

B'reshut Rabbi Riskin; distinguished guests, family and friends. It is indeed a privilege and a very special moment for me to stand before you as the new President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone.

I would like to begin by thanking my wife Ruchie.

The Torah states regarding the love of Yaakov Avinu, for Rachel:

"ויהיו בעיניו כימים אחדים באהבתו אותה"

"And the many years, seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her"

It has already been 35 years that my wife and I have walked together, and they have indeed been for me **כימים אחדים**, like a fleeting moment. Thank you, Ruchie, for your constant support and your willingness to dream together.

As a proud Jew who was raised and spent most of his life in America, and now continues to enrich his identity through becoming part of Israeli society, it is clear to me that the Jewish communities of Israel and North America are the two most prominent Jewish communities in this day and age.

Similar to the synergistic relationship expressed between Eretz Yisrael and the Babylonian communities during the Talmudic era; the Jewish communities of Israel and North America contribute to each other's destiny.

There is one significant difference.

In the times of the Talmud, the community in Israel was waning and the Babylonian community growing in prominence.

However, with the establishment of the modern State of Israel, the contemporary Israeli community has no parallel in both modern times or throughout Jewish history.

The very existence of Medinat Yisrael as articulated by Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Kook and embodied in the words of Ben-Gurion, is the means through which the continuity of the Jewish story is guaranteed.

It is in Israel that scholarship continues to expand and blossom. Where we find the largest assembly of Jewish scholars, both men and women, studying, writing and communicating a Torah that is passionate and relevant.

In Israel, the Jewish journey continues to broaden and halakha is forced to stretch. It is exciting that the norms and mores of our eternal teachings and ethical practices are asked to inform the new paradigms discovered in the logic trees of startup nation technology.

As we gather here tonight I am cognizant of the fact that out of OTS's thousands of students, hundreds find themselves at this very moment on the various borders of Israel in combat, intelligence and support units.

In the conversations that I have had with so many of them it is not lost upon me that we share the miraculous reality that the grandchildren of those who wore pinstripe concentration camp garb are donning the uniforms of *Tzahal* – the IDF – an army of great spiritual and physical strength.

But what exactly is the Jewish project of this generation? On this, there seems to be some disagreement.

There are those who emphasize that our purpose in this generation is the fortification and strengthening of the legacy of the past.

We are here is to preserve and honor the selfless sacrifice of generations past and through our commitment ensure the destiny envisioned by prior generations. They articulate that we guarantee the future of our people by committing to the ideal of
"להחזיר את העטרה ליושנה" -

To restore the crown of Torah and Judaism to its original, pristine state.

Of course, we can all agree to the necessity of a deeply rooted connection to our past. However, with that acknowledgement in mind, I would like to advocate that our responsibility to the contemporary Jewish project is to be realized from another perspective.

As Moshe Rabbeinu expresses in his final address to the Jewish people:

"כי את אשר ישנו פה עמנו עומד היום לפני ה' אלוקינו, ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום"

The Pledge that was forged between God and the Jewish People at Sinai was not exclusively with those present, but for all Jews, of all types, in all times.

I believe that the Jewish project of our generation must be shaped not by looking in the rear-view mirror but forward facing. A commitment to a Judaism that is rooted in *mesorah* (tradition), yet one that wishes to engage our children and inspire our grandchildren.

As the Jewish People were being forged into a nation, as they were forever leaving Egyptian servitude, Moshe states:

"והיה כי ישאלך בןך מחר לאמר מה זאת" -

When your child asks you in the future, 'What is this?'

Moshe was preparing his people for the inevitable set of challenging questions that our children of the 21st, 22nd and beyond will ask – and we *know* they will ask, what type of Jewish world have we bequeathed to them?

Is our brand of Judaism, ethical, moral and just? And - is it so because of the decisions that we made in our lifetime?

Our children will ask if we created an environment in which every Jew: those ritually observant and those who are not, those on the left and those on the right, Israeli or Diaspora Jew, are able to feel comfortable at our synagogues, in our schools, at the Kotel, and have been given accessibility without prejudice to our immortal writings, our literature and culture.

They will wish to know with confidence that the Judaism we promote is rooted in our eternal traditions, but also committed to a future, that it is vibrant, meaningful and inclusive.

We will need to give an accounting to our grandparents and parents about the work we engaged in to inspire the Jewish future, but more importantly we will stand in judgment before our progeny about the type of Judaism that we worked to nurture.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, spoke of the fallen heroes of the civil war

“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause.”

Lincoln asks to what cause must we show devotion, to allow the sacrifices to be worth the cost:

“That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Our sacrifice, our diligence, our goals - Must be in service to the future of our community, for Our People.

What are the dreams for the future of Ohr Torah Stone?

For nearly 40 years, under the visionary leadership of Rabbi Riskin, with a group of generous donors, talented professionals and committed lay leaders Ohr Torah Stone has attained wondrous results:

- The development of creative high schools and post-high school institutions of learning
- Championing women’s learning and leadership
- Innovative, international outreach initiatives
- Social action projects that protect and empower the alienated, the marginalized and the abused
- OTS has impacted both Israeli society and Diaspora Jewry

To get a visual perspective on the kind of incredible global impact we are making, please look at the info-graphic that is in your journal (<https://ots.org.il/our-impact/>).

It is my hope to build upon the amazing Ohr Torah Stone network that exists today in a horizontal fashion:

To strengthen and to make sure that there is a sacred synergy between our 27 institutions. Perhaps most important, for me, is to ensure that all of our institutions/programs champion an education that is spiritually enthused, religiously relevant and preparing our students to be the religious leaders, public intellectuals, entrepreneurs, titans in industry and in all facets of Israel society.

Our educational and institutional strategies must represent best and next practices. For example:

We wish to expand the way we train women to play *halakhically* appropriate leadership roles. We have done a wonderful job in making sure that the highest level of Torah learning happens in our *Batei Midrash*. We have the largest *Beit Midrash* for women in the world, and we have the most intensive program of women's Torah learning in the world.

The next step is the need to parallel that intellectual engagement with pedagogic skills, proper coaching and professional placement, so that these women can serve in leadership positions worthy of their Torah Knowledge throughout Israel and the Diaspora.

In addition to critical leadership roles that the women already play, we wish to expand their opportunities for service in synagogues in Israel, as chaplains in hospitals, and as spiritual leaders - קצינות דת - in both the IDF and the Israel police force.

We wish to revolutionize the experience Israelis have with the synagogue and their rabbinate. Over the past year, I have had the privilege to learn of the wonderful work that is being done in Israel to support rabbis serving in the field.

However, in a recent comprehensive survey that we conducted among hundreds of community and city rabbis, they shared with us their expansive reach while simultaneously acknowledging deficiencies that they recognize in their own professional education. They pointed to their need for greater ongoing educational and leadership training.

OTS was built through identifying and then rising to challenges in the Jewish world; in this area too, we will work to ensure that rabbis are prepared to engage the 21st century Jew. In the next six months, we will announce the creation of a program for rabbis who will take a year-long paid sabbatical to participate in a training program similar to what takes place in executive graduate programs in universities around the globe.

Please God, we will create a more engaged and tolerant rabbinate and synagogues that realize that the words *Beit Keneset* demand of them to be more than Houses of Prayer but institutions with multiple portals of spiritual entry.

Rabbi Riskin, you have created and built an organization that has made a difference to the entire Jewish world. Thank you for your support and the generous way in which you have orchestrated this transition. Transitions can be challenging and we could not have asked for an easier one. This is due to your modesty, piety and graciousness.

I would also like to thank my son, Yitzchak, who this past summer made aliya at the age of 13, and has done so with *gevura*, with great courage and tenacity. He is a role model to me and Ruchie.

To our children in the US: Tehilla, Tuvia, and Miriam, and, of course, our granddaughter, Ms Amalia, we miss you every single day.

To our children in Israel: Yosef, Yoni and Yehudit, and our grandson Nadav, all of whom preceded us in making Israel their home. We thank you for helping us in the ongoing process of aliya, and we are grateful for your support.

To our siblings, may we continue to make the effort to be in constant contact and celebrate our close family ties with *smachot* for many years to come.

To my in-laws, of blessed memory, for raising two beautiful, special women, may they continue to receive heavenly dividends from the light that their children and grandchildren have created.

To my parents, who attended the investiture event in Jerusalem last month, and who are enjoying the warmth of Florida at this very moment, thank you for the sacrifices you made on behalf of my education. May you continue to have much *nachat* from your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

To OTS donor-investors, whose generosity and genuine partnership have made possible all of our amazing and inspiring achievements.

And last but certainly not least, to my colleagues at Ohr Torah Stone: Thank you Roy Stern and Fred Ehrman, Chairs of our Israeli and North American boards, respectively and to my colleagues at OTS US and Israel.

Thank you to our dinner co-chairs for making this wonderful event tonight possible: Rella Feldman & Curtiss Pulitzer, Judy & Zev Berman, Shelley & Ruvan Cohen, Lorys & Mitchel Stiel, Arielle & Aryeh Kieffer, Gabi & Danny Altman and all the members of the Dinner Committee.

I would like to conclude with a story. In 1989, I was part of a group from Lincoln Square Synagogue that traveled to the Former Soviet Union to teach Talmud in Moscow, to meet with Jews in Leningrad, and to lead a model Passover Seder experience several weeks before the holiday in Tallin, Estonia, a city proclaimed Judenrein during the Holocaust.

Toward the end of the public model Seder, in which hundreds participated, I asked if anyone was interested in praying in a minyan the next morning. A few people raised their hands, and we decided to convene the *minyan*.

That morning, the small number of people who raised their hands had their electricity and phone lines disconnected. Nevertheless, hundreds came to the *minyan*.

In the synagogue - the sign above the *Aron Kodesh*, “דע לפני מי אתה עומד” - "Know Before Whom You Stand," swung in the wind, hanging on by a single nail, and all the *siddurim* were from before the pre-Holocaust era.

At the service, we sang many components of the prayer, but when we rose for the silent *Amidah*, we were not sure what to do, since very few people there could read Hebrew.

We decided, in the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov, to simply chant the *Aleph-Bet* aloud, and hope that God would attach the letters to the prayer of the *Shmoneh Esrei*. We took three steps back, and three steps forward, and began singing aloud, together, the letters of the *Aleph-Bet*.

Toward the end of that singing, the KGB burst in, terminated the service, and announced that our visas had been canceled, and that we would be deported from the country within an hour.

I quickly gave my *tefillin* to one of the boys that were present. The KGB escorted us back to the hotel, placed us on a bus and transported us to the airport.

Several years later, as a new rabbi serving in Boca Raton, Florida, I was brought to visit the educational institutions in North Miami Beach. At that time there were no Jewish schools in the Boca community.

At one of the high schools, a student came out of a classroom, ran to me, hugged me and began to whisper to me the aleph-bet. It was the child to whom I had given my *tefillin* to in Tallin Estonia. His family had subsequently immigrated to Miami Beach, and he was attending the local day school.

We are not the Lord's sculptors, commanded to educate and produce widgets. Rather, we are Gardeners with the goal of helping people blossom and find their own spiritual voice, to be able to sing the *Aleph-Bet* in melodies that speak to each and every one of the people OTS touches.

Thank you very much.