



April 11, 2001

For June 11 statement to RIETS dinner.

My predecessor, Dr. Belkin, o.b.m., determined at one point in his career that the function Yeshiva/RIETS was to be primarily educational, and leave communal affairs to other relevant organizations, such as the RCA and OUJCA. In other words, he decided that YU's business was educational, not that of a communal movement.

When I came into office twenty-five years ago, that problem was uppermost in my mind, and there were forces agitating for both points of view. I decided that without ever giving up our primary educational goal, YU/RIETS must undertake greater communal responsibilities. Let me explain why the change.

Yeshiva's policy made sense in the conditions that prevailed at that time. The RCA, together with the Rabbinic Alumni of Yeshiva, was a force in both Orthodox and general Jewish communal life. Pulpit rabbis were prominent, their synagogues were strong, their voice was heard and respected. The OUJCA had begun to come into its own as a significant element in communal life. The OU was especially strong in unifying and promoting Kashrut in American Jewry. It made sense, therefore, for Yeshiva to limit itself to and focus upon formal education, and that is why it was decided that Yeshiva's superb achievement in fostering youth work be transferred to the Orthodox Union, which accepted the challenge and fulfilled its responsibilities with a high degree of success. Yeshiva, which had done so much constructive work in fostering new communities and creating new synagogues, decided to suspend those operations as well; surely, that was a task which belonged to both rabbis and synagogues, not to schools. Of course,

at that time Yeshiva's financial condition had begun to worsen, and this contributed as well to its decision to slim down its operations.

However, twenty-five years ago during the transition between two administrations, life had begun change. I noticed that the RCA had grown much weaker: the Rav was ailing, Rabbi Israel Klavan of the RCA was soon passing away from the scene, many rabbis (except those in the "cathedral synagogues") did not attend professional conventions because they were forced to take additional employment to make ends meet and because their wives often had their own jobs. So, the RCA and Rabbinic Alumni could not be counted upon to carry their burdens. At the same time, the Orthodox Union, which had done so well in Kashrut and youth work, had still been unable to organize and develop Orthodox synagogues throughout the country -- for cogent societal reasons largely beyond its control -- and decided to invest its energies and substance in civic and political affairs.

The result was that there really was no one to fully represent what was beginning to be called Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy, which was becoming a movement that failed to move...

My calculation was that if Yeshiva does not undertake leadership in these areas, the attrition to both Left and Right would eat away at our borders and encroach upon the heart of our constituency, and we would be left with a diminishing pool of families who want a yu education. I felt that, like Churchill in his time, I was not elected President of Yeshiva and RIETS in order to preside over the dissolution of the Modern Orthodox community. A vacuum had been created, and it was our business, indeed our sacred duty, to fill that vacuum and to exercise leadership. With the RCA enfeebled, with the Orthodox Union distracted, with the Mizrahi and Religious Zionism tottering, we really had no choice but to step into the breach and do what had to be

done.

I am pleased that, while there is still so very much more to do on all fronts, we have lent strength and credibility to Modern Orthodoxy, have bolstered its morale, and encouraged a sense of optimism (which still has a long way to go). Meanwhile, our educational efforts have not only wavered, but have developed beautifully in both its Torah and Madda branches. I am pleased to say that both as a yeshiva and as a university we have made remarkable progress.

As an educational institution, we are educating more and better than ever before. And as a movement, we have begun to move!

But the only thing that does not change is change itself. We are entering new and uncharted waters. New problems are arising and, even more important, we have now become strong enough to pay attention to problems that have been with us for a while -- nagging problems that never received the full focus of our attention. We must begin to do that now.

I do not want to waste time. There is no need to wait for a new administration and new leadership which, Heaven knows, will be busy enough when it takes over from me.

I have therefore undertaken certain new initiatives in the area of Jewish education.

We have founded the Association of Modern Orthodox Day Schools and High Schools, which is already functioning.

I have appointed a new dean for the Azrieli Graduate School, and have been working on

coordinating a system of cooperation among Azrieli, the AMOD, and our own high schools.

I have instituted a reappraisal of the Jewish education we give in our high schools, particularly in the boys high school, and most especially the role of Talmud in the school.

We have begun serious discussions on the role of Talmud education and Jewish education generally in the colleges and will be continuing with explorations of the subject in RIETS itself.

These efforts should not occasion any fear. All concerned parties will be involved, so that we may benefit from the wisdom of all. It does not presage change for its own sake, only change where improvements will be the goal. It bespeaks a confidence that we have passed the struggle for survival and are now concentrating on quality. We are not only the foremost institution of Torah Umadda, but truly the *only* one. As such, the lack of any real competition threatens to make us flabby, listless, and passive. Our efforts should be seen as an attempt to avoid that complacency and its perilous consequences, and to reach new levels of excellence and pursue them with vigor, confidence, and power.