

**The Investiture of
Dr. Norman Lamm
as President of
Yeshiva University**

DR. NORMAN LAMM
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Boards of Yeshiva University, distinguished guests of the academic community, fellow members of our faculties, my revered teachers, worthy rabbis, my dear family, students, alumni, and friends of Yeshiva University.

I am deeply moved by you who have assembled this day to join me in this ceremony of investiture as president of Yeshiva University. It is on this very platform that I received my doctorate ten years ago. Even more am I honored by the confidence placed in me by the Trustees in entrusting to me the destiny of this great citadel of learning, which nurtured me intellectually and spiritually from the time I was 18 years old.

However, this sentiment is tempered by two factors: first, I fully appreciate that it is not I but Yeshiva University which is being honored by you at this occasion. It is Yeshiva to which you, and I, express our gratitude for 91 years of unexcelled academic and communal leadership.

Second, I feel humble indeed to have been summoned to follow two of the most innovative and gifted spiritual and educational leaders in the history of the American Jewish Community —Dr. Bernard Revel, of blessed memory, the first president of Yeshiva

University, and his successor and my immediate predecessor and teacher, Dr. Samuel Belkin, may he rest in peace. I revered Dr. Belkin as an inspired teacher; I loved him as a man, as a friend, as my mentor. His giant mantle feels all too large upon these narrow shoulders.

Nevertheless, I am mindful of the saying of an ancient sage, "[What the great] Samuel [was] in *his* generation, [the lesser] Jephthah [was] in *his* generation." I know that I cannot equal my predecessors. I pray only that I may prove to be of as much service to my generation as they were to theirs.

I suppose that every epoch produces its own *Weltschmerz* and issues its own solemn jeremiads. Yet it is undeniable that depression and gloom and foreboding seem to be the hallmarks of our particular time. We are the generation of Vietnam and Watergate. Economic distress casts a pall over our country, and indeed the world, at the beginning of our third century. The United Nations, which began with so much promise, continues to lend the sanction of international respectability to terrorism and duplicity, and has soured mankind's hope into cynicism. And the State of Israel, which is for Jews the only meager, institutionalized consolation to emerge out of the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, and for the Western World the only shred of atonement for its sorry and sordid record during the war years, remains the only country in the world whose claim to national self-determination is questioned by most of the nations.

At a time of such justifiable pessimism, there is much unhappiness too in the world of education.

The position to which I have been called is no easy one even in the most favorable of circumstances. Today it is more difficult than it ever was before. The lead article in a current journal of higher education is entitled, "The Reeling Presidency."

Yet, limited though we are by unpleasant realities, we must and shall confront the future courageously. As the first century R. Tarphon taught, "you are not required to finish the task, but you are not free to desist from it."

When the philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated his categorical imperative, he was asked if it is at all possible to abide by such a sublime code. He responded: "I don't know if it's practical and I don't know if it's possible, but this I know, that *du kannst weil du must*" —you can because you must.

So, maybe this isn't the best time, but it is the only time we have. And though society seems to be spinning, and institutions seem to be tumbling, and the world seems to have become unstuck, and university presidents are reeling, nevertheless I shall do the only human and honorable thing: I shall try, I shall persevere — and, with the help of God, we shall together prevail. We can, because we must.

A great American, Admiral Halsey, once said, "There are no great men — only great challenges which average men must somehow try to meet."

I should like to address myself to some of the educational challenges which all of us confront. They are problems that are not necessarily unique to higher education or indigenous to Yeshiva University. They are also philosophical and societal, and are reflected in the fact that a profound and hazardous confusion has insinuated itself into the prevalent philosophy of education in America. For an abrupt shift has taken place in the values that Americans place on education — a shift almost sharp enough to be termed a revolution.

There was a time when the American emphasis on education seemed quite extravagant. In 1830, that perceptive French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote from America to a professor friend in Paris, "The universal and sincere faith that they profess here in the efficaciousness of education seems to me one of the most remarkable features of America. . ."

In retrospect, this faith seems so pure, so ingenuous. But it soon became quite disingenuous.

For too long, American educationists and many colleges and universities mindlessly allowed themselves to fall into the trap of commercialism, as they corrupted the educational enterprise with the clever hucksterism of Madison Avenue. In our pursuit of more education for more people — an ideal not only defensible but quite noble — we promised young men and women that a college degree will open for them the doors to higher pay and better jobs, that a sheepskin will produce more greenbacks, that a Ph.D. will give

them money and status. As a result, higher education has now been caught in its own trap. We promised that college is "an investment in future earnings," and now, suddenly, we discover that the financial return after graduation on the investment of tuition, estimated as between eleven and twelve percent some five years ago, is now only slightly above seven percent! The inexorable logic of our deceptive appeals to materialistic motivations clearly leads to the conclusion that it is now wiser to invest in tax-free bonds than to go to school . . .

It is because of this unfortunate linkage, both explicit and subliminal, between education and material rewards, that in these last several years Americans have begun to speak of people as being "over-educated." My Grandmother would have asked, in her earthy Galician Yiddish, "Is it a shortcoming if the bride is too beautiful?"

I would not want this criticism to be overstated. I fully subscribe to the need for vocational preparation of young people so that they may be gainfully employed as adults. It is economically necessary, eminently reasonable, and — for Jews who abide by the Jewish Tradition — religiously mandatory. But, speaking both as a committed Jew and as an academician, it is offensive, self-defeating, and dangerous to link career training with the *purpose* of study, to confuse culture with professionalism, to identify the beneficial economic consequences of the educational enterprise as its proper motives.

This represents the antithesis and the undermining of true scholarship, and is what the Talmud called *shelo lishmah* — study pursued for unworthy and dishonorable motives.

I humbly suggest that Yeshiva University's distinctive philosophy of education has something of enduring value to contribute in this particular dilemma not only to the Jewish community, but to American society in general.

It is perhaps worthwhile to summarize briefly what we regard as our distinctive mission.

The guiding vision of this university, as it was formulated by my two distinguished predecessors, was the philosophy of "synthesis," the faith that the best of the heritage of Western civilization — the liberal arts and the sciences — was or could be made ultimately compatible with the sacred traditions of Jewish law and life or, at the least, that this dual program, with all its tensions, was crucial to the development of young Jews in an open society. The very name "Yeshiva University" symbolizes this article of faith.

During the course of time, this formula has been deepened and enhanced. Yeshiva has succeeded in raising several generations of young people who have thereby managed to gain the best of both worlds, the Western and the Jewish; and, by great effort and exertion, it has become a center of advanced research, extending the frontiers of knowledge in the arts, the sciences, and Judaic Studies.

We are committed both to unfettered scholarship, and to the quest for transcendent values,

norms, and the wisdom of tradition. We see no essential conflict between our common humanity, shared with all people of all perceptions and all races, and our distinctive Jewishness; between the universalism of our intellectual pursuits, and the commitment to the study of the heritage of Israel.

Yeshiva University's role as the transmitter of two cultures, and the creative development of both cultures, is thus the first major element in Yeshiva's purpose.

The second is, quite simply, the commitment to excellence. The word, of course, comes easy to the mouth of any educator. I do not know of any university that does not lay claim to the pursuit of excellence. Yet if I mention it here it is not so much to persuade you that we are excellent, as to remind myself that the search for excellence lays a moral obligation upon me and my administration, that we must never cease from pursuing it, though we will never attain it in its fullness.

The recent period of rapid growth and expansion has come to an end, for Yeshiva as well as for the rest of higher education in this country. Now, in this period of restraint and consolidation, our emphasis must be on quality more than on quantity, on depth more than on breadth. Yeshiva University knows that it has two great goals: survival and excellence. And one without the other is impossible.

Third, and finally, what Yeshiva reaffirms for itself, and what it must urge upon American society in general, is the love of learning for its own sake — what in the

Jewish tradition is known as *torah lishmah*. It is this third principle that I believe must be invoked and implemented if higher education in this country is to be spared the humiliation of trivialization.

Despite the acknowledgment by the bearers of this tradition of the need for vocational training, the theme of learning for its own sake remains a sacred goal — indeed, the preeminent value in all of the tradition. Whereas in the sources, this theme of *torah lishmah* refers exclusively to the study of the sacred literature, it becomes our duty to expand this concept from *torah* to *hokhmah* (secular knowledge), in the spirit of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, so that the concept of learning for its own sake embraces not only sacred but worldly wisdom as well. For ultimately, as that profound sage and gentle mystic-poet, Rav Kook, taught, “the Holy of Holies comprehends both the holy and the profane.”

It is this pursuit of learning for its own sake, without ulterior motives, this unadulterated love of the intellectual enterprise, that American universities must now, more than ever before, seek to inculcate in their students. Universities must, even while providing for career training, return to the original purpose of education, which is the transmission of culture and the advancement of knowledge for its own sake.

We know this in our very bones in this time of crisis. I wish that the policy-makers of our government knew this as well. If the present disengagement of

government from support of education and research continues, it will be a long time indeed before America can again win so many Nobel prizes in one year. Even self-interest, paradoxically, requires disinterested learning. The citizenry and government of America must learn that the cost of education is high, but the cost of ignorance is higher; that man is wedded to his intellect, and if he does not adequately provide for its upkeep, he may find that the alimony is even more onerous . . .

I would be less than candid — indeed, intellectually dishonest — if I stopped here. For what I have said about learning for its own sake does not exhaust the full meaning of *torah lishmah*. Is learning itself, indeed, going to save us? Do we have the right to subscribe to a kind of salvific mythology of education? Can we afford the luxury of a disengaged intellection and singleminded pursuit of research for its own sake in a society that seems to be undergoing a nervous breakdown? Dare we build ivory towers on the shifting sands of social instability and moral confusion?

Contrary to what Socrates taught, the knowledge of the good does not by itself lead to its implementation. Education alone is not the answer to the world's ills. Uganda's Idi Amin may be an ignorant boor, but he was far outclassed by the scientists who performed human experiments in Nazi concentration camps, and by the learned ideological hatchetment of Stalinist Russia and Maoist China.

Perhaps our crucial problem today is not the absence of

education but, on the contrary, its growth without spiritual directions and ethical dimensions. The disparity between, on the one hand, man's technological progress, made possible by his accelerated accumulation of knowledge, and on the other hand, his moral stagnation, goes back to the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, those primitive builders who knew everything about bricks and mortars but nothing about heart and sensitivity and people. That condition still obtains; time has only exacerbated it — and we are only eight years away from 1984, the target date set for us by that modern prophet of doom, George Orwell . . .

This disjunctiveness between technology and morality, between know-how and know-what, between education and ethical deterrence, is reflected in an agonizing existential paradox of contemporary man: a tremendous feeling of self-sufficiency and power, accompanied by a growing awareness of his own triviality, his marginality, his insignificance. The more powerful he becomes, the more impotent he feels and the more self-contempt he develops. The more he takes things in his own hands, the more he comes to believe that he possesses nothing but "things" and he *is* nothing but hands. Man *becomes* his own tools — heartless, soulless, pitiless, and ultimately even mindless. The philosopher Santayana wrote that men have come to power who, "having no stomach for the ultimate, burrow themselves downward towards the primitive." Barbarism is in the air, all about us.

But Judaism has taught all of us, Jews and non-Jews alike, that even when learning is pursued for its own sake, intellectually, it must never become an absolute, unrelated to moral dimensions. One must learn in order to do; and even if he learns for the sake of learning itself, it must be the kind of learning which makes him a different and better human being. King Solomon referred to Torah, the repository of Jewish teaching, as, "it is a tree of life to them who take hold of it" (Proverbs 3:18). Note that the famed king (whose wisdom was legendary despite his lack of an earned doctorate) chose as the symbol of learning only one of the two trees that grew in the middle of the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Surprisingly, he equated Torah — essentially an intellectual pursuit — with the Tree of Life rather than that of Knowledge. For true Torah is more than knowledge, it is life. True education is more than learning, it is human experience and neighborly love and elemental compassion as well. True intellect leads to more than concepts, it leads to reverence. The mind in its furthest reaches must transcend the cognitive and lead to a humble sense of wonder.

That learning must be more than knowledge, that it must enhance life, was expressed in a startlingly poignant way by the Zohar, source book of Jewish mysticism. The biblical Tree of Knowledge, it taught, possessed within it yet another tree — in Aramaic, *ilana de'mota*, the Tree of Death. When man combines knowledge and life, he is capable

of suppressing the Tree of Death. But if he pursues knowledge alone, unconcerned with the Tree of Life — with human compassion and love and gentleness — he thereby releases the noxious Tree of Death in all its many and ugly manifestations.

Our generation has repeated the mistake of Adam and Eve. We have learned nothing from our primordial forbears. We have blithely ignored the Tree of Life, and passionately bitten into the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. But the fruit is poisoned with the taste of death. Within the contours of the Tree of Knowledge — science and technology and even philosophy and art and literature — there has taken shape the dreaded Tree of Death, with its variety of deadly fruit: nuclear disaster, ecological cataclysm, genetic manipulation for sinister purposes, art and literature at the service of pornography and propaganda. The Zohar's insight is the anticipation of Huxley's *Brave New World* — a paradise turned into a hell.

Education, then, must always strive for more than an arrogantly unresponsive quest for information or facts or knowledge alone. It must be concerned with the quality and dignity of human life.

It is this enduring principle which is embodied in Yeshiva University and which I suggest is worthy of consideration by a wider audience: study for its own sake — not corrupted by base motivation and cheap commercialization, but also not study which ignores human dignity and morality and the quality of life; the

life of the mind which avoids the extremes of intellectual sacrilege and academic idolatry.

I have no doubt that there are many universities which subscribe to this ideal and strive with might and main to achieve it. Yeshiva University comes to this conclusion by extrapolating from the sources of the millennial tradition which gave birth to it and nourished it.

It is a tribute to my beloved teacher, Dr. Belkin, that he deliberately built this institution according to this ideal pattern. How else explain the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where pure research in the frontiers of medicine and the biological sciences is wedded to the prevention and conquest of disease and infirmity? How else explain the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, where the intricacies of Talmudic learning are integrated into the ideal of Service — to the young and the very old, the poor and the infirm, as well as to the community at large? How else explain the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, where social theory and humane practice go hand in hand? Or the Belfer Graduate School of Science, or the Ferkauf Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, or our new Cardozo School of Law, or the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, or each of our fifteen graduate and undergraduate divisions?

Yeshiva's obligations to its student body and to the Jewish community are self-evident. Its contributions to its third constituency, America and society at large, should be equally obvious — not only in humanistic education

and scientific research and medical and social and psychological community service, but also in the perennially relevant educational and philosophical insights it has culled from a tradition of study and teaching over the past 3500 years.

Permit me to close with a pledge and a prayer.

To my alma mater, Yeshiva University, its faculties, students, and trustees, I pledge all my strength and whatever modest talents and wisdom my Creator has granted me. I well know that no matter what I do for Yeshiva, it will be inadequate to repay the infinite debt of gratitude I owe it for my own education.

To the Jewish community, I pledge that I shall exert whatever influence this office confers upon me to advance the welfare of our folk and our faith, of Israel and Torah, in the special ways Yeshiva has perceived them, the ways of *Torah U-madda*. Let the word go out from here that Yeshiva is entering a period of renewal; that here is and shall be the greatest home of Torah in the Diaspora, even while we remain fully abreast of the wisdom of the world; that we will relate positively, warmly, and supportively to the State of Israel with pride and without apology — for our destinies are intertwined and interlocked.

To the world of scholarship, I pledge that this university will endeavor, to the limit of its ability, to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and research in all areas of the sciences and humanities.

To the community at large, I pledge to continue and augment our policies of communal service in the areas of health and welfare — striving for excellence and compassion even in the face of political cynicism.

To my dear father and mother and my beloved wife and children, I pledge to try my best to bring honor to our family to compensate, however inadequately, for the sacrifices that they must make to support my role in public life. Without their unquestioning faith in me and unswerving support of me throughout the years, I would never have been able to undertake these arduous burdens of communal and educational leadership. And with this pledge to my utterly devoted parents for whom no sacrifice was too great for me, and to my always gracious and ever understanding, always patient and ever loving Mindella, and to my four dear and precious children, who have made our family one of Torah and song and laughter, go my apologies for the difficulties my career has visited and may yet inflict upon them, and my gratitude for all they have done for and meant to me throughout the years.

And finally — a prayer.

The Talmud (*Ber. 28b*) tells us that one of the early sages, R. Nehunya b. Hakanah, used to offer a special prayer when he came into the *Bet Hamidrash* (academy). At such occasions, he would recite a special prayer for divine guidance.

It is his prayer which I now recite
as I am summoned to the
presidency of Yeshiva University
at the beginning of this last decade
of its first century:

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקי שלא יארע דבר
תקלה על ידי, ולא אומר על טמא טהור,
ולא על טהור טמא, ולא אכשל בדבר
הלכה וישמחו בי חברי, ולא יכשלו חברי
בדבר הלכה, ואשמח בהם.

"May it be Thy will, O Lord my
God, that no mishap occur
because of me; that I not
pronounce as acceptable and pure
that which is unacceptable and
impure, and that I not condemn as
wrong that which is right; that I not
err in any matter of principle, and
that my colleagues — trustees,
philanthropists, educators, facul-
ties, students, administrators,
alumni, the community at large —
have reason to be happy with me.
And may they too never err in any
important matter, and may I be
privileged to be happy and
fulfilled working with them."

כן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן

So may it be Thy will. Amen.

