

Rabbi Harari, Rabbi Levy, teachers, friends, distinguished graduates,

I have come here today, to this auditorium in which many years ago I sat at this same assembly, to commend you, and especially one among you, my beloved Isabel, for your achievement; but also to reflect with you for a few moments about the nature of achievement. Your school has asked a great deal of you, more than most schools, and you have responded brilliantly, as evidenced by this ceremony this morning. You earned the distinction that is now yours.

Always remember the sweet satisfactions of hard work and right reward, because more will be asked of you very soon, and throughout your lives as committed members of our people and thoughtful citizens of our country. The task of living intelligently never ends; and it can never be adequately met without effort. The habit of intellectual diligence that you have acquired, and demonstrated, within these walls constitutes one of your greatest advantages in life. Education is an essentially meritocratic activity; and though it sounds paradoxical, you are the aristocrats of this meritocracy. You have risen high only by the exertions of your own minds; and of this you should be mightily proud - יגעתם ומצאתם

Achievement is not only of the great ideals of American life, but also one of its great clichés; so let us think together about what it really means. There is external achievement and internal achievement; the achievement that can be measured quantitatively and the achievement that defies such measurement. It is one thing to learn something and quite another to know it. It is one thing to be taught an idea and quite another to possess it. The Kotzker Rebbe once wondered why the holiday of Shavuot, which we recently celebrated, is called "זמן מתן תורתנו" (the time of the giving of the Torah) and not – "זמן קבלת תורתנו" (the time of the receiving of the Torah) and he wisely suggested that it was because קבלה does not denote קבינה.

What has been given must still be received. And the reception of what you have been given cannot be demonstrated only externally, by a talent for tests and a skill for the right answers. Right answers are always preferable to wrong answers, but right answers can be wrong answers, too, if their reasons and causes are not understood. Just as information should be enlarged by knowledge, knowledge should be enlarged by understanding. The highest challenge, the highest achievement, is not to merely have mastered a body of knowledge, but to have also opened oneself up to the substance of what one has mastered, to have allowed oneself to be affected and even transformed by it. Academic accomplishment must be promoted into intellectual and even spiritual accomplishment. Good students must be deep students if they are to be real students.

What determines the quality of your achievement, in other words, is not performance but motivation – the spirit of your studies. Performance is visible, and therefore more easily tracked; motivation is invisible, but it shows in the tone of your endeavors, and it determines the scale of your ambitions. It is possible, alas, to do well and think small. It is possible to grasp all that is within one's reach but nothing more. Achievement must be more than a confirmation of skills. It must also be a confirmation of ideals. There are those who experience achievement as an occasion for self-satisfaction; but the ideal of

achievement must be the antithesis of self-satisfaction, because what it really represents is a refusal to be satisfied with what has so far been accomplished, a restlessness, a hunger, an extension of high standards still higher. A few weeks ago, when I was teaching משנה to my boy and some of his friends, I came upon the משנה in פרקי אבות that all of us know so well but few of us have really pondered.

”אנטיגנוס איש סוכו קיבל משמעון הצדיק. הוא היה אומר: אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס, אלא הוּו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב שלא על מנת לקבל פרס, ויהי מורא שמים עליכם.”

(פרקי אבות פרק א' משנה ג')

“Antigonos of Sokho said: Be not like servants who minister to the master for the sake of receiving a reward, but like servants who minister to the master not for the sake of a reward.” Now, there is of course nothing wrong or illegitimate about receiving a reward for your work. You are here this morning because this recognition is your just deserts. So what is the attitude that troubles Antigonos? It is what we would call the instrumental attitude, the frame of mind that accomplishes its tasks only for the sake of the benefits of such accomplishment. Since the “master” mentioned in the משנה is God, and the subject is the proper way to serve God, the Rambam observes that Antigonos’ goal is “שיהיו עובדים מאהבה” (that they serve out of love) that is, for the sake of the service itself. The point here is that the פרס is good but the עבודה is better.

Let us translate this into more general terms. There are extrinsic reasons for achievement and there are intrinsic reasons for achievement. In American society now, the extrinsic reasons have more prestige than the intrinsic reasons. People study to get ahead, and so they should: these certifications are necessary for a secure and prosperous life. But they are not sufficient for a meaningful and beautiful life. For that, as my niece has often reminded me, the intrinsic reasons are needed. I strongly encourage you to remember the obligation of intrinsicness, and not to be overwhelmed by a world in which everything is gamed and calculated, and the only considerations that matter are considerations of profit. Burnish your resumes, but never confuse your resumes with yourselves. Inhabit your education for its own sake — which is to say, for the sake of your soul.

There is only one way to cultivate your soul, and that is never to close it. Openness is more difficult than it sounds, more confusing, more frightening; and that is why there are many teachers and many texts that counsel against openness, and on behalf of a feeling of perfect certainty. But such certainty is always an illusion, even for religious people. I ask you to notice something about Antigonos, who was one of the early fathers of the rabbinical tradition. It is that the name of this great rabbi was Greek. I want you to infer from this fact not only that in his time Jewish culture in the land of Israel came under the orbit of Hellenism, but more generally that Jewish culture has regularly been stimulated and enriched by its encounter with other cultures. Your attitude toward such influences must not be one of vigilance and suspicion. You should be moved, rather, by curiosity and a desire for truth. The Talmud says “קבל את האמת ממי שאמר” (accept the truth from whoever utters it). The mind is an instrument of expansion, not contraction. You owe it to yourselves, and to your people, to expand.

With the graduation of the high school class of 2013, my family concludes a relationship with the Yeshivah of Flatbush that began in 1958 – not quite the Hellenistic age, but a very long time ago. It was

fifty-five years ago that my father המנוח and my mother שתחיה had the wisdom to bring me to the doors of this extraordinary institution. I am here today not only to exhort you and to congratulate you, but also to bid farewell to an institution that provided the foundations of my identity, and my sister's, and my nephew's, and my niece's. My own debt to this institution's old mixture of tradition and enlightenment is incalculable. As the decades have gone by, the Jewish world has changed, the world of Judaism has changed, and those changes have been felt within these walls. We all have our opinions about those changes. But we are of one opinion about the magnitude of what we owe you. Our gratitude to this school, to its principals and its teachers and its students, is beyond measure.

באורכם ראינו אור!