

Remarks to the Yavneh Academy Class of 2010/5770

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It is such an incredible honor to have the opportunity to take part in this celebration today. Thank you Mr. O'Quinn, Carol, honored rabbis, faculty members, board members, parents, and of course, the terrific class of 2010! You know in Judaism, there is no greater distinction than that of being a teacher. When you think about it we Jews do not celebrate kings or heroes, we celebrate teachers like Rabbi Akiva, and Hillel, and the greatest human teacher of all Moshe. Each morning in the *Birkat Ha'Torah* we say: *Baruch Atah Hashem ha'melameid Torah le'amo Yisrael*. Even God is referred to vocationally as a teacher, as we thank Him for teaching us Torah. Teachers are essential to Jewish continuity and Jewish survival. They inspire hearts, and minds, and dreams. Let us take a moment to celebrate the many wise, dedicated, talented teachers of Yavneh Academy and express our appreciation for everything they do. I must say that I feel the palpable presence of Ronald Gruen z"l, who loved this school and along with his beloved wife Ethel, supported it with all their hearts and means throughout their many years in Dallas. He would be so proud today.

To tell you the truth, though, I am just a little bit disappointed. I was hoping that Mr. O'Quinn might present me with an honorary Yavneh diploma today. It's common for commencement speakers to get honorary degrees from the schools that invite them to speak, and I was hoping for something like [I don't know] an honorary GED or some official documentation that would certify my relationship with this great school. I am not an alumnus of Yavneh, but I am an enthusiastic supporter and believer in this school...but perhaps not for the reasons you might expect. I have been reading with pride and interest all those ads that this school has taken out in the Dallas Morning News, the Neighbors sections, and the Texas Jewish Post each time another member of this graduating class was accepted to a top tier school; every time one of these seniors received a prestigious scholarship or a remarkable recognition of academic talent. They are beautiful ads [Deb!], and it's important for the community to know that a Jewish day school can produce the most qualified, competent students as any other school whether private or public in our increasingly competitive world of college preparatory education. There's no doubt that this class represents the best and the brightest graduates in this city. But that is not ultimately what convinced me of the greatness of this school. In fact my awe for Yavneh Academy, and for the class of 2010 in particular, is not the result of any academic criteria at all. Where I saw the soul of this school and the depth of this class was when you were all faced with what might have been the most difficult test you have taken all of your of Yavneh education. It was not a TAKS test or an SAT or anything that could be described as "standardized." It was not a test that demanded that you regurgitate facts or compute mathematical problems. It was much greater than that. It was a test of your humanity. It was a test of your *neshamot*. It was a test of your ability to show compassion, and love, and sensitivity when, shortly after the beginning of this year, one of your classmates experienced the most devastating loss imaginable. This classmate of yours is here today with his dad and his sister, but his precious mother is observing this occasion, with great pride I believe, *min ha'shamayim*..from the heavens, rather than in a seat by his side. It was in the midst of the pain and confusion of that loss

that I saw what this class is truly capable of. On January 25th and every day after you demonstrated that everything you learned in your Jewish law classes, that everything that you have seen on the pages of the Gemara and Halakha that you have studied is not just academic...not just the ponderings of sages living 1,000 years ago...2,000 years ago...You demonstrated that this Torah is a powerful, living, relevant, life-altering document and you mustered everything that you learned and offered it to one of your own in the form of comfort and presence and hope. You were at your classmate's side in remarkable numbers, in the middle of the day, early in the morning, late into the night. I thought of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who taught that a religious man is 'a person whose greatest passion is compassion.' You demonstrated then in ways that brought tears to my eyes and more importantly that gave me such hope and confidence that this school has prepared you not just intellectually, not just with the facts and figures, the names and dates...but this school has shaped your souls, it has molded your character as people who will undoubtedly succeed on the college campus—nearly any high school can do that—but this school has made you into Jews who understand the significance of your tradition, the meaning of living a life of Torah and mitzvot, the power that each one of you possesses to touch another person's soul, to be a transformative presence along the journey of life. The great poet Maya Angelou once wrote, "I have learned that people will forget what you said; people will forget what you did; but people will never forget how you made them feel." You understand that teaching perhaps more than any other graduating class around, and I know that Mitchell Blumka and his family will never forget how **you** made them feel.

It reminds me of the classic debate in *Massechet Kiddushin, daf mem amud bet...*page 40b, where Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva are discussing whether study or practice is greater. The very same Rabbi Tarfon who said *lo alecha hamelacha ligmor ve'lo atah ben chorin lehibatel mimena...*that just because you may not see the end result of all your labors doesn't exempt you from trying--he not surprisingly answers that practice, that doing is greater than study. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, who entered the world of study as an adult and understood perhaps better than anyone the potential of dedicated learning answered that study is greater than practice. And then the voices of the Sages weigh in...*Talmud! Shemevi le'maaseh...*Study is greater, because study leads to practice. Study leads to action. It is that precious gift that we send you off with in your possession as you leave Yavneh Academy for college campuses, seminaries, yeshivot, careers, and *be'ezrat Hashem*, fulfilling, generous, meaningful lives. *Talmud...shemeivi le'maaseh*. Our prayer today is that all of the learning you have done here...by the way both Jewish and general studies...leads you to live lives of active engagement with the world and with the Jewish people. That every situation in life presents you with opportunities for this text to come alive, to inform your decisions, to elevate your speech, your behavior, your personal code of conduct, your ability to give something of yourself to others. As Heschel writes: "to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things." This is what your education here has endeavored to instill in you.

Remember that the last word of the creation narrative in Genesis...that the whole story ends with the word *la'asot...*to do. "*Asher bara Elokim la'asot.*" The story of creation hinges on you and me beginning the next chapter through doing; that it is with our deeds that we partner with God to bring about beauty in the world. Yavneh Class of 2010, you have already shown us in the most remarkable ways what you are capable of. You have already demonstrated the depth of your compassion, the goodness of your souls, the incredible ability to synthesize your learning and to turn it into action.

Now, just as we read in yesterday's parasha, it's time for you to break camp and to begin a new journey. There may be times when, like our ancestors, you long for the comforts and familiarity of this place. Cherish those memories, these people that surround you today, and move forward with confidence...because we have such great confidence in you.

Mazal tov class of 2010. Go forth and continue to make us proud!