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# **“A PERFECT WORLD”**

an address by

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at the

**חג הסמיכה**

**The Chag Hasemikha**

celebrating the ordination of Rabbis

of the

**RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

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on

**כ"ו אדר תשס"ב**

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As we welcome this week the new month of Nisan, the חודש הגאולה (the month of redemption), I recall the Gemara in *Berakhot 43b*:

האי מאן דנפיק ביומי ניסן וחזי אילני דקא מלבלבי, אומר: ברוך שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום וברא בו בריות טובות ואילנות טובות להתנאות בהן בני אדם.

If one goes out in the month of Nisan, the beginning of Spring, and sees the trees blossoming, he is required to utter a blessing: "Blessed is He who created a word with nothing amiss, and placed in it beautiful creatures and beautiful trees for the pleasure of humans.

In other words, a perfect world.

*Really?* In a world of suicide bombers and rampant international anti-Semitism, of drug culture and AIDS, of racism and genocide and, in the Jewish community, pugnacious ignorance, smug mediocrity, and progressive alienation from all that has been cherished and sanctified for almost 200 generations?

Yes, the world is perfect. Oh, I know quite well that that is a fiction, but a glorious fiction it is! I would call a "sacred fiction," a statement that defies common sense but, if held and pursued single-mindedly, ultimately leads to uncommon truths. For there are fictions that, if you believe in them with all your heart and soul, even if your mind defies them, miraculously turn into truths, sacred truths. If you believe that this is a perfect world, and *שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום*, then you will *make it into* a perfect world, you will repair its defects and sublimates its evil passions and make it better and nobler and holier. That, to my mind, is what *לתיקון עולם* really means. As we say in our *עלינו* prayer, *לתיקון עולם במלכות שדי*, to repair the world based upon the ideals and model of the divine Kingdom.

So, I urge you, as newly minted *רבנים*, to engage in the heroic struggle to create absurd fictions and then turn them into sublime truths. Here are six such sacred fictions, especially for *רבנים ומחנכים*:

\*Every Jew, no matter how estranged, no matter how far gone or assimilated, is redeemable if you try hard enough.

\*Israel, with all its vigorous debates and invariable, volatile, and voluble divisiveness, its almost institutionalized agnosticism, is capable of once again becoming an *עם קדוש וממלכת כהנים*.

\*Your *בתי* *בתי*, Boards, parent councils and education committees are all cooperative, well meaning, tolerant, intelligent, peaceful, generous, and respectful ladies and gentlemen.

\*America, the culture of which constitutes our pervasive environment, the very air we breathe—despite its vulgarity and shallowness—nevertheless contains enough that is precious, enough respect for the dignity of man created in the *צלם אלוהים*, enough political wisdom, enough human goodness, to encourage our religious devotion and to enable us to thrive as Jews who are *שומרי מצוה ובני תורה*. We can thrive as committed Jews in America.

\*Your rabbinic colleagues are always helpful, respectful, without gall or envy or pettiness.

\*As a Rav, you will undoubtedly devote many hours of the day to *לימוד תורה בעיון*, not allowing the pesky details and bothersome frustrations to interfere with your learning.

All of you are in the Spring of your careers in *עבודת הקודש*, and I am in my Autumn years. So let me tell you that the fictions I've limned for you are indeed fictions, but my over 50 years in various forms of *עבודת הקודש* I've learned that these are noble fictions, usable ones, indispensable ones, sacred ones. Pursued with vigor and intelligence, with both passion and

sensitivity, they are not at all untrue, and they will morph into exciting, fulfilling realities—if not altogether, but enough to give you profound satisfaction and pride. ברוך שלא חיסר בעולמו כלום.

These six truths, induced by and developed from the noble dreams of sacred fiction, must be your goals, your sign-posts of success:

- You must never give up on any Jew, no matter how difficult it may be.
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- You must risk everything to bring about such a vast change in the communal mood as to make the commitment to Torah the most logical, rational choice for כלל ישראל.
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- Your loyalty to מדינת ישראל, no matter whether you settle here or there, should be unconditional. Criticize it, if you will, but love it, support it. And every מוסמך, indeed every graduate of our undergraduate schools as well, must at least consider עליה seriously.
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- You must always love your בעלי בתים—even if you don’t particularly like them. They are your responsibility, like it or not. Moreover, those who are now your worst critics may eventually become your best friends.
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- Don’t give up on American Jewry because of American culture. This is where we live, this is where the action is. Moreover, American culture has penetrated almost every corner of the earth, especially including Israel, and to segregate from it and refuse to engage it means you are “copping out” of the great issues of our era, and that is tantamount to a soldier abandoning his station in the heat of battle. It is an act of cowardice towards YOUR FELLOW Jews and treason to the mission Torah imposes upon us. Don’t ever disguise it as piety, as “real *frumkeit*.” The whole of the Jewish community are our comrades in arms, and we dare not betray their trust.
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- Now, as to your colleagues, present and future. It is your duty, despite all the attacks on you, to foster peace and understanding amongst your fellow Rabbis. More important: the peace and unity of your congregation, your school, the larger community, the Jewish people, even the world—all this falls within the purview of your אחריות.
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- Consider the well known passage in our daily *tefillot*: [בכל יום] תדב"א כל השונה הלכות מובטח לו שהוא בן עוה"ב, שנא' הליכות עולם לו, אל תקרי הליכות אלא הלכות (מגילה כח). “Whoever studies halakhot (laws) every day is guaranteed a place in the world-to-come.” This is immediately followed by the passage from (נ"ב פמ"ח) א"ר אלעזר א"ר—that אדר"נ (נ"ב פמ"ח) חנינא ת"ח מרבים שלום בעולם שנא' וכל בניך למודי ה' ורב שלום בניך (of Torah) increase peace in the world.”

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I have two questions about each of these sources and about the מסדרי הסידור who conjoined them: First—ת"ח מרבים שלום בעולם is factually questionable; I know of many cases where the exact opposite is true, where scholars foment strife—and I have the scars to prove it...

Second: If indeed it is important to be שונה הלכות, to learn a *halakha* every day, why do we not do so immediately by studying a halakhic passage, instead of reciting the *agadic* reference to ת"ח מרבים שלום בעולם?

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The answer to both is that it is indeed a *mitzvah* to learn a *halakha* every day, and the statement about *ת"ח מרבנים שלום בעולם* is indeed a halakhic dictum. By this I mean that this statement is not a descriptive-agadic one but is a normative-halakhic one, namely, *it is halakhically required of ת"ח that they increase peace in the world!* It is the preeminent *הלכה* one should reiterate daily.

Bear this in mind all during your careers. *Rabbanim* should be the initiators of peace, not the instigators of strife. *Talmidei Chakhamim* should teach by example that mutual insults, disrespect, and belittlement should not necessarily accompany difference of opinion; that *חילוקי דעת* need not lead to *מחלוקת*. This is not a matter of etiquette or decorum. It is Halakha.

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Since we are speaking of peace and unity, I feel compelled to refer to the *שלום בית* of our beloved Yeshiva. I have already dwelled on this twice in public addresses—last June and again last December. I believe it bears repetition as we are on the verge of significant changes in the leadership of Yeshiva.

When the Torah describes the building of the *משכן*, the Tabernacle in the desert, it speaks of the different parts of the structure and its furnishings—the *מזבח*, the *ארון*, the *שולחן*, etc., in great detail. But the conclusion is very much to the point: *והיה המשכן אחד*, "the Tabernacle shall be one"—unified and cohesive. All parts must meld together as one sanctuary.

Yeshiva is our contemporary *משכן*. It consists of many varied parts, quite distinguished—medicine and law, psychology and social work, Jewish education and Judaic studies, the undergraduate schools and, of course, RIETS—all of which must coordinate, each fulfilling its own distinct and immanent mission, but all ultimately blending in the ultimate mission of our *משכן* as a whole: the perpetuation of the Jewish people and its classical culture via the ideal of Torah Umadda, so that *והיה המשכן אחד*.

Y.U. and RIETS are legally distinct, and we must obey the laws of the State of New York. But spiritually and functionally we have, since the legal separation of RIETS, understood and intuited that: *והיה המשכן אחד*. For the last thirty years we have worked together, in consonance and mutual respect, without tension or contention, rift or conflict, for the benefit of both great institutions.

That peace, that unity, that sacred bond must never be allowed to fray. I know of no one who would consciously seek a rupture of that relationship, but the best of intentions misdirected can produce disastrous results. We must not permit anyone or anything to come between us. We may disagree about this or that—but only in respect and even love. No one has the right to turn Yeshiva into a dysfunctional family. Yeshiva University is our *גוף*, our body. RIETS is our *נשמה*, our very soul. The university without RIETS is a lifeless body, a corpse, indistinguishable from a hundred other universities. RIETS without Yeshiva University is a spirit without a body, a mere ghost, insubstantial and ephemeral. Let no man tear asunder what three presidents and three administrations have kept united almost a hundred years.

- Finally, turning back to our *מוסמכים*, the sixth and last truth: never sink into a passive intellectual mood whereby you progressively forget your learning and where your *לימוד* is barely adequate to prepare your elementary *sheurim* and lectures. It is told of the great *gaon*, R. Shelomo Eger, that he was in a partnership with a businessman, also a great *talmid chakham*. A competitor had falsely accused them of fraud, and they were up most of the night mapping plans for their defense. Towards dawn the partner came to the rabbi's room to share his thoughts, and found him deeply engrossed in his learning. "We are confronted with such a great *צרה* and you still have the ability to learn Torah?" The Rabbi answered, "yes, true we face a great *צרה*, but not learning Torah is a greater *צרה*"...



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With all this hortatory advice I am heaping upon you, let me caution you that it will not be easy. Just look at the depressing statistics about "burnout" in the rabbinate, and the number of your older colleagues who are, or are trying, to leave the Rabbinate and education for other occupations.

I know that the job of a Rabbi or educator is often a lonely one. You may find yourself in a community where there are very few people with whom you can converse as equals in background and knowledge and commitment. People will tend to look down upon you or up to you, depending on their own moral stature.

You will feel overworked, under-appreciated, and often very tired.

You will wonder if your words have any affect, if all your labors are for naught, if it was worth giving up other possible careers for the frustrations and heartache you may be suffering as rabbis or teachers.

So I am here to tell you: *stop complaining!*

First, not all other careers are paragons of pleasure and pure paradise. Every profession has its problems, its deficits, its frustrations. Excessive complaining reveals a kind of psychological immaturity, a social provincialism. If you married well, your wife will very gently but wisely ask you, after a tantrum or two, "Well, dear, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Second, if indeed the tendency to "burn-out" is more prevalent amongst rabbis than most other professions--and I believe it is--ask yourself: *so what?* If our halakhic commitments instruct us that when we recite the words of the *Shema*, ובכל נפשך, we be prepared for קידוש השם at all times, ready to be burned at the stake for our beliefs, then we must be accept the decidedly less punitive martyrdom of frustration. Remember: *better burnout than burn...*

We did not enter the rabbinate to make money, even though it is legitimate that we earn a decent living.

We did not become teachers because it is a way to get rich quick, even though we deserve adequate compensation.

We did not decide upon a career of עבודת השם and מלאכת ה' because we aspire to a life of comfort.

We became רבנים ומחנכים because we wanted to remain intimately bound to לימוד התורה in one way or another. We wanted to stem the tide of assimilation and Jewish illiteracy by putting our finger in the dike and slowing the rate of defection even if the floodwaters of cynicism and ersatz "Judaisms" swirl about us. We wanted to swim against the stream in order to reach the shore of creating a דור דעה, a Jewishly educated generation.

We determined to lend every effort to stem the erosion of Jewish society, to moderate if not reversing the ubiquitous hedonism, the permissiveness, and the crass materialism that afflicts our people along with most other Americans.

We resolved to become religious leaders not *despite* the mediocrity of American-Jewish life, but *because* of it, because we felt that our years of learning armed us with an iron will to persevere in the face of all opposition; because our long hours in the בית המדרש prepared us to be a fighting minority ready to suffer the consequences being outnumbered but not out-committed. We felt that our education in Torah Umadda armed us uniquely with the ability to make Torah attractive; to put a smile on the visage of Orthodox Judaism; to show that Torah and culture are not antagonistic, that piety is not parochial, and that Jewish learning takes a back seat to no discipline in its complexity and capaciousness, its majesty and grandeur, its holiness yet relevance.

Compared to all this, what is so troubling about a little more frustration than we think we deserve? How important in our lives should be the snubs of the *am-haaratzim* and the frozen indifference of many of our



fellow Jews? That, after all, is precisely our mission—to teach the ignorant, to arouse the indifferent, to melt the icy apathy, to stir the embers of love and passion and holiness in apparently dull hearts.

If you are tired of being the subject of idle conversation amongst your *baalebatim*, the targets of their unfair criticism, the occasional vicious rumor, take heart from the lesson of משה רבנו who worried that he would be accused by his *baalebatim* of putting his hand in the till and pocketing funds. He avoided that, but later חשדוהו מאשת איש – and he didn’t let it divert or dispirit or discourage him.

We live in dangerous but exciting times, and we expect of you to be the leaders of the Jewish community, to complete what my generation left uncompleted, to succeed where we failed, to be the latest link in the golden chain of our holy מסורה stretching from משה רבנו to משיח צדקנו.

Join the battle for Jewish creativity, for the Jewish future, armed with love: ואהבת, אהבת ה', אהבת ישראל, ואהבת התורה. And add to that אהבת ארץ ישראל ומדינת ישראל ואהבת הבריות—the tall order, but a *lovely* one.

On this eve of חודש הגאולה, may you be זוכה לגאולה חדשה, and lead in the full-throated singing of a שירה חדשה, one of new lyrics fashioned out of your own loves and loyalties and your own particular experiences—but in the same tunes, the same chants, the same ניגון of Gemara-learning that sustained you in your years in בית המדרש.

To that “music of the spheres” may all of us march on to fulfill our mission of ולהאדירה.