 2018. And annually over a number of years, I have joined hundreds of Church members, leaders, and community representatives at the annual charitable banquet of the New York Latter-day Saint Professional Association.

I also got other members of my family involved. My son-in-law, Rabbi Ian Pear, who leads the congregation Shir Hadash in Jerusalem, has established a relationship with the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies and has welcomed students in a special way as they have attended Friday night services.

And when I learned from Elder Cook that a representative of the Church had not yet been invited to join New York City’s Commission of Religious Leaders, the leading interfaith body of all religious groups in New York, I was disturbed. I asked Rabbi Potasnik, who represents the Jewish community on the commission, if he could be of help. As a result of Rabbi Potasnik’s dedicated effort, the Church was invited to join this important interreligious group.

Sharing Common Ground in the Holy Land

In reading about the history of the Church, I was fascinated to discover that its first president and prophet, Joseph Smith, assigned Orson Hyde, one of the early members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to travel to Jerusalem to dedicate the land for the return of the Jewish people. Elder Hyde made the journey and at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem offered a beautiful dedicatory prayer in 1841.

I chanced upon this information in 2015—and noted that the following year was going to be the 175th anniversary of that seminal event. I reached out to Elder Cook and others and suggested that we commemorate this by having a Latter-day Saint-Jewish delegation visit the BYU Jerusalem Center and hold a special program and ceremony celebrating that significant event. They embraced the idea, and we made the trip happen.

A magnificent program took place at the BYU Jerusalem Center. The joint delegation also visited the mayor of Jerusalem and the prime minister of Israel, laid a wreath at the Eternal Flame in the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, and held a special ceremony at the Orson Hyde Memorial Gardens on the Mount of Olives.

The more I interacted with individuals and groups within the Church, the more I discovered that the Latter-day Saint community shares many areas of common ground with the Jewish community. Each has a fundamental focus on family, each places a very high value on education, each has a strong commitment to charitable giving, each demonstrates humanitarian concern and responds when there are international catastrophes such as earthquakes and hurricanes around the globe, each has a history of disproportionate success due to ability, hard work, and determination, and each has been subjected to fierce persecution and prejudice. Another interesting point of commonality is the fact that both religious communities have the same population in the world, approximately 15 million, and the same population in the United States, approximately 7 million.

Thus, what started as an unusual request from clients has blossomed into meaningful engagements and sustained friendships on multiple levels. The goal of these efforts has been to bring the Jewish and Latter-day Saint communities closer together so that there can be greater understanding and trust. The work continues, and I look forward to the future.

I recently published a memoir, The Luckiest Guy in the World. My experiences and my extraordinary relationships with members of this Church are among the many reasons I consider myself to be such a lucky person.

I hope that recounting these events might serve as a practical illustration of how different communities can strengthen understanding and friendship. The need to bridge differences has never been more important.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland addressed the joint delegation at the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden on the Mount of Olives.
understood the importance of guaranteeing the opportunity for believers to exercise their faith. The Constitution guarantees religious freedom to all, and our nation has traditionally demonstrated respect for people who practice their faith. The founders also understood the importance of setting up a system of government based on the rule of law. By subscribing to and having respect for the rule of law, we ensure that all citizens and institutions are accountable to the same laws and that no one is above the law. This demonstrates and enforces a fundamental principle of equality.

Unfortunately, today there are forces and currents that jeopardize our democracy by degrading both the rule of law and the right of people to openly exercise their faith. Among these threats is a troubling increase in divisiveness, incivility, and polarization in our society. Examples abound of those who are unwilling to associate with or even listen to those who have differences of opinion on political, social, religious, and other issues. Increasingly, many people view those with whom they disagree as “enemies,” and they will attempt to discredit, vilify, and silence them rather than seek to listen and understand. Too many display a willingness to trample over the rights of others in order to achieve their objectives.

All of this indicates that an alarming number of our fellow citizens seem to have forgotten that, whatever our differences, our unity as a people is central to our identity, success, and strength as a nation. Our country’s very name—the United States of America—enshrines this principle. The Great Seal of the United States, which bears the Latin phrase *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”), reinforces it. Generations of school children have daily acknowledged it while reciting our Pledge of Allegiance, which speaks of “one nation” that is “indivisible.” American history teaches us that goodness, achievement, and prosperity come from being united as a people. Too many are losing sight of this foundational principle.

This increasing incivility and division is not inconsequential. It threatens great harm to our society. Listen to the words of my good friend Senator Joseph Lieberman:

> Senator Lieberman’s observations are echoed by one of your Law Society members, Judge Thomas B. Griffith, who recently retired after serving on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Judge Griffith writes:

> [I]n my lifetime, the Republic has been confronted with no more serious a challenge to its well-being and maybe even its survival than it faces today from political tribalism. . . . The Constitution’s form of government not only allows spirited disagreement, it requires it. But the Constitution cannot withstand a citizenry whose debates are filled with contempt for one another.

> Unfortunately, this increasing acrimony and tribalism is not limited to national politics; it is seeping into all aspects of our society.
Facing Today’s Challenges Together

In the face of these challenges, there is a critical need for bridge-builders—women and men who will not allow differences of opinion, as real and important as they may be, to prevent them from understanding, respecting, and working with others to better the world. To paraphrase President Russell M. Nelson, our nation needs people who “strive to build bridges of cooperation rather than walls of segregation” and who understand that

[we are all connected, and we have a God-given responsibility to help make life better for those around us. We don’t have to be alike or look alike to have love for each other. We don’t even have to agree with each other to love each other.]

We need people willing to follow the practical advice given by President Dallin H. Oaks when speaking favorably of laws that both prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ individuals and protect religious freedom:

As a practical basis for coexistence, we should accept the reality that we are fellow citizens who need each other. This requires us to accept some laws we dislike and to live peacefully with some persons whose values differ from our own. . . . [W]e should make every effort to understand the experiences and concerns of others. . . .

. . . When some advocates voice insults or practice other minor provocations, both sides should ignore them. Our society already has too many ugly confrontations. If we answer back, we tend to mirror the insult. A better response is that of the late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. When he agreed to meet with a staunch atheist who detested everything he held sacred, the rabbi was asked whether he would try to convert him. “No,” he answered, “I’m going to do something much better than that. I’m going to listen to him.”

My experiences over a lifetime in the political and legal arenas confirm the validity of these guidelines.

As lawyers of faith, you have unique abilities, opportunities, and obligations to put into practice these principles and to build bridges of understanding with those who are different from you. Your legal education taught you to make decisions based on facts and logic, not inflamed passions. You are experienced in respectfully advocating for a cause without becoming disagreeable, you are problem solvers, and you can achieve compromise. You hold positions of trust in your communities that give you influence others do not have. Your faith teaches the importance of the Old Testament imperatives to “love thy neighbour” and to “[l]ove . . . the stranger.”

The New Testament promise to those who are “peacemakers” and the Book of Mormon admonition to do away with “contention” and “stir[ring] up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another” reinforce these fundamental tenants.

The world needs your influence now more than ever.

Let me conclude with a tidbit of shared Latter-day Saint–Jewish history. The March 15, 1842, edition of the Latter-day Saint periodical Times and Seasons, edited by Joseph Smith, contains an excerpt from a book by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who was a rabbi in Oldenburg, Germany, and a leader of the Modern Orthodox Judaism movement. Joseph Smith prefaced Rabbi Hirsch’s words with the observation that Jews “although persecuted, afflicted, robbed . . . still adhere with great tenacity to their ancient moral code, and maintain principles of benevolence and charity.” Joseph Smith then quoted Rabbi Hirsch’s mandate for a godly man to “reconcile the contending, and everywhere where labours in word and deed, to relieve every pain, to heal every sorrow, and dry every tear.”

And likewise, each of you can also be a Thomas Kane–like figure who engages with understanding and who befriends those in circles beyond your own. Your efforts to build bridges will take you to surprising places that you never envisioned. You will encounter unique experiences, newfound friendships, and the knowledge that you have done your part to help create the unity necessary to maintain a strong and vibrant nation. Let this be the message and legacy of this event.

Notes

1 Mosiah 4:26.
6 Leviticus 19:18.
7 Deuteronomy 10:19.
8 Matthew 5:9.
9 3 Nephi 12:29.
10 Joseph Smith, ed., Times and Seasons 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 725.
11 Smith, 726.