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July 12, 1987

YU/Stamford, Conn. Convocation

(in honor of Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz)

1. My pleasure in addressing you at this occasion is enhanced by my personal friendship for "Rabbi Joe" Ehrenkranz. We first met when I a High School freshman... Was a different world then:

*HARDWARE = hammers and wrenches

*SOFTWARE = not in dictionary

*TO BE GAY = to be happy

*GRASS = something you mowed

*COKE = something you drank

*POT = something you cooked in

*REAGAN = an actor, not a President

*NORTH = a direction, not a lieutenant colonel -- although
in both instances magnetic...

During all these historical, societal, cultural changes, he has remained essentially the same in his personality, character, and values.

2. Permit me a few remarks on the crisis of our people in our times. In two days -- Shiva Asar be'Tammuz, initiating "Three Weeks" of mourning, culminating in Tisha be'Av -- destruction of two Temples, First in 568 BCE; Second Commonwealth came to end in 70 CE. (Importance of Temples in national Jewish life). Since 1948, our era often referred to as Third Commonwealth.

3. Why the Destructions? Rabbis of Talmud (Yoma 49a) probed beyond obvious military, political, and economic factors and located basic problem in realm of morality. In each case, moral fiber of people was weakened beyond repair, but each had a different moral cause that precipitated the churban. First Temple -- avodah zarah, idolatry. Second -- sin'at chinam... And they proved to be historically correct and morally insightful and relevant. But -- also scary! Reason? -- because my analysis of events and intuition into our current predicament leads me to frightening thought that we are today guilty of both: I am gripped by the fear, danger, and scandal that we may be responsible for both idolatry and baseless hatred!

4. First is avodah zarah, the paganism of modernism. We have assimilated not only into the common ignorance of Jewish sources, texts, and faith; we have also worshipped at the shrines of contemporary idolatry. Consider them well.

For instance, what Frances Bacon called "the idols of the market place." We even use the religious term, "the almighty buck." We worship, unabashedly, the golden calf -- or what William James once called "the bitch-goddess Success."

Our avodah zarah includes the perversities associated with ancient paganism. We are culpable of worshipping both the Idols of the Boardroom and the Idols of the Bedroom! We are, in our contemporary life, profoundly amoral, our moral sensitivities dulled, and insensitive to the most elementary moral norms which have informed Western civilization and given it its power and raison d'etre since Biblical days. We have opened our closets -- not to deposit old clothes or discarded ideas and defunct values, but to give vent to the ghosts of moral decadence that we once thought long dead. Everything comes out of the closet today -- and threatens to pollute the environment and atmosphere of our world. Indeed, the ancient heathens would be embarrassed at the depravity of our contemporary moral imagination and inventions!

No less depressing is the matter-of-factness with which we accept the apotheosis of Self. We have taken the adage, "man is the measure of all things," to its extreme. Whether on the form of stylish new "therapies" or the coin of ordinary life, we have deified the human Self -- thus: self-realization, self-fulfillment, etc. -- and raised narcissism and

egoncentricity to the level of secular sainthood. Avodah zarah, unfortunately, is alive and well in our midst -- no less, albeit in different form, than in the First Jewish Commonwealth.

5. Sin'at chinam was the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple...And we today are all deeply worried about the divisiveness, polarization, and mutual animosity that so rashly characterizes intra-Jewish relations and discourse. Consider our current situation: Likkud/ Labor; secular/ religious; Orthodox/ non-Orthodox; Left/ Right; Israel/ American Jewry, ... And -- the media make things far worse than they are by focusing on the excesses of the extremes -- as if there is no middle ground of sanity and reflection and thoughtfulness... The media have thus exacerbated the sin'at chinam that prevails and fomented even more sin'at chinam in the process.

Yet, despite the abundance of sin'at chinam in its various forms, it must be remembered that there is also a proud, distinguished, and committed moderate group!

It is this group that is represented by Yeshiva University/ It is we who abjure avodah zarah and are unalterably opposed to sin'at chinam...

By the very nature of our mission of Torah Umadda we are in

opposition to both paganism and divisiveness. We are open to mankind (AECOM, FGS), to America (CSL), to all of the Jewish community (BRGS, WSSW), to the Orthodox community (RIETS), and all the undergraduate schools. You can hardly serve such diverse constituencies without profound commitment to ahavah and you have nothing to offer them that is unique and irreplaceable if you do not offer them Torah.

It is not easy to be a "Radical Moderate" in today's environment. It means fighting on two fronts: against worldwide avodah zarah and the little paganisms that are its satellites, and against the Jewish penchant for sin'at chinam -- internecine warfare, and any form of suicidal divisiveness.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres recently (at a celebration of Ben Gurion's 100th birthday) told the following story: when Ben Gurion had temporarily retired from office to Sedeh Boker in the Neghev, he asked Peres, then a young aide, to invite the great Sh.Y. Agnon, later to become Israel's Nobel Laureate, to visit him; they had never met before. Agnon was reluctant, but finally agreed to make the visit. When returning, Peres asked Agnon for his impression. His answer: "Apparently Ben Gurion is not afraid of the Goyyim -- and what's more, he isn't even afraid of the Jews!"

To be a moderate today, in the mold of YU, means not be afraid of the avodah zarah of the outside world and not of

the sin'at chinam of the Jews!

6. YU stands for the antithesis of both these destructive plagues --avodah zarah and sin'at chinam.

We believe that Torah is not compatible with bigotry.

We affirm that, as King Solomon taught, "its [the Torah's] ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace."

We assert that harmony and unity do not require of us to abandon our principles; that we stand proudly by our belief in our ancient yet ever-new Torah and the fulness of Halakhah; that we exercise our right to think and proclaim that we are right and our adversaries are wrong, and yet to do so with civility and respect and love for our opponents.

We aspire to two great loves -- ahavat Yisrael and ahavat ha-Torah; and if the two sometimes seem to come into conflict, we are prepared to resolve the tension by relying on a yet greater though less obvious love: ahavat ha-Shem, the love of God and the love of humankind -- the creatures made in His image.

That is our credo in this crazy, cacophonous community and

this weary and often wild world. And it is most appropriate to articulate this appreciation in honor of an alumnus who, in his life and career, represents and implements that credo. Dr. Joseph H. Ehrenkranz is that man.