

Yeshiva University 70th Annual Hanukkah Dinner

I have often wondered: Why is there such an elaborate festival of Hanukkah to commemorate the *re*-dedication Temple in Jerusalem, yet nothing to celebrate its *original* construction ? Why eight full days for *rebuilding* and not a single day for the original *building* by King Solomon?

I suggest that the answer is this: re-doing is far more arduous than doing; it elicits less inspiration, there is no drama, almost no thrill, and a painful absence of applauding audiences and cheering crowds. The Rabbis of the Talmud put it succinctly: קשה עתיקא מחדתא--the old is more difficult than the new.

But it is precisely because it is so much more thankless, because it appears so much less rewarding, that it is considered as or more important, and hence more praiseworthy, than the original doing. Because the Macabbean effort at rededicating the Temple was less dramatic and impressive than Solomon's initial construction that we remember Hanukkah annually to the accompaniment of candles and song, prayer and pomp.

That is, at core, the message of *renewal*, although it is also called by a variety of other names, all of which essentially boil down to the same thing --reinventing, recreating, remaking, restoring, reprioritizing, rebuilding.

Voltaire (in his *Philosophical Dictionary*) partially recognized the truth of this idea when he wrote:

Men who are occupied with the restoration of health to other men, by the joint exercise of skill and humanity, are above all the great of the earth. They even partake of divinity, since to preserve and renew is almost as noble as to create.

Although I thank Monsieur Voltaire on behalf of our Albert Einstein College of Medicine for his accolade for physicians, I say that he was only "partially right" because it holds true not only for medicine but, as well, for a host of other disciplines which help mankind in its quest for renewal. Moreover, it is not only "almost as noble as to create" but, I submit, *more* noble.

That is what Hanukkah teaches us: to recognize the courage and stamina of those who walk in the wreckage of the past and restore them to their former glory without a thought for the psychic rewards that are expected by those who build anew. We honor those who blaze new trails, but we honor yet more those who trail the blazes in order to make the roads safe and passable, removing the pot-holes and the dead-ends that are the inevitable detritus of time. We consider as noble those who create, but nobler still those who put the pieces together after the original creation has fallen apart, victim to vandals and the accident of circumstances.

YU, in its totality, is dedicated to this sublime goal of renewal and restoration. And never was such an enterprise on such a scale more necessary than now.

We are all aware of the awesome tensions afflicting the American Jewish community as it is threatened by the centrifugal forces of intermarriage, beset by the rise of assimilation, embarrassed by gross ignorance of the great sources of the Tradition, and struggling valiantly to hold the line against further dissolution.

Surely, any Jew committed to a Jewish future should be scandalized by this bizarre phenomenon of national-religious-cultural suicide. Any thoughtful American, Jewish or non-Jewish, should be deeply troubled by this threat to the continued existence of Jews as a vital minority in this country, a group that has contributed so much to America and whose sacred texts and literature are a major contributor to Western culture.

Equally, we of YU do not assent to the idea of self-segregation that would encourage committed Jews to separate from the majority as they build their own communities anew, abandoning as hopeless the rest of the ailing and anxiety-ridden American Jewish community that is struggling with problems of its identity and unsure of its continuity.

No, we shall neither *assimilate* nor *isolate*. Instead, we shall *stimulate* our students and our fellow Jews to rebuild our community, to renew the faith and will and courage of our fellow Jews in the spirit of Hanukkah. For it is the sacred task and historic responsibility of YU to marshal its intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources in order to rebuild, to rededicate, and to renew the American Jewish community.

Indeed, YU can and must serve as a major force for this new imperative of renewal. We have the experience and the people--*and we are doing and have done just that.*



Consider what YU has done for the Jewish community in providing it with seasoned, *Jewishly knowledgeable* leadership: 3 former chairmen of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations; the present and former chairmen of the American Zionist Youth Federation; the Executive VP of the Joint Distribution Committee; the Director of International Affairs of the ADL; the founders and directors of the Gesher Foundation and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation; the presidents of Touro College and Gratz College; the founder and presidents and chancellors of Bar Ilan University; faculty members of a whole array of universities; Director General of the United Israel Appeal; high level professionals in NJCRC and the American Jewish Committee; and, of course, the leading eminences in Orthodox institutions here and abroad and in the Rabbinate and Jewish education.

And add to this all we have done and our doing in medicine, law, psychology, social work, business--in education, research, and service.

Allow me to share with you a recent personal experience. Like a piece of art, any enterprise is best viewed from a distance. That perspective came forcefully to my attention about three weeks ago, when I suddenly had the privilege of reflecting on YU from afar: I was invited to address the national Ukrainian conference of rabbis and lay leaders of the Jewish communities in Kiev. After a series of talks on Shabbat, on late Saturday night I met, at their request, with about 20 young and middle age adults. I asked what they wanted me to discuss--Torah? American Jewry? World problems of Jews? No, they were interested in only one thing--YU, its dual program, and its philosophy of Torah Umadda which fascinated them. When I mentioned returning to New York in a few days, they were devastated; they thought I had come to stay and build a replica of YU there! . One young man, of about 24-25, began to weep: "I thought you were going to stay with us and build a YU for us here"... The rest then began to ask how they could come to New York to study in YU... And one young father vowed he would find *some* way to get his daughter to Stern College.

To paraphrase the prophet Amos (8:11), they were hungry but not for bread (though they had very little of that) and thirsty but not for water (and it's radioactive) but only to hear more words about Yeshiva... And here in the States, we so often take this opportunity to study at YU for granted!

But our main efforts must be not there but here, where we have problems aplenty. And it is here, on this continent, that YU serves as a microcosm of the community most likely to survive the plague of relentless assimilation. And, by the same token, it has great and grave responsibilities towards the rest of the community--which it undertakes with love and devotion.

On this lovely festival of Hanukkah, in commemoration of the renewal of Jewish independence and the reestablishment of religious integrity, Yeshiva University pledges to foster renewal in all aspects of Jewish communal and religious life, and in the life of America as a whole. With your encouragement, help, and support, we shall, to the utmost of the abilities granted us by our Father in Heaven, kindle the lights of inspiration and the warmth of our human affection to usher in an age of renewal and rebirth.

Abraham Lincoln said the following at the very beginning of the Civil War (*Message to Congress*, 7/4/1861), and we might recite almost the identical words as the Jewish community faces the threat of communal, cultural, and religious unravelling:

Having thus chosen our course, without guile and with pure purpose, let us renew our trust in God, and go forward without fear and with manly hearts.