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Merkin Chair Investiture/R. Meir Twersky--4/30/95

(ב"מ פה.)-א"ר פרנק א"ר יוחנן, כל שהוא ת"ח ובנו ת"ח ובן בנו ת"ח, שוב אין תורה פוסקת מזרעו עד עולם, שנא' לא ימושו מפיד ומפי זרעך ומפי זרע זרעך עד עולם

This is a very special, even historic, occasion: the investing of a Rosh Yeshiva who represents the third generation of great ת"ח ראשי ישיבה at Yeshiva University, a young Rosh Yeshiva who will be occupying a chair endowed in the name of a great Jewish layman who was also a ת"ח, a "baalabus"-scholar, by his son who can rightly lay claim to the same distinction, and whose children, in turn, are following the same path. It is an investiture of a new link in the span of Torah generations.

The Merkin-Soloveitchik-Twersky families are related to each other not only by familial links and by mutual *respect*, but by another quality that also characterizes the new Leib Merkin Rosh Yeshiva, and that is--a feeling of identification with each other, of sympathy and friendship and warmth--in a word: אהבה. And this love transcends family kinship and social class or mutual interests; there is a metaphysical dimension to it. Let me explain by referring to a major verse in the Torah reading of this Shabbat (קדושים) :

ואהבת לרעך כמוך--ספרי: רבי עקיבא אומר, זה כלל גדול בתורה. בן עזאי אומר,
זה ספר תולדות האדם--זה כלל גדול מזה

Now, one wonders: why does R. Akiva specify בתורה, instead of saying just כלל גדול? Even primitive societies know the importance of love of family, of tribe and clan and community and nation, and the sense of responsibility that follows therefrom!

The answer I suggest is that we R. Akiva meant to emphasize one letter in that word: בַּתורה--not "in" but "by" (as Rashi comments on בראשית--בשביל ראשית). Hence, the message is that ואהבת לרעך becomes a כלל גדול by means of the Torah, when it issues from Torah and, in turn, enhances Torah.

Perhaps it is best to explain this point by using אהבת ה' (the love by God for Israel) as a paradigm, and this divine love for Israel comes in two forms:

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One: *Natural Love*--The Psalmist writes, עולם חסד יבנה, all the world is built out of love; as a human creator, such as an artisan or artist, loves his creation as an expression of his very self, so does the Divine Creator love His human creatures whom He made in the צלם אלקים. God loves all mankind, and this love is a unidirectional sentiment, without any anticipation of reciprocity, it is undifferentiated, immanent, and independent of man's conduct.

Two is a *special love* for Israel, His "chosen people." This love is bi-directional: כמים פנים אל פנים. It is transcendent, and reacts to the love by Israel for God. This includes the first type or natural love, since Jews are humans, no less than other humans created by God, but it is a surpassing love.

This second love is expressed through Torah. Thus, the ברכה immediately preceding the Reading of the Shema speaks primarily of the love of God for Israel *in that* He gave us the Torah: תורה ומצוות אותנו למדת. Torah is that which transforms natural-universal love into the special or סגולה love; hence, it might best be termed *covenantal love*, for the Torah is the ברית or covenant between God and Israel.

In this manner, we better understand another series of statements by the same R. Akiva, in chapter II of Avot: חביב אדם שנברא בצלם, "Beloved is man in that he was created in the divine Image." This, clearly, is what we have termed God's natural love for Israel as part of humankind. The last dictum of R. Akiva reads, חביבין ישראל שניתן להם כלי חמדה, "Beloved is Israel in that the 'delightful instrument' [i.e., Torah] was given to them." The love for Israel is thus expressed through Torah; it is a *covenantal love*.

Now, אהבת רעים follows the same pattern; structurally, the love of fellow-man is patterned on the love by God. The natural love is psychological in nature: the love for family, clan, nation. Jews, along with the rest of humanity, participate in this kind love. But beyond that is a spiritual, meta-physical and meta-psychological love, one transmogrified by Torah, a love that issues from Torah, speaks through Torah, and leads to the formation of a Torah spirituality. It is a *covenantal love*, which expresses itself in the love between רבי ותלמיד and in בדיבוק חברים, a love which elevates man to a super-natural level (as elaborated on, in a different context, by R. Hayyim of Volozhin in his נפש החיים).

Thus, the כלל גדול בתורה of R. Akiva is a love that comprehends the natural love but transcends it to the *covenantal by means of Torah*.

That is what defines the Merkin-Soloveitchik-Twersky relationship--and, as well, their relationship to Yeshiva University.

I remember Leib Merkin, the eponym of the Chair, from my very earliest years in the rabbinate. He was an imposing, and rather intimidating figure. He was bright, even brilliant in business, and highly knowledgeable and astute in his "lomdus." I recall how, when one very prominent rabbi of those days was delivering a דרשה to an admiring congregation, and Mr. Leib Merkin called out a correction--*twice!*--and the rabbi, otherwise one of the most self-confident men I ever met, backed off and not only did not upbraid Mr. Merkin for the interruption, but apologized to him! I confess that it scared me --I would not have dared delivered a דרשה, and certainly not a שיעור, in his presence...

His son and my very good friend Hermann, the Vice Chairman of our Board of Trustees, is likewise a great achiever in both his business life and as a learned Jew for whom every rabbi or מגיד שיעור has to prepare most meticulously. And here, as in the Soloveitchik-Twersky family, תורה אינה פוסקת לעולם, the heritage of lay-"lomdim" continues--and we shall later have the privilege of hearing a few well chosen words from Ezra Merkin, a worthy successor to this eminent tradition.

Rabbi Meir Twersky is heir to two great Torah traditions, those of Brisk and the Hasidic Tolner house. What both have in common is--Reb Meir himself, and their אהבת התורה. Rabbi Twersky bears a total and wholesome love for his students, and they reciprocate this אהבה fully. All together bespeak an admirable love for Torah.

So, Reb Meir, I hereby invest you as the successor to the Rav, as the second occupant of the Leib Merkin Chair in Talmud

May the רבשי"ע grant that His covenantal relationship grow and mature, so that you will, in turn, educate your disciples in a covenantal love for each other, for you, and for כלל ישראל, and thus, like your immortal grandfather before you, make your indelible stamp upon generations of תלמידים of our yeshiva--שנה ועשרים שנה.