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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

It is with a mixture of personal pleasure and the poignant pain of nostalgia that I preside over this commencement which is the last official ceremony of our Centennial year -- which has now lasted more than two years...

Last September, at the beginning of this academic year, I spoke at our formal Centennial Convocation and pleaded for greater awareness of moral values in education. Secretary William Bennett, who was present at that event, had been talking the subject up and down the nation, and Governor Mario Cuomo had just recently spoken in the same vein. Finding myself in such distinguished company from both sides of the political divide, I expected little passion in reaction to my comments, even when they were condensed in an op-ed page article for The New York Times.

I was sorely mistaken. There was passion aplenty in both my supporters (who obviously were in the right...) and my detractors. My opponents, all from the academic community, were all high-minded, sophisticated, and articulate -- but not always consistent. Thus, a typical response was that I was merely mouthing truisms to which no one could take exception, and hence I was really saying nothing, AND that my thesis was a disguised attempt at introducing denominational indoctrination into our universities. That the two propositions contradict each other

was not apparent to my critics.

More to the point, other critics, equally oblivious to the need for elementary consistency, asked why my values should be preferred to others, and continued to assert a basically relativistic ethos according to which all values have equal validity in the "marketplace of ideas," a theory which if pursued to its logical conclusion leads to moral nihilism. They then proceeded to assure me and their own readers that the academy certainly does act upon certain accepted moral principles, such as no murder, mayhem, robbery, or cheating. How nice.

There is, however, a fundamental error committed by both sides in this national debate over teaching moral values in our schools. And that is, that "values" (a concept that is as old as Plato but was probably first elaborated in the modern era by Immanuel Kant) are not self-sufficient entities that can be implemented by articulation alone, and that can be directly transmitted in a teaching situation. Values are like essences or souls: they function only in a larger context. If disembodied, they are like friendly ghosts -- they make nice noises but are really unreal. Values must be dressed in empirical actions or firm attitudes or in any larger existential structure, just as souls must be clothed in bodies. Values and souls share a touching modesty: they will not appear, in public or in private, undraped.

Hence, the question of values in our troubled society cannot

be approached in a preacherish, hortatory manner. Rather, we must shop around, with a high degree of sensitivity and sophistication, for an effective manner of engagement so that the values we cherish are insinuated rather than taught. Values are transmitted only by indirection, rarely by instruction.

Moreover, the context they require is what stands in need of articulation, elaboration, and explication if the fundamental values they enshrine are to be realized. This is a principle taught to us over 2,000 years ago when the immortal teacher Hillel was approached by a pagan who wished to be converted to Judaism, and asked the great scholar to teach him the entire Torah while standing al regel ahat, on one foot, that is, basing it all on one regula or rule. He was asking for a quick fix: "fast -- give me the chief value and I'll know what it's all about." Hillel's answer was: v'ahavta le'reiakha kamokha, ve'idakh perusha -- zil gemor. "'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'; the rest is commentary -- now go and learn." There certainly is a fundamental value -- love of fellow man -- but merely stating it is almost meaningless. There are no effective "values" without an empirical context. Hence, the whole of the Torah and its tradition is the commentary, the context. "Go and learn" for the rest of your life, and only then will you be able to realize the underlying value of love.

Let me exemplify this approach in a manner appropriate to



this occasion by focusing on academic ethics, both in honor of this commencement, and bearing in mind that the oldest part of this university is Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. I shall therefore draw upon three items -- a technique, an event, and a text -- from the Jewish educational tradition and seek to demonstrate how values emanating from what would seem such a parochial, particularistic, and even denominational source possess enough universal validity to be of immediate relevance and cogency to every participant in today's ceremony: Jewish or Gentile, black or white, man or woman, religious or secular.

First is the encouragement of the study of texts by groups of two or three students working together. Formulated by the Sages of the Talmud and institutionalized in Talmudic academies throughout the world, it anticipated by hundreds of years the "team efforts" which have become standard fare in research in both the academy and industry, and the philosophic emphasis on dialogue by Buber. It is based on the idea that while thinking is a solitary act, study benefits from testing your own ideas against an equal or a superior. An individual scholar, laboring in solitude, can grossly misinterpret a text -- or research findings -- with no one to correct him. Only in dialogue do ideas become refined and developed. Two minds thus working on one problem are more than the sum of one and one. This "chavrusa" system, incidentally, is still used to great advantage both here at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and in



every major school of Talmud.

Second is the emphasis on means over ends in the cognitive realm. The eighteenth century Rabbi Elijah, the "Gaon of Vilna," one of the most authentic geniuses in the history of Jewish scholarship, once told his disciple, R. Hayyim, that his (R. Hayyim's) younger brother Zalman would have a mystical vision the next day in which angelic messengers would reveal to him the solutions to a number of troubling, complex intellectual problems in his Talmudic studies over which he had been agonizing for some time. Said the Gaon to R. Hayyim, "Tell Zalman to banish those mystical visitors, those occult, magical problem-solvers. Torah which comes too easy is not authentic Torah." The intellectual enterprise of Torah values means more than results. It is more important to study well than to know a lot.

This Jewish insight has, I believe, universal relevance. The implicit academic value is that while "results" may be more desirable from a commercial and prestige point of view, the means of the intellectual enterprise are far more significant for the personal growth of the student. An enlightened national policy would, in consonance with such a value, take a much more far-sighted view and invest in people rather than in projects, looking not for immediate results but for the long-range development of the society.

My third example, which should serve as something of a

corrective to what I have just said, is a text. It comes from a well known yet remarkable verse in the Book of Proverbs, and is prominently intoned during Shabbat services and other occasions when the Torah is read publicly. It reads, Etz hayyim hi la-mahazikim bah, "It is a tree of life to those who hold on to it," referring to the Torah. I say it is remarkable because there is an obvious allusion here to one of the two trees that are mentioned in the Genesis narrative of the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Knowledge (etz ha-daat) and the Tree of Life (etz ha-hayyim). One would have thought that the Torah, repository of Israel's laws, 613 commandments in all, and popularly called "The Law," would best be symbolized by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet the Tree of Knowledge is passed over, and the wise King Solomon refers to Torah as Etz Hayyim, the Tree of Life.

This is, I believe, no arbitrary exercise of poetic license. Jewish law and tradition teach that talmud torah is the greatest mitzvah; study is Judaism's most compelling form of worship. The exercise of the mind in the service of the Lord is considered man's principal duty and his most sacred achievement. Moreover, the motivation for such study must be pure: lishmah, study for its own sake, for the purpose of lucid understanding and intellectual enlightenment. But the Jewish masters also knew that man's cognitive quest, unrelated to the larger questions of life and destiny, can become an addiction or, indeed, a form of

self-validation that is akin to idolatry. The Tree of Knowledge can lead to man's felicity but also to his undoing and leave him defenseless, at the mercy of his own inventions and devices. That is why its produce is considered the "forbidden fruit."

Torah, therefore, is compared not to the Tree of Knowledge but to the Tree of Life, the etz hayyim. The immediate goal of the scholar must be enlightenment, discovery, and understanding -- the equivalent of "Torah for its own sake." But one's life as a scholar, one's ultimate purpose, must be one of service. Scholarship must enhance life, promote life, adorn life, sanctify life. If intellect is turned in upon itself and divorced from life of man and society, the whole enterprise becomes questionable. Indeed -- it becomes both futile and despicable: such talents ought not be denied to a suffering humanity on the grounds of the intellectual's self-indulgence.

Here, then, are three items -- a device, an event, a text -- from the corpus of the Jewish heritage. They do not explicitly preach any values, yet they embody them. And while the institutional context may be Jewish, the values themselves are universal. Values, in this sense, are like poetry: the language is always particular, but the message may well speak to every heart and mind of the human race.

So let the debate continue, but on a more realistic basis. "Values" cannot be pre-packaged in the form of lesson-plans or



legislated by government. But government and industry and, of course, the educational world, must join in the effort to recapture for our society those values worth living and dying for; to think broadly how to insinuate those values into our lives creatively; and to do so without yielding to a blanket relativism on one side or to narrow intolerance on the other. In this context, the fear that every form of moral assertion on campus necessarily implies sectarianism is, while historically understandable, factually a distraction.

You who graduate from Yeshiva University today have been exposed to this educational ethos and its unspoken moral underpinnings. As you proceed to the next level of your education or into the professional or business worlds, they will stand you in good stead, provided that they are nourished and strengthened -- preferably through much exercise.

We bid you farewell in the confidence that you will always be sources of pride to your families and to your alma mater -- and that your example will make a difference in your communities and in society at large.