

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
By Ambassador Yehuda Avner, Delivered May 24, 2012

I am humbly grateful for the high honor you do me this day. And I pay tribute to **you** — the graduation class of 2012 — to you and to your families — as you enter the next phase of your hard-earned scholastic achievements. Indeed, if there be a religious aristocracy in the Jewish world today I am looking at it now — **you** who have imbibed the Torah Umadda scholarship of Yeshiva University — **you** — an educated elite of our people, steeped in the knowledge that wherever we Jews have gone in history — whether in agony, in prayer, in hope, in tragedy, or in triumph — we have always followed our own way, deeply involved in the paths of history but never swallowed up by them — forever belonging to and contributing mightily to world civilization, and yet remaining distinct from it — forever proclaiming with pride and with dignity: **“YEHUDI ANOCHI — I am a Jew.”**

No wonder I meet more graduates of Yeshiva University in Eretz Yisrael than from any other academic institution in the world.

It was sixty-four years ago, Mr. President, in this season of the year, that I arrived in Eretz Yisrael from my native England. I was a lad of seventeen, fired by an inextinguishable fervor to fight the British for a Jewish state. I soon found myself swept up into a situation without knowing what I had let myself in for. I

had no idea that the initial skirmishes in which our underground militia, the Haganah, was engaged, would so ferociously escalate into an all-out struggle for survival. It might sound heroic today, but it was not then on that Friday night of May 14, 1948, when the British evacuated the country and our War of Independence began.

For three consecutive days and nights we — an inglorious bucket brigade of some 20 underfed, thirsty diggers — were desperately fortifying a narrow sector of besieged Jerusalem, hacking out trenches on a mountain side where Yad V'shem now stands, overlooking the village of Ein Karem. Our only weapons were a dozen World War One rifles, and rumor had it that a Jordanian brigade was coming up from Jericho to launch an offensive that night — and we were supposed to stop them. But none of us knew how. With twelve obsolete rifles and a motley, untrained crew like ours, what were we supposed to do?

One insuperable problem was our lack of communication with the outside world. We hadn't the slightest idea of what was going on. So our commander — a fellow called Elisha — instructed one of our lot — whose name was Leopold Mahler — a violinist, and grand nephew of the composer Gustav Mahler — he instructed him to scout out the land to see what he could dig up. By the time he returned it was close to midnight and he came crawling into our trench waving a bottle of wine and shouting, "I have news. I have news." He told us that David

Ben-Gurion had declared independence that afternoon in Tel Aviv, and that the Jewish state would come into being at midnight.

There was dead silence. Midnight was minutes away. Then we cheered and embraced and pumped hands, until Elisha called out, “Hey Mahler, our state — what’s its name?” Mahler stared back at him blankly and said, “I don’t know. I didn’t think to ask.”

“How about Yehuda?” suggested one. “King David’s kingdom was called Yehuda.” “Nah,” cried another, “Tziyon — Zion. It’s obvious.” “And what’s wrong with Israel?” asked a third. To which Elisha, grabbing hold of a tin mug and filling it with the wine Mahler had ferreted, said, “Let’s drink a L’chayim to our Jewish state, whatever its name.”

Whereupon, a Hassid in our unit, whom we all knew as Reb Nussen der chazzan, (oh yes, in those days haredim served in the army) — he cried out, “Wait! It’s Shabbos. Let’s make *Kiddush* first.” So we crouched around Reb Nussen der chazzan in the trench as he began to chant a sweet and melodious “*Yom hashishi*.” And as he finished he swayed back and forth and, eyes closed, voice trembling, declared *b’sheim u’vmalchut* — in triumphant joy to that first night of freedom — *sh’hecheyanu, v’kiyemanu v’hegiyanu l’zman hazeh*.”

But then the mortars from Ein Karem pounded the hillside, and it was all dust and debris and fear and carnage. The price we

paid for our freedom turned out to be appalling. We Jews fought alone. Nobody helped us. This is why year after year on Yom Hazikaron — our Memorial Day — thousands of families (mine among them) gather in military cemeteries across the country to weep over our individual plots of grief. It were as if we had composed our Declaration of Independence with our own skin as the parchment, our own blood as the ink, and our own skulls as the inkwells.

I was too young then to realize the enormity of what was happening — that we were embarked on a revolution which, for us — the Jewish people — was no less earth-shattering than was the American Revolution, perhaps even more so.

I dare say “perhaps even more so” because for centuries we Jews had been nothing but an **object** of history, meaning that others always made the decisions about our fate for us. Came Israel’s birth 64 years ago and, from that day forth, we once again became a **subject** of history, meaning that we became responsible for our own destiny — in accordance with our own needs, our own will, and our own choice.

This is why I believe with all my heart that Israel’s six million shall forever be the custodians of the voices of those other six million. It is why I believe that the birth of Israel saved the Jewish people from appalling decline, if not oblivion, after the Shoah. It is why I believe that the Jewish state performed a historic mission of national rescue in liberating and redeeming

and rehabilitating our scattered brethren, wherever they were downtrodden. It is why I believe that the renewed Jewish sovereignty intuitively released a regenerative energy that has invigorated a renaissance, which has pulsed throughout the whole of our people. It is why I believe that the Jewish state has provided the infrastructure for the largest center of Torah scholarship in the world, whose influence is felt throughout the world. It is why I believe that for many Jews today — perhaps the majority — their Jewish identity is unalterably bound up with the fate of Israel. And it is why I believe with all my heart *sh'lo yanum v'lo yishan Shomer Yisrael* — that the Guardian of Israel shall neither rest nor slumber in watching over His people.

So, if you ask me — as many ask me — as no doubt many of you ask yourselves — the way things are going — what will be? *MA YIHIYE?* Essentially, I would have to tell you in all honesty — I don't know. And do you know what? — we have never known. Many an American who has a measure of certainty about his or her future will assuredly find this hard to understand — to understand the capacity of a nation to live with the unknown. Yet the essence of all of Jewish history ever since God commanded Abraham “*Lech l'cha*” — GO — set out for the unknown — the essence of our people has been the capacity to live with the unknown. The entire venture of Israel has been achieved only by jumping into the unknown. In no case, under

no circumstances, at no period, to no Israeli prime minister, has the future been clear and known.

So, given these unknowns I humbly offer you — **you**, the graduation class of 2012 in particular — I offer you my TEN COMMANDMENTS designed to meet the political unknowns of our times.

One: When an enemy of our people says he seeks to destroy us, believe him.

Two: Stand tall in the knowledge that every tyrant in history who has ever sought our destruction has himself been destroyed.

Three: Protect Jewish dignity and honor at all cost. Life is holy, but there are times when one must risk life for the sake of life itself.

Four: Never raise a hand against a fellow Jew no matter the provocation.

Five: Give the enemy no quarter in demolishing his malicious propaganda.

Six: Whenever a threat against a fellow Jew looms, do all in your power to come to his aid whatever the sacrifice.

Seven: Never pause to wonder what others will think or say.

Eight: Be forever loyal to the historic truth that Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people and Jerusalem its eternal capital.

Nine: Love peace, but love freedom more.

And Ten, which is really Number One: *U'sh 'nantem l'vanecha*. Build Jewish homes not by the accident of birth, but by the conviction of our eternal Torah.

And as we celebrate in a few days time Chag Matan Torah — the festival of Shavuot — I recall the sight I saw at the Kotel but a short while ago. I saw a bent old man accompanied by a strapping young man — a soldier. And judging by the familiarity of their behavior I gathered they were a grandfather and a grandson. They were deep in conversation when, suddenly, for whatever reason, the old man rolled up his sleeve to show the young man the serial number tattooed on his arm. At which the young man undid the top button of his uniform to show the old man the IDF tag number strung around his neck. And there they stood — grandfather and grandson comparing serial numbers — **Auschwitz and Zva HaHagana L'Yisrael**. And seeing them comparing those serial numbers I thought to myself, Ribono shel Olam, this is a story of almost biblical proportions — from the darkest pit to the highest peak — **from Shoah to yeshua** in the space of hardly more than two generations.

As for myself I am just one of very many who made some contribution to our sovereign rebirth. For this I am eternally grateful to the Almighty, just as the award bestowed upon me this day is one of the greatest privileges of my life.

It was the circumstances of the times that challenged my generation to fight for, and defend Medinat Yisrael. **And yours** — you, the graduation class of 2012 — what do the circumstances of YOUR times challenge you to do? I submit they challenge you to be in the vanguard as role models of our people.

Why you?

Because by the years you have spent here you have become just that — role models of our people. This is the honest truth. It is the honest truth by virtue of the unparalleled scholarship and values of Torah UMadda which you have imbibed in this unrivalled citadel of Jewish scholastic vision.

My dear graduates — these are the best of times and they are the worst of times. I need not elaborate. Our Jewish people need the likes of you as never before. Indeed, our people need Yeshiva University as never before.

So yes, assuredly — *YOM ZEH MECHUBAD!*: This is the day of your distinction. May you, with the Almighty's help, go forth and prosper.

Alu v'hatzlichu!

To you and to your dear families I extend my heartfelt mazal tov.