

Becoming Even Closer: YU in a Time of War

President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

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It is a privilege to be speaking in the *Beis Midrash* on Chanukah. It is essential that at this moment for us to appreciate the critical importance of the *Beis Midrash*. These past couple of months have required a very public-facing type of advocacy, and it's necessary today to be out there publically and forcefully to advocate for our people and for Israel against antisemitism. I, together with our students, have been doing that work and we will continue. But the anchor of everything that we do is here in the *Beis Midrash*, because everything that we do begins in the *Beis Midrash*. Everything we do as a yeshiva, everything we do as a university, and everything we do as individuals. We understand clearly what *Chazal* has taught us (*Avos* 3:17): a tree without roots cannot be easily toppled, but a tree with deep roots can withstand the torrential winds of the times. We are only forward-focused because we are deeply rooted.

Talmud Torah and the *Beis Midrash* are our anchor, but they are more than that—they are also our source—our source, our strength, and they give us meaning. This has always been true, but it is especially true *now*.

Just before Chanukah, I was learning with my daughter a piece

from the *Nesivos Shalom* that I think expresses this point. The *Nesivos Shalom* writes that there are two *Yamim Tovim* that revolve around the number 8, and they parallel one another: Shemini Atzeres and Chanukah. Both are *bechinas shemona*, but there is a fundamental difference between them. *Shemini Atzeres* is the peak of the *Yamim Tovim/Yamim Noraim* experience. It's the finale of all our efforts and all of the closeness that we have fostered with Hashem. It comes after Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkos, and the end of the *Shalosh Regalim*. We are the height of our spiritual powers. While Chanukah is also 8 days, nevertheless it represents something quite different.

The *Nesivos Shalom* explains it with a *mashal*. Imagine a king with 2 sons. One son is extraordinarily successful— everything he touches turns to gold; he's well-liked and put together, content, social and joyful. The other son however, is broken, vulnerable, struggling. A *ben hamutzlach* versus the *ben hamushpal*. The first is a prince among people, the second struggles to participate in the daily affairs of the kingdom. Which son is more beloved by the king? Of course, he loves both equally. He is deeply proud of the *ben hamutzlach*, but it is the *ben hamushpal* that pulls at the king's heart and brings out his compassion. The king personally goes to the room of the son who struggles, to give him encouragement and strength. The king personally goes to tuck in the blanket of this son to keep him warm. It's wonderful for the *ben hamutzlach*—life coming so easily—but the parent is drawn to the child that struggles.

Shemini Atzeres is the climax of the entire *Yamim Noraim* period, it is when we are at our highest, at our most spiritual selves. It thus represents the *ben hamutzlach*. The Chanukah, however, is in the

darkness. It's when it is difficult to see the light, when we are enshrouded in this cold wintery day. It's when we are struggling and feel turmoil and suffer. The lesson of Chanukah is one that during these moments Hashem comes even closer. He places the blanket over His people on this cold night. He ensures that we are safe, and He looks over us specifically in times of darkness. When we are broken, we are at our strongest, because we become even closer.

I think this is a moment, on Chanukah, during which we can reflect on the closeness of this time, and on the parallels of the *ben hamutzlach* versus the *ben hamushpal*. Think back to before October 7th, when we started Shemini Atzeres, and compare it to where we are today. I was in Yerushalayim at the beginning of Shemini Atzeres. It was a great moment; I walked around with my sons in Yerushalayim. We were dancing in the *bakafos*... it was a magnificent end to the *chag* of Sukkos. And then, the next day, we woke up and went to shul. Suddenly, the world changed. Tragically, we were thrown from the heights, from the *ben hamutzlach* to the *ben hamushpal*.

We are all challenged. We are all mourning. Every single person in this room either knows someone or is one degree of separation from someone who was murdered, taken hostage, or killed in the line of duty, in just these past couple of months. We lean on each other for strength and support. We are closer to Israel. We have responded so powerfully and forcefully every day with our *tefillos* and our learning and with all of the activity that we do in support of *acheinu kol Beis Yisrael* and of *Medinas Yisrael*. This is a moment of our own, when we feel closer to the Jewish people as a whole and we have become closer to Hashem. Who else do we lean on? *Anachnu maaminim bnei*

maaminim! It's in our brokenness as the *ben hamushpal*, that we recognize that Hashem is by our side, placing the blanket upon us.

I want to tell our *bnei yeshiva*, that this moment in time presents us with an enormous opportunity. Jews today have their hearts open like no other time in recent Jewish history, probably since the Six Day War. The Jews today have rediscovered their Jewish identity. Jews throughout this country and the world understand that they are connected to something greater. That they feel closer right now to the source. It's not just as a response to antisemitism and hate, but rather it's about people searching for an authentic connection to their identity. Hashem is calling out to us. People feel it, and you—my dear students—are uniquely capable of leading the way.

I was recently in conversation with an alum who is now in the business world. He told me that at the beginning of Chanukah he had a business meeting in Atlanta. He was sitting in the boardroom with the CEO, and during the break, the CEO came over to him and started talking to him about Chanukah and his childhood memories. He wasn't even aware that the CEO was Jewish. But when you walk into a boardroom with the kippah on your head, you draw out other people. You're a magnet. They will come to you to connect with themselves. They will speak in Hebrew and talk to you about Chanukah. They are looking to you to lead. Not just against antisemitism, but with a positive proactive message of what Judaism stands for.

One of the great expressions of Yeshiva University and our students' leadership was the rally. I don't think people know this. It wasn't just that all of our students attended the rally, which was the

largest representation of an institution in the country—which was in addition led by our Roshei Yeshiva who not just encouraged people to go but went to the rally themselves, teaching Torah all throughout—but lesser known is the following story. When they called for this rally, they didn't know if anyone was going to come. The organizers were worried that it was going to be a *chillul Hashem*, because the worst thing to happen would be to call a rally and then only tens of thousands of people show up. And then we canceled classes. The organizers of the rally will tell you that the reason why close to 300,000 people came is because Yeshiva University came. When the organizers heard that we canceled, they cheered, and they started telling all of the other *yeshivos*, day schools, synagogues—of all denominations—that Yeshiva University canceled their classes. That is the moment that is credited as the source of the rally's success— because the country was led by our Roshei Yeshiva and our leadership, to express the importance of Israel and standing for *acheinu kol beis Yisrael*.

The world today has also seen the moral bankruptcy of higher education. A couple of days ago, I was interviewed by a journalist from Forbes, and she asked me “Rabbi, can you tell me about the core Torah values?”. I've been waiting 5 years for a journalist to ask me that question! She asked me this, because people are searching, and they see that institutions of higher education that are revered in our society are actually morally bankrupt, and they are turning to Yeshiva University to understand what it means to have an education that is inspired and fueled by core values. “What are these values, Rabbi?” They are turning to us, and Hashem is closer to us now. We have an opportunity, not just to fill the airwaves by speaking against

antisemitism, which should be so obvious, but more than that, to actually speak about what we stand for.

When I started as the president of YU, I went to a conference for new University presidents at Harvard. During one of the breaks between the sessions, the presidents were discussing one of their great challenges: when do they step in when their faculty says something that is over the line? And they told these stories about faculty saying really troubling things. They decided that they can step in when a faculty member calls for active violence against someone else. That's when they thought they could step in. And I said to them: "Let me ask you something. You're all talking about negative freedom, about what you can stop, but what about positive freedom? Why are you here? What is the purpose of your university? What are you trying to teach? What are your values?" After that comment, all throughout the conference, the presidents kept on referring back to "remember when Ari asked 'why are we here?' 'What's the goal?'" The world is seeing what happens when there is no purpose and no mission, and the value of having values that are driven by the Beis Midrash, where everything is fueled by Torah.

During this period, we become even closer. Closer to each other, closer to *Medinas Yisrael*; we are even closer to Hashem, and Hashem has drawn closer to us. And my *bracha* at this time—on Chanukah this year—for *Am Yisrael*, is not just that the Jewish people should see a speedy victory—those in Israel fighting against Hamas and those in the United States fighting against antisemitism. But even moreso, my *bracha* is that we use this time to come closer to our Source—for each of us as individual *ovdei Hashem* and for all of us as a

Yeshiva—and to use our *kochos* to illuminate the world. *Ve'ahavta es Hashem*, the Gemara says, *she'tibei sheim Hashem mis'abeiv al yadecha* (*Yoma* 86a), that the name of G-d will become more beloved through you. We are the wick, the Torah is the oil. Go and light the world, with our core values, with the Torah, with the *mitzvos*, with the loving spirit of Hashem. For when we do that, we will not just celebrate the *nissim* and the *nifla'os* and the *milchamos*, but we will all also celebrate the *geulah sheleimah*, may it come soon.