

Keynote Address at the InauguralNorth American Orthodox Jewish Leadership Conference

The most Jewish way to begin this historic conference is, appropriately, with "thanksgiving"--to the Almighty **שְׁחַיֵּינוּ** וְהִגִּיעֵנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

Now, that is an interesting **בְּרָכָה**. Two of the three verbs are self-explanatory: **שְׁחַיֵּינוּ**, He let us live, despite all persecutions and material obstacles. **וְהִגִּיעֵנוּ**, He allowed us to reach this day, overcoming all cultural, spiritual, and psychological pressures on us. But most interesting is the middle verb: **וְקִיְמָנוּ**, usually translated as "He let us exist." But if we already say that He let us live and reach, why is it necessary to add "exist?"

It has been suggested that the word is a halakhic term. **וְקִיְמָנוּ** comes from **קִיּוֹם**, and in the Halakha the word for affirmation or authentication of a **שֵׁטֶר** or document is called **קִיּוֹם שֵׁטְרוֹת**, whereby witnesses testify to the authenticity of the signatures on a document. Hence, **וְקִיְמָנוּ** means, "He has justified and authenticated our approach, our mission, our **דֶּרֶךְ**."*

For the last 50 or more years, savants and sages, sociologists and social philosophers and community "machers," have predicted the imminent demise of Orthodox Judaism and the disappearance of Orthodox Jews as a significant part of the North American Jewish community. But we are to say, "We are Here!" By the grace of the Almighty, **וְקִיְמָנוּ**, He has, through history, vindicated our essential outlook, and so we are very much alive if beset by problems, very much vigorous if more than a bit contentious. And what greater reason to thank Him than for legitimating who and what we are.

And, indeed, it is appropriate to ask two questions, to which I intend to address myself this evening: First, who are we--we who have convened and are participating in this conference? And second, what do we want and why have we gathered here at this juncture of our history?

Who are we? First, we are Jews; and we are joined by a common history and common national and ethnic experiences to all other Jews, as partners in what the Rav זצ"ל has called the **בְּרִית גּוֹרֵל**, the "covenant of fate." As such, all Jewish concerns are our concerns, all the joys and the travails, the pains and the pleasures of **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל** and **מְדִינַת יִשְׂרָאֵל** are ours to be felt keenly and responsibly.

* See Ramban to Deut. 27:26--**הַזֶּה הָיָה דְבַר יְקִיָּם אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת**

Next, we are religious, religiously observant, Orthodox Jews. We are bound by the Halakha, and our aspirations are limned in the Agadah, the Musar and philosophical treatises, and the rest of the priceless literature of our Torah and our Mesorah. We are thus intimate partners with all other committed Jews in what the Rav calls the ברית יעוד, "the covenant of destiny."

Finally, like all other Orthodox Jews--whether Hasidic or Mitnagdic, Ger or Lubavitch, Ashkenazi or Sephardi, Ponovezh or Porat Yosef, עולם הישיבות or עם דרך ארץ--we represent a significant and identifiable subgroup within אמוני ישראל with whom we may share some perceptions as, indeed, they may share some of our ideas. Consider the constituent groups of this Conference and you will recognize our special Orthodox ideology. Whether we call ourselves Dati or "Modern Orthodox" or "Centrist Orthodox" or we remain unnamed, unidentified, and undifferentiated, as some would have it, we stand roughly for the following special ideas, i.e., in addition to those maintained by all segments of Orthodoxy as part of the Torah tradition:

**Torah Umadda*: the belief that the primacy of Torah, which is undisputed, does not exclude all the worldly wisdom of the ages and our own spectacular age. Our attitude to modernity is complicated and sophisticated; it is neither one of total rejection, which is impossible, or total acceptance, which is both foolish and suicidal.

**The State of Israel* as a welcome sign of חסדי ה' after the agonies of the Holocaust. Some may consider it ראשית צמיחה גאולתנו, as the beginning of the Messianic era, and others may be more modest and doubtful about our ability to identify the exact position of the current era in the wide scope of Jewish history. But we are all devoted heart and soul to the מדינה.

**The Education of the Jewish Woman*. We affirm the need to give a thorough grounding in Torah education to women. This policy issues not from contemporary feminism but from the historic decision of the חפץ חיים earlier this century acknowledging the necessity to provide Jewish women with a Torah education not inferior to the secular education they were receiving.

**Inclusiveness*, as opposed to exclusiveness. Limited only by halakhic restrictions and common sense, our preference is to include more rather than less Jews in our conception of כלל ישראל and in the circle of our fraternal concern.

**Moderation and Civility*. In the formulation of our public, communal policy and the conduct of our disagreements with other Jews, whether as individuals or as organizations, we hold that more is gained by mutual respect than by mutual abuse, by civility than by invective, by self-restraint than by self-righteousness, by moderation than by malice. We reserve the right and necessity, of course, to advocate our positions with passion and, criticize, if need be, even with indignation--but always with courtesy.

These--but not necessarily all of them for each individual--are some of the principles that characterize our vision and mark us as a distinct and special group within Orthodoxy.

But, in order for us to realize this grand vision and be effective, we must attend to a serious, discomfiting problem that often plagues too many of us, and that is: a loss of collective self-confidence. For leaders--and we are gathered here as leaders--that can often be a fatal defect.

Allow me to share with you what I told the Rabbinical Council at their last convention here in this very hotel last June. The great threat to our leadership role--and perhaps its most fundamental cause--is our own self-doubt. We suffer from an inner failure of philosophic nerve. We have been bullied into doubting our own *shittah*, the one on which we have built our personal and professional lives. When one or another of the sides that surround us shouts loud enough and long enough, we begin to wonder if maybe, maybe we were wrong all along, that others are right and we are in error. And there is nothing more deadly than that kind of pernicious self-doubt. It kills a person's initiative, his dignity and, finally, his integrity.

There is a time for self-questioning, even for a degree of self-doubt. But now is not such a time. The kind of Yiddishkeit we stand for must be reasserted *davka* when it is assaulted.

The letter *ע* in the word *שמע ישראל* is writ large, it is an *עין רבתי*. Why so? R. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains: It is large in order not to be mistaken for an *א*, for the word *שנא* means "maybe," "perhaps"; it is the sign of self-doubt, of hesitation, of diffidence. Such *שנא* is the very opposite of *שמע*, which connotes a commanding certainty and rightness.

We are attacked on one side for being stubbornly true to the Torah heritage, supposedly marking us as Neanderthals and as benighted advocates of narrow-minded, anti-democratic intolerance. At the same time we are assailed from the other side, disqualified and delegitimated for not being authentically Orthodox. But no matter where the attacks come from, we must have the strength and the courage to proclaim *שמע* for our principles--*שמע* and not, Heaven forbid, *שנא*; confidence and not diffidence.

Kenneth Clark concluded his massive study, *Civilization*, by stating, "It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization." If what we have cherished as our interpretation of our "civilization," is to thrive and flourish, then we must rid ourselves of our *שנא* stance and return to a firm and self-respecting *שמע* attitude. For we have accomplished much that we can be proud of on this continent, even before the post-war immigrations, in Jewish education, in kashrut, in building *mikvaot*, and shuls and national organizations and an infrastructure for the entire Orthodox community--along with fulfilling our obligations to the wider Jewish community.

This conference, then, is a time for us to reaffirm our faith in our own most fundamental principles, and confirm our confidence in the correctness of our cause. Assailed by Right and Left, we must stand up with strength, with both the courage of our convictions and the conviction of our courage.

Let us now address the second of the two questions I posed: What Do We Want and Why Have We Gathered Here?

We want 3 things:

a) To save as much as possible of the Jewish World in this hour of its crisis;

b) To improve our own Orthodox community, and consult with each other as to how we can contribute to the vision of the הנצח living creatively in this and the next century in accordance with the highest precepts and aspirations taught to us by our holy Torah;

c) To create better conditions for peaceful cooperation by all those are so dedicated in the entire Orthodox community.

The first item on our agenda is: What can we, as Orthodox Jews, do To Save the Jewish World?

The progress we Orthodox Jews have made in the last several decades is cause for hope and for optimism--but by no means for euphoria, triumphalism, or institutional self-righteousness. We have got to remember that we are still a minority--5%? 10% of North American Jewry? Even in Greater N.Y. we are estimated at only about 14% of the Jewish community.

The fact is that the North American Jewish community is in a process of dissolution. 53% of American Jewry is marrying out! Anyone who finds pleasure in that self-evident bankruptcy of Jewish secularism or Reform in its various manifestations is a fool or worse. These are our brothers and sisters or cousins; they are the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of loyal, good Jews who are being lost to us forever.

And this horrendous level of out-marriage is but a symptom of the wholesale assimilation of all North American Jewry. The disappearance of whole Jewish communities by assimilation is not unknown in Jewish history, but the cultural-religious suicide of such vast numbers of Jews is unprecedented.

Moreover, this assimilation is exacerbated by what it is that our fellow Jews are assimilating into. A great man of letters, Ludwig Lewisohn, once complained not that American Jewry is assimilating, but that it is assimilating on the level of Hollywood and dime novels instead of at the level of James Dewey and William James. He would have been shocked by how radically Western (and especially American) culture has deteriorated a mere 45-50 years later--Hollywood and silly novels sound saintly by comparison.

Listen to the experts about our changing society: Sen. Moynihan, in the recent issue of *The American Scholar*, writes about "defining deviancy down." Deviancy and immorality have reached such staggering proportions that we practice denial: we define the deviant actions as normal, and so our society appears "normal." Unmarried mothers, illegitimacy, crime, welfare dependency, mental illness, homelessness, sexual aberrations--these are now considered routine and, in some cases, the sacrosanct privilege of those who choose these "alternate" ways.

Charles Krauthammer, writing in the latest issue of *The New Republic*, adds the rest of the story: not only is the abnormal and deviant redefined as normal, but what was always regarded as normal and proper is now attacked as deviant and downright evil. Pornographic speech is acceptable, politically incorrect speech is horrifying. Child abuse has been discovered, and now every person with a complaint about life is declared to be a victim of child abuse--whether or not it really occurred--because the family is presumed to be the hot bed of all evil. Gays are honest, straights are hypocrites. And so the list goes on and on.

Now, this is an earth-shaking change in moral perception. It means that, from a Jewish point of view, our society is sinking rapidly in the quick-sand of depravity. Consider that only a few days ago, because of criticism by the State Health Commissioner, the N.Y. State Board of Regents deferred a vote which, amongst other things, encourages teachers of grades 4 to 6 to talk with their students about non-standard varieties of sexual congress (N.Y. Times, 11/20/93).

And this is the society into which most American Jews are willfully assimilating, either without a second thought or with joyful enthusiasm! As the Rabbis put it: **כמקולקלים שבהם** עשיתם, **כמתוקנים שבהם לא עשיתם**. We imitated the worst, not the best.

There is Biblical precedent for this awful situation: Israel suffered from backsliding to idolatry more than once, and always with terrible consequences. But the most terrible of all these flirtations with paganism was the incident of Baal Peor, which resulted in a plague in which 24,000 Jews were killed. The Midrash says that it was worse even than the Golden Calf defecation: **זו גזירה קשה מן העגל**. Why? There is good reason for it: because the Baal Peor was not only an idol, but a peculiarly disgusting one! Its cult involved a form of worship which was revolting, nauseating, appallingly loathsome. To give up **עבודה** for something as abominable and odious as this--was far worse than assimilation into the ordinary pagan culture.

And to return to our contemporary scene: what is remarkably shocking is the way Reform has reacted to this cataclysm that hangs over the heads of the Jewish community like some malevolent, miasmic, mushroom cloud of ethnic extinction. First it "kashered" non-Jews as Jews by the sleight-of-hand of patri-linealism--the Jewish equivalent of Moynihan's "defining deviancy down." Now Reform temples have welcomed honest-to-goodness,

genuine *goyim* (even according to the patrilineal doctrine), as "full members...[as] officers of the congregation, as religious school teachers and as ritual participants" (Michael Meyer, *CCAR Journal*, Summer 1993). Writing in the quarterly of the Reform movement, one of their own faculty members protests, "When will we begin to hear demands that not only should **Christians** be given full equality in the Reform temple but also--at least up to a point--so should **Christianity**?" (*ibid.*).

And so Reform, tragically, is not only mindlessly marching its members into total assimilation into this deviant culture, the contemporary equivalent of Baal Peor, but may also be preparing to open their temples to the Gospel of **שמך**. One is hard put to say which is worse. How sad!

What can and must the Jewish community as a whole do to save itself? Let me mention four things:

First, we must look upon our situation with a clarity born of urgency and a truthfulness born of failure. And then we will see that only a meaningful faith in God can guarantee that we will have a posterity. There will be neither Jewish identity nor Jewish continuity without Judaism, without Torah, without God.

We must say that openly because *it is too late to lie*. It is too late to overlay the terrible truth with frictionless fictions. It is going to be painful for our fellow Jews to accept, even hear that. But there is no other cure for their futurelessness.

Federations will not save us--they are in such dire straits that they have even condescended to work with synagogues..

Tzedakah will not save us. The Biblical precept that **צדקה תציל ממות**, that charity will save from death, obtains for individuals, not for entire communities.

Israel will not save us. Indeed, *it may need us*. Rabbi Adin Steinsalz was right when he said that our great problem is not whether there will be a Palestinian state, but whether the State of Israel will be a Jewish state.

Summer camps, trips to Israel, the Hebrew language --these can be meaningful in the context of an overall solution; by themselves they are but gimmicks.

Only a return to our vibrant faith and its ancient sources will see us through our present crisis and ensure our continuity. And that faith is Judaism, and Judaism means God and Torah, and Torah means the acceptance of Halakhah as our authority (and not merely "a guide") in our lives.

So the first principle in helping save the Jewish world is to be Jews... Which leads me to my second point.

e must rethink the nature of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. We Orthodox Jews must help reeducate our people to think of ourselves no longer as an infinitely malleable, totally plastic ethnic group that can and ought, chameleon-like, adjust to any cultural and moral conditions. We must see ourselves as we were throughout the ages--as a *protest people*, as people who are in but not of the environing society, who hold up a different standard for their contemporaries, who--without resigning from the society--remain psychologically and spiritually perpetual outsiders, affirming what is noble and rejecting what is ugly in that society.

The great Musar teacher, R. Simcha Zissel of Kelm, once said that this was the very essence of the mission of the three patriarchs. Abraham was the man of *חסד*--specifically so, because he flourished in the era of Sodom, the epitome of sadism and cruelty. Isaac is the symbol of *עבודה* and *יראת ה'*, protesting his immoral, pagan environment of which he said, *רק אין יראת ה'* *במקום הזה*. And Jacob represents *אמת*, a sure rejection of the deviousness of his uncle and father-in-law, Laban. And that mission of protest and that demand for change and improvement is inscribed in the very genes of their descendants. It is that self-definition of *עם ישראל* that we must recapture in our times.

Third is--the Jewish family. Without the warm medium of a functional Jewish family, the Jewish *מסורה* cannot be continued. We were and are a family-centered faith. Our founding father, Abraham, was commissioned to be a blessing to *האדמה*; there is no *עם* without healthy *משפחות*. If the Jewish community, now involved throughout the continent in studying Jewish identity and continuity, is serious in its work, it must recommend immediate action to do such things as: provide counseling for married couples as well as prenuptial counseling to decrease the divorce rate; engage in public education towards earlier marriages and demographic growth; help young families by offering stipends for kosher food and for giving children a day school or yeshiva education; increase such stipends for larger families; and discourage abortion with the same vigor that most American Jews advocate pro-choice in the public arena.

Fourth, and most important: Jewish education. This audience needs no instruction on the need for elementary and high school Jewish education. But the various "identity and continuity" commissions must learn this--and fast. I would plead with them: no more studies, surveys, or market research is needed. The link between education and continuity is too obvious to need "scientific" confirmation. Don't drown in "process"; better a middling cure applied quickly than a better cure--after the patient is comatose.

What even this audience needs to be reminded of in relation to *חינוך* is the importance of post-secondary Jewish education. Were I not concerned that my remarks might be misinterpreted as institutional self-pleading, I would elaborate on this point. For now, let me just say that if we are any place in the Orthodox orbit we should be serious about the Mishna's dictum

that תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם and appreciate that it makes demands on us all through our lives, even on a college level; and that, furthermore, the ambience of a secular college may be too much for a 17 or 18 year old to handle even after a good day school education--especially when excellent alternatives are available. ודי לחכימא ברמיזא.

Which leads me directly to my next theme: What Can We Do to Improve Our Own Orthodox Community?

*We must affirm unqualifiedly the primacy of Torah, especially we who advocate and practice Torah Umadda. Torah Umadda does not put the two on equal footing. The validity of Madda is not despite but because of the primacy of talmud torah. The study of Torah is obligatory for every individual and for every community. Without it, no one has the right to the title "Orthodox."

*Next, we must expose ourselves to honest, regular, and serious self-criticism. Not every criticism leveled at us should be dismissed out of hand. We are strong enough and should be honest enough to listen carefully to critics, no matter what their affiliation. Most important is the criticism that we must direct at ourselves. Are we sufficiently careful to daven מנחה ומעריב as well as שחרית--and especially בצבור? Have we built and maintained adequate חסד institutions for our community? Do we value the canons of צניעות more than the whims of fashion designers? Are we as punctilious and punctual in setting aside time for "learning" as we are for tennis or bridge or jogging or whatever?

*Additionally, we must act with אהבת ישראל to all others--left, right, or center--and therefore accept responsibility for our non-Orthodox brethren. I know that many of us are deeply pessimistic about their future as Jews, that the majority of them have essentially given up the ghost and are doomed to disappear in an unrivaled historic disaster. (The Kotzker used to say that he often met people who have been long dead but didn't know it...) But we have no right, morally or halakhically, to despair of them. If you see a man drowning, even if you are pessimistic about his chances for surviving, you must spare no effort to rescue him: לא תעמד על דם רעך holds true for soul as well as for body.

This means that we must engage vigorously in outreach to the non-observant Jewish community. It is a pity that "outreach" has become so popular that the term has been hijacked. It is being emptied of its original content and misused as it is narrowly defined as reaching out to the already intermarried. While we certainly can sympathize with the pain of the relatives and friends of those who married out, we should not agree with a policy that gives it priority. This diverts public attention and communal funds from the far more accessible and success-prone constituency of those who have not, or not yet, decided to abandon the Jewish community and Jewish destiny. And that is where our efforts must be directed.

We are simply not doing enough in propagating Torah and Mitzvot amongst Jews who still may give us a hearing. If the Irish can choose one son of every family for the priesthood, and the Mormons can successfully insist that two years must be spent as missionaries for the Mormon Church, cannot we manage to devise some system to save North American Jewry--before it is too late, **חט ושלום**? All of our constituent groups should feel challenged to come up with creative, viable, effective plans.

We have talked so far of saving what we can of the Jewish world and of improving the Orthodox community as our tasks. I now come to my last point: Peace in the Orthodox Family.

We have been deeply hurt by the insulting reactions to the **פטירה** of our great teacher, the Rav זצ"ל. Many of us took up the cudgels to defend his honor against his detractors. We followed the advice of King Solomon in the 5th verse of the 26th chapter of **משלי**, where he says, **ענה כסיל כאולתו פן יהיה חכם** --"answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes." Our silence would have been construed as consent, and so we cried out and gave vent to our pain.

But now, the Rav's **כבוד** demands that all these polemics cease. Now we must go to the **פטוק** before the one I quoted. It reads, **אל תען כסיל כאולתו פן תשוה לו גם אתה** --we are not to answer in kind lest we descend to that same unappealing level. So, let the issue be dropped from the public forum.

The honor of the entire Orthodox community, in all its various factions and sub-groups, requires self-restraint of each of us despite the provocations in all areas that divide us.

We read in **וישלה** of Reuven's sin against his father Jacob as he intruded in his personal, conjugal life. Jacob's reaction was--no reaction! **וישמע ישראל**, he heard--and said nothing. At this point, a remarkable thing takes place in the way the Torah is written: a space is left, as if a new paragraph begins--but there is no **פטוק**, no period to indicate the end of a sentence. Instead, the Torah continues, **ויהיו בני יעקב שנים עשר**, Jacob had twelve sons.

Ramban suggests a most relevant solution: It is because Jacob held his peace and refused to lash out at Reuben, that his family remained whole, all 12 of them. Had he spoken up he would probably have alienated Reuben and caused a rift amongst his children. That is why there is no period, no end of sentence, because his hearing-without-reacting kept all his 12 children as his sons and as one family.

I believe this may explain an other puzzle: why is the patriarch's name changed? First he is called "Israel"--**וישמע ישראל**--and immediately thereafter, "Jacob": **ויהיו בני יעקב שנים עשר**.

The answer, I submit, is that יעקב is his ordinary, daily name, whereas ישראל represents majesty, triumph, special grace and greatness. It is because Jacob showed his statesmanship and saintliness in exercising self-restraint, in acting like ישראל, that--as יעקב--he merited peace in all his family.

Let us learn from him. We've had enough mutual recriminations, so much of it ugly and mean-spirited and gratuitously nasty, that to continue it is to deteriorate both morally and in morale. We cannot preach respect and demand civility if we are not ready to grant it. Barring the unforeseeable, let us be done with all these negative emotions and concentrate on what is constructive--and conducive to peace, to שלום, in the Orthodox family. Now is the time for ישראל, for statesmanship, as we bend every effort to avoid further alienation and polarization in the contemporary family of בני יעקב.

It is the practice of the Rambam to close every set of halakhot with an agadic flourish in which he shows the importance of the particular mitzvah he had been codifying. Yet, in one case he makes an exception: that of Hanukkah. He concludes his הלכות חנוכה by showing that there is a value higher than that of חנוכה:

היו לפניו נר ביתו ונר חנוכה, או נר ביתו
וקידוש היום, נר ביתו קודם משום שלום
בית... גדול השלום שכל התורה ניתנה לעשות שלום
בעולם, שנא' דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום

The Hanukkah candle is the symbol of פרסומי ניסא. But miracles take second place to שלום בית, symbolized by the Shabbat candle. Kiddush bespeaks holiness, sanctity, but even קידוש must make way for שלום בית. Torah is the greatest mitzvah in the Torah--but it too is ultimately but a means to attain peace.

As we approach Hanukkah, let that message of the Rambam be broadcast loud and clear, and let the word go out from here for all to hear: Peace amongst Jews--peace, without necessarily agreeing on all issues, without uniformity or bullying or artificial suppression of ideas and ideals--is the greatest miracle of all, greater even than that of Hanukkah.

שלום בית in our Orthodox camp is greater and more important even than קידוש; and certainly claims to greater holiness or "frumkeit" should never be used to disturb the peace.

ת"ח מרבים שלום בעולם. Peace is what Torah is all about. And if we all reverence Torah and aspire to study and understand it, then the proof of our success and our sincerity is how far we are willing to go and how much we are willing to put up with for it.

אז נדברו יראי ה' ויקשב ה' וישמע
Only if truly religious people are willing to talk with each other, is the רבש"ע willing to listen.

May we, in our deliberations and in the Torah we shall hear, attain to every blessing of the רבש"ע but, above all else, to שלום.

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום
עלינו ועל כל ישראל ואמרו אמן