

ANNUAL Y.U. HANUKKAH DINNER

I am delighted to greet the President of Israel, Chaim Herzog, an old and distinguished friend, in a triple capacity: as the President of Israel, a country in which over 10% of our undergraduate alumni have settled and now call "home" and where we send some 300 or more students every year to spend a year or two in study; as an honorary doctoral alumnus of Y.U.; and as a role model for our students, a man who has had the finest education in two worlds -- the world of the university and the world of the Yeshivot, where he studies at ישיבת חברון as well as the feet of his late, famed father, Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog.

We appreciate your friendship in making this special trip and wish you well on your return journey this evening.
בואכם לשלום וצאתכם לשלום.

Hanukkah, like everything else in life, is open to a variety of interpretations, and to an even greater variety of misinterpretations. The event has been taken to signify a purely secular nationalist struggle -- and the celebration of a super-natural miracle; the political assertion of freedom of religion -- and the revolt against Hellenism, the then contemporary form of assimilation.

But whatever one's inclination in historical exegesis, one thing is clear: the Hasmoneans or (Maccabbees) were fighting for something beyond themselves. Their success consisted not in appealing to self-interest, but in rallying people to a higher cause -- which made their self-interest meaningful and tenable. There is nothing quite so unrealistic and impractical as the cynical and smug assumption that people are interested only in their status and stomachs.

But what was the over-all and overarching cause for which our Hasmonean ancestors were willing to sacrifice their very lives, for which they revolted against the Greek-Syrian oppressors, and which we celebrate this night of Hanukkah?

The key lies in the special addition to our regular prayers during this happy festival, the על הנסים prayer. The oppressors had one priority: להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחוקי רצונך, to make the Jews forget their Torah and cause them to violate the *mitzvot*, the divine commandments. Note well the order: first, to make them abandon the study of Torah, and second, to get them to violate the commandments.

Here we have the diabolically clever strategy that the Greek-Syrians and their Hellenizing lackeys used to defeat the Jews: strike them through their Torah, forbid the children to learn, the adults to study, the Sages to do their research. Once you do that, all else will fall by the wayside. Let them keep their *mitzvot* -- let them go the synagogue, worship in the Temple, celebrate their holidays, observe the Sabbath -- *but don't let them study, don't let them educate the next generation!* That indeed was a clever plan, one that failed only because the Maccabbees understood its ramifications and were determined to oppose it, because they knew that without study and learning they were doomed, that if you abandon education you are finished as a people.

The truth they discovered, and which is the central message of Hanukkah, is most relevant to us. That is why I confess to being nervous about the role of education, and the proper understanding of its scale of values, in the outlook of the incoming administration. Cutting down on basic science and pure research in favor of applied research will, it is true, yield some quick results -- but will cripple science and especially medicine for years and years to come. And it will send precisely the wrong message to our citizenry, the message that *all* learning must be functional, that if it doesn't lead to a job quickly -- a secure and high-paying job -- then it is not worth slaving over a text or in the library.

That principle needs affirmation and iteration in the world of contemporary education itself. More than the loss of government funds, the modern university has sustained a massive loss of purpose. By attempting too much, higher education has achieved too little. Universities have learned that if you try to be all things to all people, you end by being nothing for yourself; that if you do not stand for something, you fall for anything. The curse of bigness is not so much that the individual gets lost, as it is that the institution cannot find its soul, and so is often more concerned with political correctness than the search for truth.

It is in this sense that Yeshiva has reason for optimism and reassurance as to its basic health. Our faculty and our students know what we stand for, what our ultimate values and commitments are, and the historical mission we have undertaken in education. Our purpose is more than institutional survival and self-perpetuation.

Our purpose is the flowering of the Jewish heritage in the soil of contemporary America -- a soil which sometimes is arid as a desert, and sometimes as fertile as a jungle giving rise to competing value-systems, often quite noxious. Our mission is: the highest excellence in both Jewish and worldly disciplines, so that student will receive the finest teaching and the finest research training in both areas -- and learn that they are compatible; and when they are not, then the student has a creative challenge before him.

Because we stand for something beyond ourselves, our fate is intimately tied in to both worlds in which we live: the Jewish community and the universe of higher education. What happens to them, has immediate effects upon us.

And I believe that it is equally true, that we have an effect upon them. Yeshiva University has certain distinguished and prestigious elements in its great complex -- such as its graduate schools in medicine and law, in psychology and social work and academic Judaica and business and Jewish education -- schools that are in the forefront of higher education and research, and which profoundly influence the course of events.

And Yeshiva University, as the greatest Yeshiva in the world -- in all its levels, from the high schools through its excellent undergraduate schools through the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and its Kollelim -- is immensely important to the future of the Jewish community in America, Israel, and all the world.

If the gloomy predictions as to the radical decimation of the Jewish population of this country are to be neutralized; if the devastating statistics predicting the effective dissolution of the American-Jewish community are to be halted and reversed; if we are to survive and flourish in this free and pluralistic society, it will only be done by the combined efforts of all committed Jews, but especially by Jewish education, and most especially by Yeshiva University.

Education, unfortunately, is slow and deliberate, and it is also costly and expensive and painful -- for supporters as well as for teachers and students. But it is absolutely indispensable. The wisest of all men, King Solomon, put it this way: **יוסף דעת**, **יוסף מכאוב**, "he who increases knowledge increases pain." And that legendary Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, said, **"קרענקן זאלסט דו, אבער לערנען מוסט דו"** -- "Get sick and wallow in pain, if necessary, but learn! Study!"

Here, at Yeshiva University, lies the key to Jewish survival in the United States. Here Torah flourished -- alongside biology and business, psychology and social work, Latin and Law, history and histology. Here you have students who leaved a jet and flew to Israel to be with Israel for the Gulf War, as thousands of other American Jews were fleeing. Here you have law students who are advocates for the poor and elderly, medical students who clerk in the slums, social work students who work in the most dangerous of areas. Here you have researchers plumbing the past, assessing the present, preparing for the future. Here you have the past relived and the future aborning. Here you have Yeshiva University.

It is because of this that the participation of the Jewish community at large in Yeshiva University is so crucial to the future of Judaism. That is why I welcome you here so warmly -- and why I offer to you, all of you, on behalf of the faculties and students of all parts of the University, our heartfelt thanks, our genuine gratitude, along with my best wishes for a happy and joyous Hanukkah.