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of the British Commonwealth*

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Yeshiva University

**Sixty-Sixth Annual
Commencement Address**

Commencement Address

by Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks

Distinguished president, Rabbi Norman Lamm, rabbanim, academic staff, and students of Yeshiva University, ladies and gentlemen—

I am deeply moved by the honor you have bestowed on me and my fellow honorees today. All the more so since it has been conferred by an individual, Rabbi Lamm, and an institution, Yeshiva University, that have consistently upheld the highest standards of honor in Jewish life. When Abba Eban, Israel's former foreign secretary, revisited his alma mater, Cambridge University, he said, "It was here that I acquired the integrity, honesty, and love of truth that have been such a disadvantage to me in my political career." I suppose in his darker moments Rabbi Lamm may sometimes feel that integrity, honesty, and love of tolerance are a disadvantage in Jewish life as well. In fact, nowadays, the very definition of being a balanced personality is that you are attacked by both sides. However, we say in the words of Ben Zoma, איזהו מכובד? המכבד אחרים "Who is honored? Not one who receives honor but one who bestows honor." Today, therefore, the true honor belongs to your outstanding president, Rabbi Lamm, and the institution he leads, Yeshiva University.

Towards that honor, ladies and gentlemen, let me reflect with you today on what it means to be a graduate, as you are, of the only institution in the world that bears in its name the two great citadels of higher learning in western civilization, the yeshiva and the university. The university is an ancient institution. It goes all the way back to Oxford in the twelfth

century, Paris in the eleventh, Salerno in the ninth. The yeshiva is more ancient still, three times as old, going back to the very dawn of Jewish history. מעולם לא פסקה ישיבה מאבותינו "There was never a time when there was not a yeshiva in Jewish life."

In both places, the yeshiva and the university, learning, knowledge, and the pursuit of truth are pursued to their highest degree; in both places, scholars and scholarship are honored. And yet they are different places; they belong to different traditions. Therefore, how do they join together? And what is the significance of their joining together, to the Jewish world today?

The answer lies in a striking and famous midrashic statement. The Midrash says, אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגוים, תאמין "If someone says to you there is wisdom among the nations of the world, believe it [because it's true]." יש תורה בגוים אל תאמין "If they say to you there is Torah amongst the nations, do not believe it [because Torah belongs to us]." The sages distinguished between two kinds of scholarship, chochma and Torah. Chochma—wisdom—is the universal aspiration of mankind. Torah is the unique heritage of the Jewish people. Chochma comes to us through Divine creation—when Hashem says, נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו "Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness," which, says Rashi, means להבין ולהשכל "capable of reflecting, understanding, and learning about his situation." Torah, however, comes to us not through Divine creation but through Divine revelation, the direct revelation of Hashem's will for us.

Through chochma we learn what it is to be a human being, through Torah we learn what it is to be a Jew; and each of those concepts has a home. The home of chochma is the university; the home of Torah is the yeshiva. Now, what is very striking about our sages is that they valued both. They cher-

ished both. They loved Torah, but they respected chochma as well. They coined a special blessing on seeing a great Torah sage, but they also coined a special blessing on seeing a great secular scholar. Indeed, they even instituted that every single day we should pray for דעה בינה והשכל or חכמה בינה ודעת, “general wisdom,” even before we pray השבינו אבינו לתורתך “That Hashem draw us close to His Torah.”

The truth is, it was the combination of the two that defined greatness for Chazal. Because without chochma, Torah is lame; and without Torah, chochma is blind. We need both. We need chochma to be truly human, and we need Torah to be truly Jewish. And there is no conflict between them. I discovered this in a strange way a few years ago. My wife and I were taking a holiday in Eilat, and we were taking a trip in one of the glass-bottomed boats there, when the captain overheard us talking and he rushed over to us and he said, אתם מאנגליה? “Are you from England?” and we said, “Yes, why?” He said, “Oh, I’ve just got back from a holiday in England.” So we said, “How did you like it?” Now, you know what Eilat is like—it’s barren, it’s a wilderness, it’s a desert. He said, “England was wonderful!” He said, “The grass is so green, the buildings are so old, the people are so polite!” And then he thought for a moment and an enormous smile came over his face, and he opened his arms to embrace the whole barren landscape, and with an enormous smile he said, אבל זה שלנו “But this is ours.”

That is how we understood chochma and Torah—we admired the wisdom of Aristotle, the beauty of Shakespeare, the elegance of theoretical physics, but of Torah we said, אבל זה שלנו “This is ours.” And so, ideally, every single Jew should share both. Every Jew who aspires to higher learning should be a graduate of the yeshiva and the university. Why,

then, are there not hundreds of such places? Why is there only one? And here we come to the sad, even tragic, fact that what Judaism always tried to hold together has today split apart.

Consider this: today there are more Jews at university than in any previous generation. There are also more Jews in yeshiva than ever before in our history. Yet there is a great divide between them; they tend to be two different groups of Jews. And sometimes, sadly, the Jews who go to yeshiva can even frown on general culture—as they used to say about that wonderful book in which they translated Shakespeare into Yiddish and wrote underneath “*fertiechet und ferbessert*”: translated and improved. And sometimes רחמנא לצלן the other Jews, the Jews of university, fail to engage with Torah, with yeshiva. Sometimes, they even forget they are Jews. The late Shlomo Carlebach, who spent a lifetime going around campuses, said towards the end of his life, “You know, when I go around campuses, and I talk to students and I ask them ‘what are you?’, when somebody gets up and says, ‘I’m a Catholic,’ I know that’s a Catholic; somebody gets up and says, ‘I’m a Protestant,’ I know that’s a Protestant; somebody gets up and says, ‘I’m just a human being,’ I know that’s a Jew.”

And yet if our Torah lacks chochma, how can we connect it to our engagement with the wider world? And if our chochma lacks Torah, how can we be Jews in any real, intellectual, and spiritual depth? We find ourselves today in a world with two kinds of Jews—one group formidably well-educated and yet Jewishly almost illiterate; and another group of Jews who are fluent in Maharsha and the Ketzot haChoshen and yet who stammer when it comes to the culture of the world.

היתכן?—is that how it was supposed to be? There are cerebral lesions in which the connection can be fractured between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. The result is a disintegration of the personality. I believe today the Jewish people is suffering from a lesion which has broken the connection between the left and right hemispheres of the Jewish people. And there is only one group of people who can help to heal that fracture, and that is you—the graduates of Yeshiva University—because you, almost alone in today's Jewish world, have learned to combine Torah and chochma, to integrate yeshiva and university. You know that they are not שתי רשויות, “two separate domains”; they are the two hemispheres of the Jewish soul. Chochma reminds us that we are humans, we are citizens of the universal enterprise of mankind, and Torah reminds us that we are Jews, heirs of the greatest heritage ever conferred upon a people.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been your privilege to learn, it will be your responsibility to teach—that you can be a faithful Jew and still participate in the wider world, and that you can participate in the wider world and still stay a faithful Jew. You will be criticized by the right and by the left, but let me tell you now that when you are criticized, you should know that that will be your honorary doctorate. Today, to be criticized by all sides is the greatest badge of honor in the Jewish world. And you should know that you are being criticized because you are doing the right thing. You will integrate what others have sought to disintegrate. You will be the bearers of the correct way, the harmonious way, דרך ה' “Hashem's way.”

So let me end, ladies and gentlemen, by telling you a story, something that happened to me just a few months ago. A little while back, in London, I received a phone call from the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University. He phoned me up with an unusual request. He asked, would I be willing to give the first Steven Spielberg lecture at Cambridge University? It was such an exotic invitation I couldn't refuse, and I went and for an hour, in the Divinity School in Cambridge, I taught Torah to a packed room, including the Vice Chancellor and the leading professors of Cambridge University.

Afterwards, I asked the few Jewish students who were there to stay so that we could daven Maariv together; and then after Maariv, I went down to the reception being held in my honor by the Vice Chancellor. And there at the reception an elderly Jewish professor was standing in a corner, his eyes full of tears, and I went up to him and said, “What are you crying for? I know it wasn't that good but it wasn't that bad!” And he told me the following: “I will explain to you, chief rabbi, why I am so emotional. You,” he said, “probably did not realize that the area on which the Divinity School in Cambridge stands was the site of the pre-expulsion Jewish community. You know that there were Jews in Britain between the tenth and thirteenth centuries; they were expelled in 1290 and the site on which the Divinity School is built is where the Jewish area was.” He said, “The lane beside the lecture hall which I'd known as an undergraduate as All Saints Passage in the early Middle Ages was called Jews Lane. That spot where you gave the lecture tonight was the very place on which, in the twelfth century, the medieval synagogue stood. Tonight was the first time that Jews have learned Torah and davened on that spot in more than seven hundred years.”

And I said, “רבונו של עולם, if only the Jews of the thirteenth century had known all that they were about to experience by way of persecution, expulsion, inquisitions, and pogroms; how despite all of that, they would one day return in honor and be able to teach Torah to the Vice Chancellor and professors of Cambridge; how they would one day bring back the spirit of yeshiva to the very university which once excluded them. Then they would have known that what our ancestors believed all along, but all too rarely had the chance to see, was true—that **היא חכמתכם ובינתכם לעיני העמים** that Torah when we combine it with humanity is ‘our wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the world.’”

And then I knew this has to be our way—to bring humanity to Torah and Torah to humanity, to bring the yeshiva and the university together again with distinction and with pride. That is the privilege you have had in this Yeshiva University. May you live by those principles in the future; may Hashem bring you blessing in all you do. **ויהי רצון שתשרה שכניה במעשי ידיכם**. “And may His presence dwell in the work of your hands.” Amen.