

Centennial AddressRabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary Dinner

. When our Father Jacob was having problems with his father-in-law and employer, Laban, he turned to him in frustration and said:

...זה עשרים שנה אנכי עמך וְחֶלְדִּי וְעֶזְרִי לֹא שָׁכְלוּ וְאֵילֵי צֹאנִי לֹא אָכַלְתִּי...  
הֵייתִי בְיוֹם אֶכְלָנִי חֶרֶב וְקֶדַח בְּלִילָה וְתָדַד שְׁנֵתִי מֵעֵינַי

I have been with you for twenty years...and I have not eaten any of the animals of your flock...In the daytime I was consumed by drought, and with frost by night. And sleep fled from my eyes (Gen.31: 38-40)

I can sympathize with some though not all of Jacob's complaints. No one ever accused me of eating any members of Yeshiva's flocks, although various interesting, imaginative rumors have come to my attention during these past two decades... I have not suffered the radical changes of temperature that afflicted our shepherd forefather; instead, I made up for that with varied kinds of headaches. But I have worked--and worried--quite hard these twenty years, and indeed, often, too often, "sleep fled from my eyes." But unlike Jacob, I have no complaints; instead, I offer thanks to you--colleagues, trustees, supporters, alumni, students, my very devoted wife and family who have borne with grace so much of the burdens I carried, and, most of all, to the Almighty--for having given me the privilege of serving a cause I consider sacred and an institution that I believe in and love with all my heart and all my soul and all my might. And I pray that God will give me the strength to continue such service into the future.

Twenty years is not unusual for a presidency of Yeshiva, but quite rare for the stewardship of an American university. It calls to mind the story of a couple celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary. A local reporter approached them and asked one of them, "How does it feel to have lived 60 years with one person?" The answer: "Oh, it was like 2 days." Why two days, the reporter asked. The reply: "like Yom Kippur and Tisha Be'av!"

In my case, the answer would be that twenty years passed like only *one* day--Simchat Torah. Not all was song and dance, but there was always the joy of serving a great, transcendent cause with which I fully identify.

Our celebration today is in honor of the foresight of our founders in renaming Yeshiva Etz Chayim for the Kovner Rav, R. Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, who died the year before.

It is not generally recognized that this Gaon in many ways adumbrated--explicitly but mostly implicitly, in the way he behaved--the ideals which inspire this Yeshiva and make it



unique. Together with the Netziv and R. Shmuel Mohliver, he identified publicly with the Hovevei Zion movement--the precursor of Zionism. He believed in the unity of the Jewish community, and did not hesitate to attend conferences with assimilationist Jews. He wrote letters on behalf of cooperating with non-observant Jews in responding to challenges to what was precious to all Jews. Despite his apprehensions about America and its corrosive effects on Jewish loyalties, he permitted many of the students of his Kollel to emigrate to the U.S. His attitude stemmed not from some liberal religious or political doctrine, but from a sophisticated *ahavat Yisrael*--the same source for his historic attitude to helping *agunot* reestablish normal lives. His approach thus finds a home with us after a whole, violent, historic century.

What, indeed, is it that we stand for now, at the brink of a new century and new millennium on the secular calendar? Let me respond by means of a story told in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 33b) which is a powerful metaphor for our own RIETS (Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary). It concerns the great R. Simeon bar Yochai and his son R. Elazar:

A few of the great Tannaim of that generation were discussing the occupying government, the Romans. R. Simeon bar Yochai made a sarcastic comment about them, and the information soon reached the Roman authorities who condemned him to death. He fled, together with his son R. Elazar, and eventually the two found refuge in a bare cave, with nothing but a carob tree and a fresh well to sustain them. There they stayed for twelve years, growing intensely in their learning and their spiritual development, until the Prophet Elijah announced that Caesar was dead, and hence they were free to leave. They left, and the first scene they encountered was that of a farmer plowing and planting his field. They were outraged by the apparent "normalcy" they beheld, and commented, "they abandon life eternal (i.e., the study of Torah) for ephemeral life!" They could not bear the thought of such normalcy. And, wherever they cast their eyes, it was burnt to a cinder, i.e., they reduced such pretenses to ashes. Whereupon a Divine Voice issued from Heaven and exclaimed, "Have you left your cave in order to destroy My world? Go back to your cave!" They returned and stayed there for another twelve months. At the end of that period, another Divine Voice commanded them, "Leave your cave." They did so, and wherever R. Elazar wound (i.e., he kept up his radical dissatisfaction with mundane life) R. Simeon bar Yochai healed (i.e., he was reconciled to "normal" life). On the eve of the Sabbath they saw an old man hurrying, with a pair of myrtle twigs in his hand. "What are these for?" they asked. In honor of the Sabbath, the old man answered. Whereupon the father said to the son, "See how the people of Israel love the *mitzvot*." Thus, they were pacified.

At this point, both older and younger man understand that sincere devotion of even a layman, a non-scholar in Torah is precious, and should not be deprecated.



What do learn from this? We learn that caves are important, that they are critical if we are to create *talmidei chakhamim* and nourish people of great spiritual capacity. But it is *not* the norm for Jewish society and community or, for that matter, for *talmidei chakhamim*. Any attempt to impose the discipline of the cave on the “real world” is destructive, and those who advocate it are told: *go back to your cave!*... The Divine Voice favors the new-found maturity of R. Simeon bar Yochai, not the radical view of his son; hence, the command to us is clear: *leave the cave*... The regular Jewish community that remains loyal to Yiddishkeit is a precious one and should be valued, even as is an old and apparently uneducated man who does what he can with love. “See how the people of Israel love the *mitzvot*.”

We too, then, must include every Jew who cherishes his Jewishness, even though he may be ignorant of the correct way of doing so, in the circle of our deepest spiritual concern and personal regard and friendship and love, and never seek to exclude him.

We who study and teach at Yeshiva essentially live in a private community--a marvelous enclave, one of study and thought and research, of vibrant ideas and creative concepts and novel interpretations and spiritual growth, all on the very highest levels. But it is an *enclave*, not a *cave*; we are not hermetically sealed off from the world. Yes, the “cave experience” can be, and indeed is, a vital element in one’s Torah development, and that is why we recommend (at considerable cost to us!) a year of intensive immersion in Torah in Israel and, for Semikha students, at our Gruss Institute in Jerusalem. But the cave is not the natural habitat of Torah; a “house of study”-- a *bet ha-midrash*--is where Torah flourishes, not a “cave” of study. We do not and should not aspire to educate our students to live in caves once they have left the Yeshiva. We have and should have higher and more demanding standards than the rest of society and Jewish community, but not so high that *we* look upon *them* with withering contempt-- “wherever they cast their eyes was burnt”----and not *so* demanding that *others* look upon *us* as out of reach and irrelevant.

Unquestionably, the great mission and prime emphasis of RIETS is *Torah Lishmah*--the study of Torah for its own sake”: not for professional achievement, not for adornment or prestige, not for the glory of any individual or any institution. In the context of Yeshiva University’s Torah Umadda education, this goal is in the tradition of R. Simeon bar Yochai when he emerged from his cave the second time. Our credo is and must remain that Torah is the highest and most sublime ideal of *am yisrael*, that study of Torah is the noblest occupation, that the Torah way of life is worthy of the most demanding sacrifice. But Torah is not incompatible with a creative life in the enormous variety of pursuits open to us in modern life: in the arts and sciences and business and crafts and professions.

The second emphasis of RIETS, as the premier institution of Modern Orthodoxy, is therefore on service to the Jewish community. The adjective “Modern” should not fool anyone. Our commitment to and celebration of *Torah Lishmah* is no less than that of any other advanced yeshiva; but unlike others, our confrontation with modernity is more nuanced, more subtle, and more balanced. We neither accept it uncritically nor reject it unthinkingly. We believe, as the Rav taught us, that Torah can be lived and implemented in



every time and circumstance, and that includes modernity and post-modernity. We stand firmly in the world of Halakha, but we shall not turn our backs on the world of *Madda*--of culture and science. We shall ever heed the Voice that bids us "leave the cave!" That dialectic between the Cave and the World is the source of our glory--as well as of our dilemmas, our tensions, and our perplexing inconsistencies. Our commitment is to Torah, to this community of Modern/Centrist Orthodox Jews, and to this ideology. And it is a commitment, not a compromise or concession.

On this centennial of the naming of RIETS we are summoned to reaffirm our commitment to that historic vision, for it is *our* truth. And, as the Hasidic Zaddik R. Hirsh Rimanover taught, in a playful but profound comment on the verse *lo tonu ish et amito* ("you shall not deceive your fellow man"--Lev. 25:17). The word *amito*, friend or fellow man, is spelled with an *ayin*; with hardly any change in pronunciation it can be read as if it were spelled with an *aleph*, thus: "do not deceive your [very own] truth." *Be true to your own ideals!*

This restatement of our institutional mission should be self-evident. It should also be evident to all that this is not an easy task educationally, for our ideological balance is always precarious, and we are constantly called upon to exercise careful judgment. Younger people, especially, incline to idealistic perfectionism and are less tolerant of the foibles of an imperfect humanity and an inconsistent community--much like R. Elazar, son of R. Simeon bar Yochai. That is the way of the world, and we should be proud of our students. And if they sometimes tend to relatively extreme views, it is because of the purity of their ideals and their quest for absolute consistency, aspirations which are inspiring and admirable. It is true that such over-demanding youthful idealism can lead them and us astray, and thus prove quite dangerous. But we are adults, and so must be confident that they will mature; and we who are older must be wiser and teach them how to bank the fires of youthful zeal and sublimate their passionate idealistic yearnings in a manner that will enhance and not destroy the community of *kelal yisrael*; that will heal and not hurt, following the more mature R. Simeon bar Yochai rather than his son R. Elazar--and yet keep their idealistic ambitions alive and active for the rest of their lives.

And we must look with love and appreciation upon the non-Yeshiva, lay community, encouraging their observance of *mitzvot* at whatever level they have attained--"See how the people of Israel love the *mitzvot*"--inspiring them to greater love of *mitzvot*, to deeper study of Torah, to a more intense passion for our people and land, to increased support for Torah and its schools, and urging upon them a nobler degree of ethical and moral conduct.

As I consider our alumni and our current students, I can tell you that the overwhelming majority live up to and exceed our expectations. They are aflame with dedication, but they are more mature than their years. They are idealistic, and one of their great ideals is their love of their fellow Jews, their love of Eretz Israel, as well as their love of Torah. Be proud of them! They deserve it. And we deserve them. R. Isaac Elchanan too would have been proud of them.



It is fitting and proper that at a celebration of this sort we invoke the memories of my two illustrious predecessors, to whom Yeshiva owes its success, indeed, its very existence. Dr. Bernard Revel and Dr. Samuel Belkin, *zekher tzaddikim liverakhah*, sacrificed their lives and careers for the sake of this institution and we should always remember them in gratitude and love.

The one who shaped RIETS and put the stamp of his genius on it was the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *zekher tzaddik liverakhah*, and it is his legacy that must be preserved, expanded, and continued as a living tradition at Yeshiva University and RIETS. But -- it must be his *true* legacy. No one-sided distortion of this complex intellectual and spiritual giant should be countenanced. Let it be stated clearly and unequivocally: his attitude to "the wisdom of the nations," to Torah Umadda, to the broader Jewish community, was not cavalier; it was *le'khat'chilah*, not *bidiavad*. Any contrary assertion diminishes the *Gestalt* of this unconventional Rosh Yeshiva and *gaon she'bi-geonim*. The Rav was an integrated human being whose thinking was complicated and deep, and we should be suspicious of any effort to cut him down to fit the size of our own minds, minds so much less capacious, less bold, less profound than his. We here stand by the man he was, as the highest instance of our ideals and our aspirations. *And the Rav was a man of the broadest vision; intellectually and spiritually, he was not a "cave" man...*

After his cave-experience, the Talmud tells us, R. Simeon bar Yochai wanted to offer thanks to the Almighty for the miracle of his survival. He said, "let me go and accomplish something" practical and useful for my people. The Talmud tells us that he learned this from our Father Jacob, the same Jacob who labored for twenty years for Laban and then survived his encounter with Esau. In a comment on a verse, the Talmud relates that Jacob arrived *shalem*, "whole--physically, economically, and spiritually," and that in gratitude he instituted several important contributions to the welfare of Salem, the place he came to.

I pray that I, together with all of you, be privileged to follow the example of both R. Simeon bar Yochai and Jacob and accomplish great things for RIETS and YU and, through them, for all our people, for *kelal yisrael*. And I believe that the greatest contributions that remain to be made as I conclude 20 years of service is to put our beloved Yeshiva in the condition in which Jacob arrived in Salem:...improved physically, financially, and spiritually in the ever higher levels of Torah to which we all aspire.

The future beckons, and we must respond, all of us, with the determination of which R. Simeon bar Yochai spoke: to accomplish great, practical, real things on behalf of Yeshiva.

In that way, each of us individually and all of us collectively, can attain the wholeness which is worthy of our greatest sacrifices and most cherished aspirations.

So may it be His will.