

Draft      *for*

When we celebrated the ninetieth birthday of my dear father, *Zikhrono liverakhah*, I cited the Mishnah in Avot 5:21, *ben tish'im lishvach*. Despite the standard explanation that at ninety years old a person is stooped and decrepit, and there is much truth to that, I offered a more sensitive and profound interpretation. Without going into all of the details, I observed that *hishtachavayah*, the prostration of the attendee at the Jerusalem Temple, was the final ritual performed as the culmination of the divine service. Through prostration pilgrims stopped to reflect on their heavenly encounter and offered their gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to serve God through the divine service. At ninety, I suggested, a person stops to reflect on a life well lived, a family raised, professional and personal achievements, spiritual growth, accomplishments, mistakes, successes and failure—and pauses for *hishtachavayah*, a moment of reflection, gratitude, and appreciation.

While I have yet to reach my father's age, at this moment of transition in accordance with an agreement reached 3 years ago—as I step down from my position as Chancellor of Yeshiva University and Rosh Hayeshivah, ending over sixty years of official affiliation with my beloved Yeshiva University as student, faculty member, Rosh Hayeshivah, President, and Chancellor – I use this moment for *mishtachavin u-modim* – pause, reflection, and expression of gratitude.

Yeshiva nurtured me, challenged me, and formed me. Yeshiva took me in as a young, untested, and unproven boy and gave me opportunities for religious and intellectual growth, personal development, and professional achievement. For these sixty years I lived and breathed Yeshiva, its problems, its challenges, and its successes. I enjoyed opportunities that I never dreamed would be offered me: leadership, responsibility, the trust of a community, the affection

and support of many from world leaders to “drawers of water,” and the pulpit of the Orthodox and Jewish world. The day I became President in 1976 I was humbled to occupy the offices of my *rebbeim*, mentors, and predecessors – Dr. Revel, Dr. Belkin, the Rav, *zikhronam livrakhah* – and a host of other *rebbeim*, professors, administrators, and lay leaders; I continue to be humbled and incredulous today as I step down. I would like to believe that I was a worthy custodian of their creation and leave the institution and the Torah u-Madda community more vital, vibrant, and effective religiously, academically, communally, and financially. Yeshiva University is not only an institution. It is a faith, a vision, a dream, a destiny. It has been my faith, my vision, my dream, and my destiny. It is the kind of faith that elicited from me, and from so many others, for over 125 years, work, dedication, and endless effort and endeavor.

It would be too easy at this moment in Yeshiva’s history, when fortune smiles on us and we are a top-ranked university and a thriving *bet midrash*, when things are largely going our way, to forget past adversities and difficulties and to think that our successes are surely part of the very fabric of our existence. We cannot assume that it is natural and normal that conditions will be as favorable as they are today, nor should we imagine that they could not have been otherwise. We forget that the felicity of the present is actually the fulfillment of the promise of the past. We are therefore obligated to an appreciation of our blessings as a special gift, as the keeping of God’s word, as the vindication of the covenant in which He promised us that Torah shall not depart from us or from our descendants. The experience of fulfillment lays upon us the obligation of humility, to realize that we are not necessarily deserving of what has come upon us, that we have not wrought our good fortune with our own hands and wisdom, that it is God in His goodness Who keeps His Word to generations past and by virtue of which we now prosper. We must

demand of ourselves the obligations that flow from our successes – the qualities of understanding, of perspective, of *emunah*, and above all, of a deep humility that the Higher Force has responded to our own initiative in molding Jewish history and keeping His promise, through us, to those who preceded us.

In the *Aleinu*, *mishtachavim* is followed by *modim*, as in thanks. But there is another meaning as well, one that holds the key to real leadership and one upon which I reflect at this important transition in my personal and professional life. Jacob's blessing to his son Judah, *Yehudah, attah yodukha achekha* (Gen. 49:8) literally means "Judah, your brothers will recognize you (as their leader)." However, the word *yodukha*, they will recognize you, is etymologically related to the word *vidui*, confession and therefore teaches us that only those who can, like Judah, confess, are those who can be acknowledged as real leaders.

And it is to this I turn as I contemplate my response, and in some ways lack of adequate response, to allegations of abuse by other in the Yeshiva community that were brought to me some form 25 years ago. At the time I acted in a way that I thought was noble but which now seems ill conceived. I understand better today than I did then that sometimes, when you think you are doing good, your actions do not measure up. You think you are helping, but you are not. You submit to momentary compassion in according individuals the benefit of the doubt, by not fully recognizing what is before you, and in the process you lose your Promised Land. I recognize now that when we, however inadvertently act in a way that may expose our children to danger, we risk the tragedy of receiving that calamitous report: *taro toraf Yosef*, "Joseph is devoured," all our work is in vain, all we have put into our children has the risk of being undone



because of a few foolish moves. And when that happens—one must do *teshuvah*. So I too must do *teshuvah*.

True character requires of me the courage to admit that, despite my best intentions, I was wrong. I am not perfect; none of us is perfect. Each of us has failed, in one way or another, in greater or lesser measure, to live by the highest standards and ideals of our tradition – ethically, morally, halakhically. We must never be so committed to justify in our past that we thereby threaten to destroy our future. Is this not an easy task? On the contrary, it is one of the greatest trials of all, for it means sacrificing our very egos, our reputation, even our identities. But we can and must do it. I must do it, and having done so, contribute to the creation of a future that is safer for innocents, and more ethically and halakhically correct.

Biblical Judah was big enough to admit that he was small. He confesses a mistake. He can experience guilt and confront it creatively. After the incident with Tamar, he does not offer any tortured rationalizations to vindicate himself. He says simply and forthrightly: *tzadkah mimmeni* (Gen. 38:26), she was right and I was wrong. And with that statement Judah is transformed into a self-critical man of moral courage. He concedes guilt. He knows that he is guilty with regard to Joseph, and together with his brothers he says *aval ashemim anachnu*, “indeed, we are guilty.” Pushed to the limits of the endurance of his conscience, he rises to a new stature and achieves a moral greatness that is irrefrangible and pellucid.

This is what I am *modeh* as I reflect on my tenure. *Tzadkah mimmeni*. I hope that those who came forth and others who put their trust in me will feel that faith vindicated and justified.



*Modeh ani.*

One might think it appropriate to mark the normal end of a career in *avvodat ha-kodesh* with the recitation of *Havdalah*, the blessing which marks the end of the sacred period of holy days. Yet my whole career in *avoted ha-kodesh* has been one of *havdalah*.

Consider: When we recite this prayer, we bless God who distinguishes between sacred and profane, light and dark, Israel and the nations, Sabbath and weekday. Jewish practice calls for us to recite this *havdalah* on Saturday nights and at the end of holidays, not only over a cup of wine, but also during the *Amidah* of the evening prayer which marks the transition from holy-day to week-day. And the Talmud requires that the *havdalah* be recited specifically in the blessing which *attah chonein le-adam da'at*, in which we pray to the Almighty for the gift of wisdom and knowledge and understanding. What is the relevance of *havdalah* to this specific blessing? The Rabbis answer, "if there is no knowledge, whence the ability to distinguish?" In other words, the ability to discern between different values, to discriminate and to distinguish between competing claims, and therefore the ability to emerge whole from the confusions that reign in life, requires *da'at* – special insights and intellectual gifts.

And yet, if we examine the passage of the *havdalah* carefully, we remain with the question: why so? Apparently, it should be rather easy to make these distinctions. Any child can tell the difference between light and dark; reference to identity of the parents will tell us if one is Jewish or non-Jewish; the difference between the Sabbath and weekdays is nothing more complicated than consulting a calendar; and even the distinction between sacred and profane is

not overly taxing – who cannot tell apart, for instance, a *Sefer Torah* from a novel? Why, then, the special requirement for *da'at* or knowledge, for intellectual graces, in order to perform *havdalah*?

The answer is that for those who are superficial or who dwell in only one realm, *da'at* is indeed unnecessary. If we associate only with *kodesh* (holiness), Israel, *ore* (light), and Sabbath – or only with *hol* (the profane), the nations, *hoshekh* (darkness), and weekday – it is easy to discern distinctions and life is much less confusing. The full agnostic has few problems. There is little to confuse him. He swallows all of contemporary life, and therefore he has no difficulties in trying to tell apart its various strands. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, the Jew who does not step out of his self-imposed boundaries of the sacred, of Israel, of the light of *Torah*, rejects all that is new and secular and alien in the contemporary culture, and he too has little to confuse him.

However, *da'at* is needed and *havdalah* is vital for those of us who choose to live in both realms, *Torah* and *Madda*, and will reject neither – for those of us who opt for both light and darkness, for Israel and the nations, for Sabbath and weekdays, for the sacred and the profane.

This category describes most of us, who are known by the somewhat infelicitous name “Modern Orthodox,” who refuse to succumb to the blandishments of the materialistic and hedonistic and agnostic society, and yet refuse the easy comforts of intellectual ghettoization; who believe that the function and the mission of the Jew in the world is to illuminate the *hoshekh* (darkness); to sanctify the *hol* (profane); to bring the Jewish message to the nations; and to

introduce the warmth and meaningfulness of the Sabbath to all the days of the week.

For us, who are involved in this great mission, that of Torah and that of Mada, was the dictum of the Rabbis meant: *im ein da'at, havdalah minayin*. It is we, who straddle both worlds, who are therefore subject to the danger of confusion, and who therefore need the special divine gift of *da'at* or knowledge, insight, in order to be able to perform *havdalah*, always to distinguish between the light and the dark, even when we try to illuminate the shadows of life; to know what separates the holy and the profane, even when we try to consecrate the secular.

Educationally, the highest expression of this point of view is Yeshiva University. For Yeshiva is more than a *university* -- it is truly a *universe*, a microcosm of the American Orthodox world -- its vices and its virtues, its faults and its merits, its promises and its potentials, its currents and sub-currents. No other place in the world offers such a combination: a Yeshiva and a medical school, a Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and a Stern College for Women; a Talmudic Kollel and a graduate school of education.

The ideal of Yeshiva is: *kiddush ha-hol*, the sanctification of the profane, the illumination of the dark, and the Judaization of the general. It is Yeshiva, therefore, which strives most mightily for that *da'at* to keep *havdalah*, to be able at all times to discern and distinguish, to avoid confusion in a terribly confusing world.

This vast educational complex, this "Yeshiva Universe," is the vision of some of the greatest Jewish scholars of our and of past generations -- and it is one which, because of the



implied risks, constantly requires *da'at* and increasing *havdalah* in order to save our generation, and future generations, from confusion.

And finally, a prayer for my family, my students my colleagues, and my friends: Learn from my experiences, both positive and negative to pursue success with grace and to endeavor to face failure with dignity, to be prepared for the extreme periods of life's challenges without hubris or despair and never to stop hoping for and expecting better news and better times. Above all, learn the importance of commitment to great and noble ideals even when it hurts and disappoints, but trust that ultimately it will all prove worthwhile. I pray that you will always strive to live morally upstanding and spiritually fulfilling lives, marked by abiding loyal to the principles of Orthodox Judaism, to Torah Umadda, along with respect for all people who honestly follow the dictates of their own beliefs and conscience even when such do not accord with your own deepest commitments; and to combine your love of God and Torah with love of all humans created in the image of God.

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If in any way my life's experience can encourage in you the aspiration to attain a modicum of wisdom, a trust in the faith in our ancestors' spiritual striving from Abraham through Moses through the giants of the sacred Jewish tradition; a measure of the value of the sweetness and intellectual excitement in the study of Torah; a desire to excel in the practice of *mitzvot*; the reassurance that ultimately character and Godliness are infinitely more ennobling

and valuable than any worldly goods or social approbation; and the strength to hold fast and persevere through a life of *havdalah* – why, then, my life – and yours – will have proven worthwhile. *Halevai!*

May Yeshiva's future be both gracious and powerful, as it is lead by my distinguished succesor, President Richard Joel.

I conclude with my public acknowledgement that all of us owe the superb leadership of my dear friend and successor, President Richard Joel. Yeshiva is fortunate to have a leader of such caliber as our President. He deserves the loyalty of all students and faculties of our beloved institution.