

President Richard M. Joel Investiture Remarks

To Ennoble and Enable: An Inaugural Vision

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Ambassador, members of the boards, roshei yeshiva, members of the faculty, students, alumni, presidents and delegates of universities, family and friends. I want to thank Michael Jesselson, Dean Efreim Nulman, the Investiture Committee, and so many extraordinary members of the Yeshiva University family for creating this wonderful celebration.

Forty years ago on this day, September 21, 1963, a young boy took his place as a bar mitzvah in the presence of two loving parents, in a room filled with hope for the future. Today, those parents are gone, the bar mitzvah stands before you, older and enriched by a blessed life, and hopes fill this chamber to overflowing. I will refrain this day from delivering my bar mitzvah speech, or playing my accordion. This is my gift to you. I will, however, speak to the hopes of the parents of that young boy. We gather in the shadow of the Days of Awe, in the bright sunshine of a new generation to reaffirm our confidence in the future, in the majesty of learning, in the spirit of humankind, in the informing power of our wondrous story, and in the guiding hand of G-d.

For me, this is a moment of hope and joy, of fear and trembling. For you have entrusted to me the destiny of Yeshiva University, a unique life force whose very existence represents a yearning for all that is sacred in our humanity and all that is human in our sanctity. I come before you standing on the shoulders of giants, who persevered in dreaming dreams, and willed them into reality.

That I have been given such an opportunity is in so many ways due to the historic and heroic efforts of my wonderful predecessor, Dr. Norman Lamm. His legacy is a university of strength and security, constantly challenged by him to live by standards of Torah Umadda, the sacred confrontation of Torah and secular wisdom. He would have me tell you that his work was the continuation of the life labors of our two revered predecessors, Dr. Samuel Belkin and Dr. Bernard Revel, of blessed memory. And Yeshiva would not be Yeshiva without the profound impact of the mind and soul of the Rav, Rabbi Yosef Ber Soloveitchik, zecher tzadik livracha. We all know that their success would not have been realized without the very real partnership of legions of extraordinary leaders, with names of Samuel Levy, Max Stern, Max Etra, Herbert Tenzer, Ludwig Jesselson, Hermann Merkin,

David Gottesman, Robert Beren, Ronald Stanton, and the passionate people who shared their dreams.

The prophet Joel, in Chapter 3, tells of a time when your elders shall dream dreams and your young shall see visions. What are our dreams, for ourselves, for those we love, for our family, for civilization? As others seek to paint the future in nightmarish hues, how do we create, on the canvas of our lives, a world of color and light, where elders can share dreams, and children can realize visions?

THE VALUE OF VALUES

A university must be a dream incubator, provoking visions and strategies for the future. It must be committed not to change, but to purpose. In 1946, Britain's poet laureate, John Masefield, wrote of the gift to civilization that is a university:

"There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university. It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see, where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honor thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things. They give young people that close companionship for which youth longs, and that chance of the endless discussion of the themes that are endless, without which youth would seem a waste of time. There are few earthly things more splendid than a university. In these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values, when the dams are down and the floods are making misery, when every future looks somewhat grim, and every ancient foothold has become something of a quagmire, wherever a university stands, it stands and shines; wherever it exists, the free minds of men, urged on to full and fair inquiry, may still bring wisdom into human affairs."

Ladies and gentlemen, we gather at a time when universities have been in retreat for a generation. While pursuing achievement and proficiency, the university has turned from Masefield's poetry, and has become too much a place of prose. Whether still fearful of the upheavals of the 60s, or paralyzed by the correctness of relativism, the academy has retreated from shaping our civilization. A new generation comes of age, longing for what William Raspberry calls a life that makes sense, feeling profound existential loneliness, while living in a shrinking world that, paradoxically, produces feelings of anonymity. Our children long to matter, yearning for an informing

vision of values that makes life work. They confront a madness of license on one hand and extremist, hateful fundamentalism on the other that seeks to extinguish the light of ideas and the lyric melody of values.

A great university must refocus on the exploration of the value of values, must expose the young to the freedom of commitment, to the nuance of ideals firmly held, while protecting the rights of others. A great university must rebuild a spirit of free inquiry, while embracing the immutability of life values that are non-negotiable. It must teach the skills of navigating the terrain, while reaching for the cosmos. Its challenge is not to defend Western civilization, but to advance Western civilization. A great university is great scholars and great students.

We are a great university. We are a great university because the Jewish people and its sacred story inform us. These values are our values.

At this time, in this place, Yeshiva University stands poised to lead.

NEW FRONTIERS - TO ENNOBLE AND ENABLE

We are a strong university, with well-developed schools and programs, functioning successfully. We all know the significant accomplishments of Yeshiva. We also know that Yeshiva University is a wonderful work in process. No longer threatened with fiscal fragility, we can dream future dreams. As with any new administration, there is now a moment to reflect, to listen and learn; to build on and renew the vision that is Yeshiva. I have spent six months as president-elect and 100 days as president listening to a chorus of voices. I've been seeking guidance and asking questions, and fashioning dreams into what I believe is a collective vision. William Butler Yeats teaches us that in dreams begins responsibility. On a more personal level, I recall dozing in front of the television, with my son Noam. He startled me awake saying, "Dad, they just said something you would say." I said, "what's that?" He said, "The only way to make dreams come true is to wake up." It's time to awaken and make dreams come true.

The time is now to re-emphasize our commitment to a community of trust and caring. The time is now to re-emphasize our commitment to quality and excellence in education, sacred and secular, to challenge the Yeshiva, the undergraduate and graduate schools to take ownership of Torah Umadda—to view the world of ideas, of the arts and sciences, of the needs of a troubled humanity, through the prism of Torah and timeless values that have formed the bedrock of

civilization. We must not only espouse Torah Umadda, we must live it, and challenge our students, in whatever school, from whatever place, to live it. We must take time to ask hard questions, of how we teach and model integrity, how we provoke leadership, service, and learning.

While president-elect, I lived in the dorm for four months. A remarkable time. One thing became clear: in a profound way, at this university, the experience is so much more than the classroom, so much more than the subjects, so much more than the campus. The combination of these students and this faculty, these values and these times, creates a YU experience that is incomparable. Our challenge, yours and mine, is to strengthen that experience, to build on it, to ensure that our students stay part of Yeshiva life.

Let us resolve to fashion a Yeshiva University that ennobles and enables—that ennobles students in purpose, and enables them in capacity to dream and to fulfill those dreams for self and humankind. I believe that to make that real, we must commit ourselves to four areas of concentration—nobility, excellence, Israel, and community. And let these concentrations be our signature.

MAKING NOBILITY'S PRESENCE FELT

Nobility should be the driving aspiration of our academy. A master principle in our tradition emerges from a verse in Leviticus (Chapter 19) – “Be holy, for I the L-rd am holy.” We are commanded to emulate G-d, to model our deeds after G-d's deeds. I think the word “holy” does a disservice to the concept of Kedusha. I think Kedusha translates as nobility.

One of the most eminent Torah scholars of the generation before the Holocaust, who distinguished himself as rosh yeshiva in RIETS, Rabbi Shimon Shkop, interpreted Kedusha in this way. According to Rav Shkop, Kedusha means dedicating all of one's abilities to noble and exalted goals. Kedusha challenges us to use the best of our energies and mental capacities, not to improve ourselves, but to work for the betterment of the community and the advancement of humankind.

Young people yearn for lives of nobility, but don't know how to attain them. The challenge of being knights-errant, to go forth from our university to ennoble life and give ongoing harmonies to western civilization by whom we are and what we do, is a compelling vision for our children. We must elevate the quality of the experience for our students, so that each one feels inspired by his tenure at YU.

We are a small enough school to be personal. Somehow, sometimes, we make ourselves impersonal. We too much mirror the anonymity of society. We need to strengthen our culture of nobility. To improve civilization, we must model civility. We must tear down walls between the people and institutions that are Yeshiva University. There is joy in nobility. Let us posit a recommitment to a Yeshiva family, where people risk trusting each other, where "we can" is the operative term. We will find social venues for the faculty and administration to know each other, and learn from each other. Let's make sure every employee feels part of the community. Let's treat the students as the gifts that they are. "Every Student Counts" must be our mantra. This agenda is elevating and liberating. Being student-friendly does not mean being student-pandering. Our students deserve standards, and rigor, but delivered with a smile. A culture of caring must be the hallmark of Yeshiva. That requires a commitment of resources and attitude. We simply must enhance the quality of the student experience in every interaction, and in terms of guidance and counseling, opportunities for students to feel valued and valuable, beyond what we offer today.

Our commitment to excellence must be real. Excellence must be nourished, or it becomes pedestrian. Every university president speaks of excellence. What do I mean in a YU context? Through years of struggle, Yeshiva labored heroically to provide a fine education for each student. And yet, over time, we have become risk-averse. We are too cautious to reach, to attain what Dr. Lamm has called "The Royal Reach." As we look forward, we need to ask, how do we make our constellation of schools places of choice for the serious student? And how do we play to our strengths in doing that? We must look at academic excellence, and at all aspects of what we do. Let me offer a few examples:

ADVANCING EXCELLENCE

Our undergraduate schools are quality institutions. Yet our faculty is overburdened with high courseloads and inadequate research support. We have unmet curricular needs. It's too often a difficult choice for students to turn down the Ivy Leagues for Yeshiva. We have so much at YU, that for students who seek an experience in a Torah Umadda context, that ennobles and enables, coming to Yeshiva should be, as they say, a no-brainer. I believe that to model Torah Umadda, the quality of the secular experience has to rival the quality of the Torah experience. We should make the fact that we have three relatively small undergraduate schools into a great strength. These gems must be polished to shine. We must build on what we have. What would it

take to enhance the faculty, the curriculum, and the academic environment so that our undergraduate schools are schools of choice, treasures of teaching and research excellence? Let's decide which disciplines must be our strengths, or need to be, and ensure that they're excellent. How do we use the resource of New York to attract master teachers and more faculty who embrace the challenge of Torah Umadda? Our curriculum should be so rich that our students look to stay for additional years.

How do we strengthen the professional training components of RIETS so they complement the quality of the learning, even as we support and strengthen our outstanding Yeshiva? What's our plan for making Azrieli the premier school of Jewish education? How do we encourage the continuing achievement of Cardozo and its premier faculty?

At the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, we are just now embarking on an historic project to build a center for research in genetic and translational science, a key building block in the incredible scientific research being conducted. As we expand the Resnick Campus, we are also concentrating on enhancing the quality of student life.

We are strong enough to offer challenges to all of our graduate schools, Jewish Studies, Social Work, Psychology, to chart a course of excellence.

We have hardly begun to think in interdisciplinary terms. How do we encourage interdisciplinary efforts among and between the schools? What an intellectual and teaching resource we have if we collaborate, if we envision centers for Ethics and Leadership, within our walls, and in the community. Imagine focusing the educational resources of the university on the increasingly fine Yeshiva University High Schools. What a laboratory they can be. The YU Museum is an educational resource waiting to be tapped. The whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Our faculty and administration are ripe for the challenge; our students are deserving of its success.

THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL

The land of Israel and the State of Israel are central to the future vision of the Jewish people, and have always been central to the reality of the Yeshiva University community. More than 2000 alumni now live in Israel. We have a philosophy of life—an approach of Torah Umadda that is unique, and could contribute significantly to bridging the corrosive gaps in Israeli society. It is time we concretized our commitment in terms of the university's agenda. More than 600

students enrolled as Yeshiva undergrads spend their first year studying at Israeli institutions. We offer a first-rate graduate Talmudic Institute on our Gruss campus in Jerusalem. Here, in New York, our undergraduates constitute the largest body of pro-Israel students on any campus outside Israel. And yet, we have not articulated a coherent Israel agenda here or in Israel.

So let's be serious about YU and Israel. Let's review our curricular offerings dealing with Israel and enrich them. Let's make YU the address in New York for Israel events and Israel conversations. Let's work to offer more internships in Israel, more extracurricular support for Israeli programming, and appropriate relationships with Israeli universities and educational institutions. How do we envision the full use of the Gruss Campus? What vision do we have for the Gruss Kollel, and for the educational presence we should be. Let's take a serious look at the one-year program in Israel and see how we can add value. Dr. Lamm and I will shortly spend time on a fact-finding trip, engaging key constituencies in eliciting their ideas, so that we can fashion the agenda that should be ours.

Finally, we must address the key role of community in building Yeshiva University's future. If we are serious about being a premier educational enterprise that ennobles and enables our world, we must see ourselves as a university without walls. Yeshiva University lives throughout the world. It lives through its network of alumni who are pervasive and strong. It lives through the network of communities that have been informed by the Yeshiva University vision. It is shaped by the presence of YU professionals who guide the professions. It thrives through the network of synagogues and communal institutions that are led by Yeshiva lay and professional leaders. We are the people who have defined the concept of a lifetime of learning. This global community hungers for an ongoing relationship with us. And we owe the community to serve as its educational resource.

Therefore, we must plan to fill those needs. We will explore how we offer continuing educational opportunities, through distance-learning, through an educational-speakers bureau, making accessible the great Torah knowledge and wonderful scholarship that resides in our faculty. We must develop the ability to offer valuable in-service programs to support the educational institutions and communal agencies. We must partner with the global communal organizations to offer our resources. We will invite the community to our campuses to share in the great celebration of learning that is Yeshiva.

SERVING THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Our student body participates in an unbelievable array of community service projects worldwide. We must be better partners with them, encouraging community service, and offering students the clinical skills to serve the community, even as they learn the enormous fulfillment that comes from service. We must serve the rabbinates that provoke our agenda in the community, and support the network of educators that inspires our day schools and yeshivot. What's our role in ensuring the excellence of the synagogues and day schools that so need an ongoing educational home, and are also the source for our students? We must assume responsibility for the ongoing inspiration of both the Jewish community and the professional networks that emanate from Yeshiva University. That's what it means to advance civilization. That business must be our business. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes Yeshiva University to inform the global village.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are challenges worthy of our efforts. We speak today of an expansive agenda that can ennoble and enable our children to build lives worth living in communities worth living in. The aspirations are real. But expectations must be real as well. The goals we set forth today are ambitious. They will take many years to realize. They will require our good will, and our great effort. Dreams and visions must be accompanied by choices and commitments. We will formulate the plans, school by school, division by division, and will present them to our boards and then the community at the end of this academic year. We will offer you our best efforts joyously. Will you join in this historic effort? Dare we dream? Dare we not?

I stand before you with hope and commitment, because my life has been informed by the loving guiding force of my best friend, Esther. Her family has inspired me. Our friends have been my teachers. And our children, Penny, Avery, Ariella, Noam, Nachum, and Kira illumine our lives and inspire our tomorrows. So many of you have added immeasurably to our journey to this point. So much of this we owe to Yeshiva, for educating our parents and our children.

The first time I visited this room, I was twelve years old. My mother and father brought me here, for my induction into the Bnai Hillel Honor Society. After the ceremony, we walked through the halls of this building. For one of the only times in my life, I saw my father cry. He told me that in his life's journey from Vilna to South Africa to America, he never believed he would see such proud Jewish purpose fulfilled. He told me then that I would study here. Within a year, he was gone. Today, that pride and joy resides in his only child. My wife and I have

raised our children to be a credit to their grandparents and their people. This president's firstborn has just made aliya, planting herself in Israel. His next child will be ordained by this house of learning later this year. All the others will find their paths with equal value and joy. Such should be the paths of all of our children. It is for us to guide them to their future, to ennoble and enable them, together.

The Torah reading of this past week puts our challenge in perspective: "I call heaven and earth to witness today, that I have placed before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live."

May we choose wisely. And May it be G-d's will. V'cheyn yehi ratzon.