

“DO NOT LET THE CENTER COLLAPSE”

An Address by
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to the Yeshiva University
Alumni in Jerusalem

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"DO NOT LET THE CENTER COLLAPSE"

Yeshiva University is exceedingly proud of its alumni, both men and women, in Israel: their idealism, their personal deportment, their families, their professional achievements, and their varied contributions to the State of Israel. I have met our graduates in every part of this country and they are engaged in a dizzying variety of professions and businesses. In all cases, they have given us cause for pride and "nachas."

But these accomplishments are, for the most part, personal, the result of individual efforts and successes. What has been missing is the collective voice of the Yeshiva University graduates in the State of Israel.

The time has come for Yeshiva University, through its alumni, to become a clear and articulate moral force in this country. Our alumni must become a cohesive group united not only by a common alma mater, but by a comprehensive Torah outlook which, without keeping to any party line, will be idealistic yet realistic, both youthfully energetic and mature, assertive but balanced, and combining enthusiasm with sanity.

A wave of extremism is sweeping the world, and America and the American Jewish community have not remained unaffected by it. But the negative results are far more palpable and consequential in Israel for a number of obvious reasons: it is a smaller country; this is a highly politicized and informal society; people here suffer from a low threshold of frustration because of the accumulated military, political, and economic pressures; and the country lacks

an established tradition of civility in public discourse.

Yet, these are only explanations, not excuses. The situation is too serious to ignore when it sometimes seems, at least to this observer, that the lunatics have taken over the asylum.

At times of this sort, we all stand under a holy imperative: do not let the center collapse!

What Yeshiva has taught us, both in theory and in practice—the joining of Torah learning and Western culture under the rubric of *Torah U'Mada*; openness to the environing culture; *ahavat ha-Torah* plus *ahavat Yisrael*; the appreciation of tolerance and the abhorrence of bigotry; a critical but loving commitment to the State of Israel—all this is a **deliberate philosophy of life, not a compromise foisted upon us**. In the language of Halakhah, this approach is *le'khat'hilah* and not *be'diavad*.

I recognize that we Yeshiva University graduates labor under a long tradition of self-criticism sometimes bordering on institutional self-abnegation. Especially now, under the pressures of a resurgent extremism, we tend to question ourselves and to internalize the criticism that we are often inconsistent. I acknowledge that. It is indeed true that the extremes of both left and right are more consistent than we. But I remember what a great American educator, Nicholas Murray Butler, once said: "The extremes are logical—but absurd."

Just how absurd the extremes can become was revealed to me a few months ago. Someone republished copies of a Yiddish journal that had appeared many years ago in a part of Rumania that included Satmar. I leafed through a couple of years of the newspaper, and found it fascinating. I then began to chuckle in amusement at the gravity, the utter seriousness, with which these communities took themselves and their issues. High literary style was employed in the service of vicious invective against the rabbi of a neighboring community, and the insult was returned in kind. This shohet was accused of all kinds of malfeasance, and the

leading Hasid of another Rebbe was painted in broad, black strokes as the very incarnation of the devil. After a while, the initial *casus belli* was totally forgotten, and the rhetoric turned purple because of the excessive language used by the opposition. Indeed, I learned a new sociological principle: the more extravagant you are in praise of your own leader, the more intemperate you become in denouncing the leader of the opposition. However, my amusement soon turned into anger and contempt when I noticed that, in the midst of all this unrestrained controversy, there appeared here and there, in little boxes in insignificant corners of the paper, such news items as: "A Putsch in Munich Beer Hall"; "National Socialist Movement Wins in Germany"; "Racial Laws Passed in Nuremburg," etc. Indeed, both sides were logical and consistent—and tragically, catastrophically absurd. Such is the nonsense engendered by militant extremism.

It is against the backdrop of such unjustified extremism that Yeshiva University must be seen as the standard-bearer of moderation in Jewish life. For YU stands not only for *Torah U'Mada*—a broader and more comprehensive vision of Torah as expressed in a particular curricular philosophy—but also for sanity and for moderation; for the conviction that Maimonides' "middle way" applies not only to personal dispositions and character traits, but also to communal conduct and public policy; for an appreciation that life is filled with ambiguities and complexities and resists black-and-white simplism.

We of the Yeshiva University community are often chided that our policy of centrism and our philosophy of moderation contain implicit hidden dangers. This is true; the study of wordly culture can sometimes lead questioning young people astray. An openness to non-observant Jewish neighbors, or to non-Jews, implies that they are as human as we are, and that can sometimes have a negative effect on our attempt to maintain our traditions. Agreed. But all life is dangerous, and unless you are determined to raise your child in a hermetically sealed Skinner

box, safe from germs and crossing the street, you will expose yourself and your family to dangers of all kinds.

Besides, Rav Kook has taught us that our duty as people of Torah is *le'kadesh et ha-hol*, to sanctify the profane—and not to reject it. The very encounter of sacred and profane is a high desideratum despite the obvious dangers of “contamination.”

Indeed, we are under an obligation to accept a certain amount of danger for the sake of our people as a whole. Hasidic tradition relates that the great Rebbe, R. Menahem Mendel of Vorke, affectionately known in Hasidic lore as *Der Shweiger*, “the Silent One,” once said: “The *sod* of *parah adumah* (the secret, mystery of the red heifer)—is *ahavat Yisrael*.” This statement proved too cryptic for easy comprehension, so the elders of his Hasidim explained as follows: When an Israelite was ritually impure, and sought to rid himself of his *tumah*, he would approach the Kohen, who would mix the ashes of the red heifer with water in the Biblically prescribed manner, and sprinkle it upon the one who was *tamei*. The result was that the impure Israelite became cleansed of his impurity and declared *tahor*, whilst the Kohanim who participated in the various aspects of the ritual became impure until evening. What the Torah was teaching, then, was that the Kohen, who was presumed to stand on a spiritually higher level than the ordinary Israelite, was commanded to risk *tumah* and embrace impurity if by so doing he could help his fellow Jew achieve *taharah*. The Kohen was instructed to accept the dangers and consequences of impurity as an act of *ahavat Yisrael*, out of love for his fellow Jews and their needs.

Hence, our readiness as Jews of moderation to accept a certain degree of “danger” is based not only upon the fact that danger is ubiquitous in life, and that the function of the holy is to sanctify the profane, but also as an expression of our love for our fellow Jews.

This moderation must now become our public expression in this country. I urge you—as an organized non-partisan group, with provisions

and latitude for differences of opinion amongst yourselves on details—not only to keep away from extremism yourselves, but to declare yourselves openly, assertively, and forcefully for such a centrist position.

The advocacy of moderation should never be seen as an act of weakness. Mark Twain once said: “Moderation in all things—except moderation.” The only area where we must be extreme is in the pursuit of moderation in all aspects of our communal and social life. I am in favor of “radical moderation.”

The task of Yeshiva University alumni in Israel is to present and represent *Torah U'Mada* at its highest levels; to cherish Torah scholars, and to become, ourselves, people deeply learned in Torah; to extend the hand of friendship to all Jews, for we all share a common history and a common destiny; and to help restore peace and wholeness to Israeli society. By a pursuit of *shalom*, I mean not that we become “wimps,” and not that we engage in preaching and mere rhetorical gestures; rather, that we attempt to open up maximum channels of dialogue between different sectors of Israeli society, and that we help restore civility to public discourse.

The pursuit of such peace and civility does not mean that we can or ought to avoid all controversies; that is generally impossible, and especially so in the context of such a tense and contentious society as that of Israel. (I remember a story my grandfather told me, of a young man who appeared one weekday morning in a synagogue and joined the services but failed to put on his *tefillin*. He resisted the requests of a *gabbai* and the president, until the rabbi approached him and asked for an explanation. He told the rabbi that his father had died and left a will that he, the son, should avoid all controversies; since there is a dispute between Rashi and Rabbenu Tam as to the nature of the *tefillin*, he therefore avoided *tefillin* altogether. . . .)

What I do mean is that we must condemn all destructive extremes and treat them, wherever possible, with studied neglect. We must invite all serious and well-meaning

controversialists to meet and "talk it out" with mutual respect and underlying friendship.

The Sages taught in *Avot* that *kol mahloket she'hi le'shem shamayim sofah le'hitzkayem*—every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will, in the end, endure. R. Elazar Ashkenazi, in his famous *Maasei Ha-shem*, asked: Do not the overwhelming majority of participants in a dispute lay claim to the mantle of *le'shem shamayim*, to truth and justice and righteousness? He answered by explaining that the Hebrew word *sof* has two meanings—conclusion and goal. (This is similar to the English "end" which means both conclusion and purpose, or goal.) Hence, the Sages are offering us a definition of *le'shem shamayim*: when the parties to a dispute differ only as to means, but both seek to preserve the end (*sof*) toward which they mutually strive, then that controversy is indeed *le'shem shamayim*.

So, too, all who seek a *kiyyum* for Torah and for State, no matter how they differ on the nature and degree of that goal—even if by "Torah" they mean "Jewish identity" and by "State" they mean the welfare of *Klal Yisrael*—all these should join in a civilized "controversy for the sake of Heaven."

I know that I have presented only a general outline, not working details. The reason is not only the lack of time and the need for brevity, but deliberate self-restraint. It is because you know far more about the situation than I do. You are intimately acquainted with the realities that prevail here, and I am not. Under such circumstances, for me to come and outline exactly what you must do would be imperious, presumptuous, and plain silly.

You must decide the "how." I merely plead with you to join your alma mater in the U.S., so that together—both here and there—we can proceed with true dignity, fearing no one but the Almighty Himself.

For indeed, the time has come for us to stop being intimidated, apologetic, or defensive.

I will repeat to you a story I told at our *Hag*

Hasemikhah a few months ago. A young rabbi in New York was distressed because he was being unfairly attacked by certain extremists. He visited the Rav, our great and revered mentor, Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, may he live and be well, to consult with him. It was the week that we read the portion of *Va-yetzei*. The Rav listened to him and made one simple comment on the verse, "And Jacob went *le'darko*, on his way, and he was met by the Angels of God." The Rav told him: If you will go on your own way, in the way that you are convinced is correct and true and proper, looking neither left nor right, then you will indeed meet the Angels of God. Ignore the extremes and do what is right.

That teaching holds for us as well. Let no one intimidate us. Do not cater to the Left, and do not cower before the Right. Let us march straight ahead, and pay more attention to "above" and "below" than to "right" or "left."

That was, is, and will always remain the policy of Yeshiva University—everywhere.

It will not be easy for us to blaze our own trail, following the star of our own vision, committed to the truths that we cherish and revere, without being pulled and pushed right and left, off our chosen way.

Yet, we have no choice but to exercise our Jewish dignity, our human honor, and our Torah responsibility as we begin the second century of our institutional existence.

This is the *derekh* that we have been taught by my sainted predecessors, Drs. Revel and Belkin, of blessed memory, and—may he be blessed with a long and healthful life—the Rav. This is the way we have chosen for ourselves and which we teach our children and our students.

This is *our* way—"and Jacob went on his way." And if, as a result, we do not completely succeed in transforming ourselves and our fellow Jews into *malakhim*, into participants in an angelic discourse, at least our relations with each other will be human.

More than that we cannot do. Less than that we dare not try.



