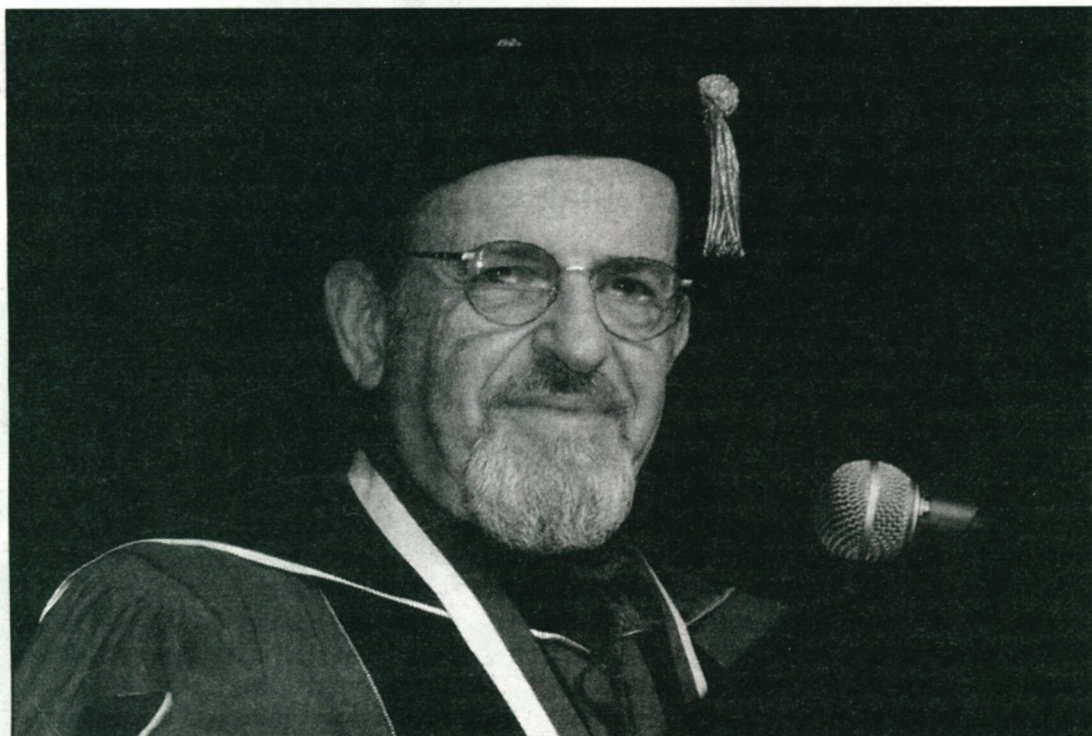


Address by Dr. President, Yes 68th Annual Comm May 2



After 22 years of inviting speakers from elsewhere, I decided to deliver the commencement address myself this year, in honor of my classmates who today celebrate the 50th anniversary of their graduation from Yeshiva College in 1949—and, of course, in honor of this year's graduates.

I hope you do not think I am compromising your special celebration by taking note of the jubilee anniversary by me and my classmates. I am reminded of the incident that occurred to one of the most distinguished philosophers of our times, Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was preparing to take a train at the Oxford Depot in England, and was deep in philosophic conversation with two of his most eminent students—Prof. Hart, and a woman whose name I forgot. At one point, they noticed to their dismay that the train was beginning to pull away from the station, whereupon they all began to run for the train. The two younger scholastics made it just in time, but the older Prof. Wittgenstein was left behind, huffing and puffing, a look of disappointment written all over him. A kindly lady who noticed the professor's discomfort assured him, "Don't worry, the next train departs in just one hour." "But you don't understand," he replied, "they came to see me off..."

So, we have gathered to see you off, and it may sound to you that we are sending the class of '49 off. But worry not. By the time these ceremonies are over, all of us will have been seen off successfully.

I offer you my apologies as well for being the hapless victims upon whom I am visiting my maudlin recollection and gratuitous advice. My only excuse is that years alone endow one with certain privileges, and that half a century from now you probably will inflict similar punishment upon your students and grandchildren. May you all live that long and longer—in health and happiness.

THEN VS. NOW

What a difference between my graduation and this class! Consider the numbers alone: in 1949, the faculty, both full-time and part-time, consisted of 38 men—no women. And the graduating class counted 38 men—no

women. Today, we celebrate the graduation of 2200 men and women, of whom 650 are undergraduates and 836 graduates. And the faculty of the undergraduate colleges consists of 267 men and women, and the total faculty—full-time and part-time—numbers 1015 scholars. Then we had no Kollelim, today-five. Then we had but one building, and today we have 5 campuses in New York, and one in Israel. So we usher out this foul but fascinating century, so blood-drenched yet so glorious, in far better condition than we were in mid-century.

The cultural differences are also fascinating. Then, as a well known writer observed, chips were made of wood, hardware was hammers and wrenches, and software wasn't in the dictionary. Grass was something you mowed, Coke was something you drank, Crack was something you repaired, and Pot was something you cooked in. If you were lucky, life was "swell" or "neat"—not "cool." And we had to ship arms clandestinely to Israel—not fly openly and happily for a year or two of learning there.

Despite all these changes, many things have remained fundamentally the same, especially for Yeshiva students. We then were, and today you are, basically respectful of teachers and parents—with only an occasional aberrant personality to spoil the record. Yeshiva students mostly do have intellectual concerns, despite worry about career and future. They were, and you are, loyal to our great country and passionately committed to the State of Israel—which then was only one year old. Above all, they did, and you do cherish the wholeness and holiness of the Jewish heritage. And for this we are most grateful.

INDEPENDENT THINKING

I direct my remarks this morning to the newly minted bachelors concerning two of the things that have not essentially changed in 50 years—and that are in apparent conflict with each other. One is the need for every person to think for himself or herself, and the other is the need for us to speak and act as one, for the sake of unity in the community.

The pressure to conform, the means by

which discipline is enforced in society, opposes the need to think critically for one's self. It acts in conjunction with the herd instinct which, as the term implies, reduces humans intellectually and morally to our basic biological level—that of animals. Now, as then, society demands conformity with its values, opinions, styles of dress or speech—in every sphere of human activity.

Nowadays we experience the same tyranny but with a slight twist: apparently we must conform to non-conformity itself. If every kind of dress, however fashionably skimpy or morally repugnant, is acceptable, whether at the office or at home, at the beach or in the house of worship, then everyone must dress different and down. If speech must be laced with "you know" and "like," then, like, everyone, you know, must speak in a kind of like linguistic static... If everyone indulges in the collective pursuit of mindless hedonism and permissiveness, then people of decent instincts sheepishly follow suit and disguise their thoughtlessness with phony euphemisms. The tendency to submit to the icons of fashion and accept the *diktat* of the barons of campus or industry by wearing only designer *clothes* may be forgivable. Not so the easy capitulation to designer *ideas*. The darker forces of our culture flourish in the murkiness of the critical intellect.

The Jewish tradition celebrates thinking for yourself. "This is the Torah, and I must study it," is the formal introduction by many of our medieval halakhic authorities to a declaration of critical ideas, as if to say: I must learn Torah as I understand it, with my own mind, even if I have to question the views of eminent predecessors. The giants of the Jewish tradition were notoriously independent thinkers—independent even of their own beloved teachers. R. Asher (1250-1327), of Germany and Spain, instructed us that the Torah demands that we speak the truth and that we not play favorites for any individual. And R. Hayyim Volozhiner (1749-1821) taught us that to differ with a revered teacher is a *milchemet mitzvah*, a holy war, in which we give no quarter to an intellectual opponent because of his station or prestige. These, and others, were eminent halakhic authorities who rejected authoritarianism.

I shall never forget an incident that occurred when I was a student of our late master, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory. "The Rav" had been propounding a fascinating interpretation of a Tosafot for about two weeks of *sheurim*. At the beginning of the third week he called upon me to present the Tosafot and, intimidated as I was, I gave back to him what I thought was a full exposition of his arguments. I was confident that I would receive at least a word of commendation—but got the exact reverse. "What are you telling me? Don't you think I know what I said? I want to hear what *you* think! I want my students to think for themselves and not just to parrot what I say."

A year ago, both India and Pakistan shocked the world and caught its leaders unawares when these two antagonistic countries exploded nuclear devices, throwing the international balance of terror into chaos. Why, it was asked, was the government unprepared for this? The answer: there exists

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Reconciliation Exercises

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in the CIA an obscure post in charge of "contrarian thinking" whose job it is to argue against conventional wisdom. (There is an established place for contrarian thinking even in the stock market.) This time the intelligence officer in charge failed to think in a contrary manner, resulting in the worst American intelligence debacle in recent years.

I am not advocating that you be perversely different on principle. But when it comes to the important decisions in life, in the quiet of your own mind, be wary of the tyranny of dogmatic opinions and untested ideas and the demand for uniformity of thought. You who have studied Talmud in depth know that of the 526 chapters of the Mishna, only one—*Eizehu mekoman*—contains laws with no controversies, no differing views!

The lesson for us is clear: each of us must have tucked away in some corner of his and her brain a contrarian—or *ipkha mistabra*—compartment whose function it is to seek out views other than those we readily consent to because they swarm around us. The devil's advocate can well turn out to be an angelic emissary. And swimming against the stream may be the best way to avoid drowning.

THE NEED FOR UNITY

However, we must not ignore the countervailing need—that of unity as an alternative to chaos. Hence, I am not advising you to be non-conformist on principle on every issue. Just as we are rewarded for *derisha*—speaking out—so, the Talmud teaches us, are we rewarded for *perisha*, for keeping silent, for squelching the urge to proclaim and declare. To choose properly and wisely between them, *sekhel*—good judgment—will always remain indispensable. Offsetting the need for individual independence is a crying need to hold together a society whose fabric seems to be unraveling. Kosovo and Serbia, Syria and Lebanon, the Basques in Spain and the Kurds in Turkey—these and many others illustrate the centrifugal tendencies abroad in the world, fueled by hatred and the resurrection of ancient enmities. And here in America, diversity and cultural pluralism may yet lead to social incoherence.

For Jews, the situation is even worse. The recent election campaign in Israel highlighted an ethnicism and tribalism that portend a movement from attractive diversity to dangerous fragmentation—a peril already evident, as well, in American-Jewish life. We hurl invectives at each other with the enthusiasm of a manic pitcher in a fateful game of denominational hardball. The Shinui party in Israel spews forth anti-Orthodox hatred bordering on the anti-Semitic. Politicos on all sides, both here and there, use inflammatory rhetoric to humiliate even minor dissenters in their own bailiwick. So deep is the fissure that families on both sides of the several divides choose not to marry with each other, so that we are faced with the terrifying possibility of breaking up into two peoples, as mere resentment curdles into cold and hard hatred.

How has it come to pass that such virulent factionalism and partisanship, the illegitimate scions of smug self-certainty, are allowed to run amok in the land? We are faced with more than a civil war amongst Jews. We are faced with an *un-civil* war. We seem to be

going beyond a *Kulturkampf*, a war of cultures, to adopting a *Kampfkultur*, a culture of war, a battle psychology—against each other. For all our rhetoric about Jewish unity, we are on the precipice, staring into the abyss of communal self-destruction—and there is enough blame for all sides to share in the guilt.

RECONCILIATION AND TOLERANCE

How then, you may ask, do we reconcile these two apparent opposites—the need to be unified and avoid chaos and anarchy, and the imperative to think for ourselves and allow for contrarian thought?

There are several answers. First, reserve your intellectual independence for the truly important things. Not every issue is worth arguing for, and not everything that comes into your mind should come out of your mouth. And second—speak humbly, without arrogance. No one is an expert on everything.

Third, and more important: Our tradition teaches us that the *tefillin shel rosh*, phylacteries worn on the head, must be exposed, while the *shel yad*—those on the arm—must be covered. So, in the realm of ideas and attitudes whose provenance is in the head, always feel free to air your questions and entertain contrary views. But when it comes to action and working for the common weal, symbolized by the arm, then after decisions are democratically arrived at, all dissident views must be held in abeyance—covered up with dignity—as the majority view prevails. Speak your mind, but act in concert with others.

Hence, group action—yes; group thinking—no. Mutual commitment to ideals—yes; the stifling of all dissenting notions—no. And physical or even verbal violence—no, never.

Finally, there is really no *necessary* conflict between independent thinking and unity of action. Certainly, there are times when fundamental principles must be defended at any cost. There are red lines that may not be crossed. But these lines must be short, few, and well defined. And remember: most often it is not diversity of thought that causes disunity, but the *way in which the views of the disputants are expressed*. If there is a lack of mutual respect, of civility, of *derekh eretz*, of acknowledging the right of others to maintain different opinions, then a crippling disunity is inevitable. If, however, the arguments are conducted in a spirit of tolerance and dignity and a readiness to compromise on tactics and less-than-fundamental matters, unity and amity are certainly attainable. Such attitude most often characterized the Talmudic debates throughout its long history. The lack of such comity is what led to the destruction of the Second Temple and Jewish independence two millennia ago.

I am grateful to our Dean Purpura for drawing my attention to something the historian Shelby Foote has pointed out: Before the Civil War, the United States was referred to in the plural—"the United States *are*." After the terrible war that claimed 670,000 lives, the United States became singular—"the United States *is*." We became one nation.

Tragically, it seems that the opposite grammatical transformation is afflicting us as Jews: we are going from the singular to the plural. And we have got to reverse that trend.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

I address myself specifically to those today graduating from our three undergraduate schools. Your generation dare not wait for blood to be spilled or reputations besmirched or schisms perpetuated in order finally to conclude that unity must be achieved—a unity invigorated by lively debate in mutual respect. As you grow into leadership positions, Yeshiva alumni should not allow it to be said that the Jewish people are this or that, only that the Jewish people is one thing or the other.

I repeat: there are boundaries beyond which, as men and women of principle, we dare not go without injuring our integrity. But draw those lines with exceeding care. Do not be tempted by easy solutions expressed in slogans and clichés and buzz-words. And do not be seduced by the extremists' meretricious claims to consistency. Life is too complex, too full of ambiguity and paradox, to be captured by facile consistency. Remember that extremism can rip off the thin veneer of civilization and reveal the ugly, venal visage of violence.

Instead, advocate the primacy of Torah with strength but with humility, with conviction but with compassion, with vigor but with reverence—and even with love for those outside your own circle. Sometimes that demands the most courage.

In only a few years, you will be in a position to make a difference. If you, as graduates of Yeshiva College and Stern and Syms, are truly *benei Torah*, you will strive mightily to achieve that modicum of unity. As the Talmud put it so quaintly (Berakhot 6a): The Almighty too dons *tefillin*, and in them is inscribed the verse (II Samuel 7:23) "Who is like unto Thy people Israel, one nation on the earth." One who fails to promote the oneness of Israel, disqualifies the *tefillin* of the Almighty and in effect denies the unity of God.

So, as you leave Yeshiva bear in mind that as the people of Torah we are each of us summoned to our sacred mission to act on behalf of the peace and unity of the community, and all mankind: "Its (the Torah's) ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all its paths lead to peace" (Proverbs 3). Let us exercise our critical intelligence honed by the study of both our sacred texts and the richness of worldly culture. And let us insist that only in an atmosphere of civility and tolerance can vigorous disagreement enhance the welfare of all. This, after all, is of the essence of Torah Umadda which Yeshiva stands for and what we have been teaching you—and what I hope you have learned and learned well.

Be proud of your heritage, proud of your alma mater, and proud of our sublime mission. Know that we are proud of you, the fruit of our labors over the years. Remember at all times that in the eyes of the world each of you represents Yeshiva University and all that it stands for. I am confident that you will reflect well upon us.

In the words we proclaim when we finish reading one of the Five Books of the Torah, as you close the covers on this chapter of your lives, *חזק חזק ונתחזק*—Let us be strong, very strong, and let us strengthen each other.