

# TORAH AND CHOKHMAH

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**Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth Dr Sacks delivered the 66th Annual Commencement Address at Yeshiva University on May 22nd, 1997.**

I am deeply moved by the honour 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 honour 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, 'Who is truly honoured? Not one who receives honour but one who bestows it.' Today, therefore, the true honour belongs to your outstanding president, Rabbi Lamm, and the institution he leads, Yeshiva University.

Towards that honour let me reflect with you today on what it means to be a graduate of the only institution in the world that bears in its name the two great citadels of higher learning in western civilization, the yeshivah and the university. The university is an

ancient institution. It goes all the way back to Oxford in the 12th century, Paris in the 11th, Salerno in the 9th. The yeshivah is more ancient still, three times as old, going back to the very dawn of Jewish history. *Meolam lo paska yeshivah* (there was never a time when there was not a yeshivah in Jewish life).

In both places, the yeshivah and the university, learning, knowledge and the seeking of truth are pursued to their highest degree; in both places, scholars and scholarship are honoured. 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?

## Torah and Chokhmah

The answer lies in a striking and famous midrashic statement. The Midrash says, 'If someone says to you there is wisdom among the nations of the world, believe it (because it is true). *Yesh Torah bagoyyim al taamin* (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, *chokhmah* and Torah. *Chokhmah* - wisdom - is the universal aspiration of mankind. Torah is the unique heritage of the Jewish people. *Chokhmah* comes to us through Divine creation - when God says, *Naaseh adam besalmeynu kidemuteinu* (Let us make man in our image, in our likeness) which, says Rashi, means *lehavin ulehaskil* (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 God's will to us.

Through *chokhmah* 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 *chokhmah* is the university; the home of Torah is the yeshivah. Now, what is very striking about our sages is that they valued both. They cherished both. They loved Torah, but they respected *chokhmah* 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 *de'ah binah vehaskel* or *chokhmah binah vedaat* (general wisdom) even before we pray *hashiveinu avinu letoratekha* (that God draw us close to His Torah).

The truth is, it was the combination of the two that defined greatness for Chazal. Because without *chokhmah*, Torah is lame; and without Torah, *chokhmah* is blind. We need both. We need *chokhmah* 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 said, *attem meAngliyyah?* (Are you from England?) and we said, 'yes, why?' He replied '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! 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. He opened his arms to embrace the whole barren landscape and with an enormous smile said *aval zeh shellanu* (but this is ours).

That is how we understood *chokhmah* and Torah - we admired the wisdom of Aristotle, the beauty of Shakespeare, the elegance of theoretical physics, but of Torah we said *aval zeh shellanu* (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 yeshivah 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.

### The Great Divide

Consider this: today there are more Jews at university than in any previous generation. There are also more Jews in yeshivah 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 yeshivah 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, *Rachmana litslan* (Hashem should not let it happen) the other Jews, the Jews of university, fail to engage with Torah, with yeshivah. 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 *chokhmah*, how can we connect it to our engagement with the wider world? And if our *chokhmah* 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 *Ketsot Hachoshen* and yet who stammer when it comes to the culture of the world.

*Hayittakhen* (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 world, have learned to combine Torah and *chokhmah*, to integrate yeshivah and university. You know that they are not two separate domains; they are the two hemispheres of the Jewish soul. *Chokhmah* 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.

### Harmony and Honour

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 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 honour 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, *Derekh Hashem* (God's way).

So let me end, ladies and gentlemen, by telling you of something that happened to me just a few months ago. A little while back, in London, I received a 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.

### Torah Renewed - After 700 Years

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 honour 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 realise 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 expelled in 1290 and the site on which the Divinity School is built is where the Jewish area was. 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 12th century, the medieval



synagogue stood. Tonight was the first time that Jews have learned Torah and davened on that spot in more than 700 years.'

And I said,

*Ribbono shel olam* - if only the Jews of the 13th 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 honour and be able to teach

Torah to the Vice Chancellor and professors of Cambridge; how they would one day bring back the spirit of yeshivah 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 - *hi chokhmatkhem uvinatkhem leaynei ha'amim* (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 yeshivah 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 God bring you blessing in all you do. *Viyehi ratson shetishrah shekhinah bemaasei yedeikhem*. (And may His presence dwell in the work of your hands.) Amen.

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