Rav Yitzchak Levy –

Rav Gigi suggested that I give a speech to the talmidim before going, so first of all I want to thank him for this advice. The truth is that this is not a farewell speech. Ever since I entered the yeshiva forty years ago, as a young student, the yeshiva became a central part of my life. I want to thank the teaching staff and the roshei yeshiva. My only intent is to pause from my current role as a mashgiach in the yeshiva.

I will discuss several things which influenced me, perhaps they will be important also to someone listening. I want to start with gratitude to the Master of the world, for my life, for saving me in the Yom Kippur war and in the terrorist attack in Otniel. In both cases, I was literally between life and death.

I think that if the Holy One, Blessed be He kept me alive, there must be something that He wants from me. I say to my children and my students that nothing is for granted. A person wakes up in the morning and sees that he is breathing and able to move around, it would be fitting for him to dance all day long. Without my wife, I would not have been able to achieve any of what I have achieved. I am grateful to the founding roshei yeshiva who accepted me as a student and later on as a ram in the yeshiva and for all that they taught me. I learned much from the present roshei yeshiva, with whom I worked for many years and I thank them.

I am also grateful to the hundreds and thousands of students who I merited to learn from and maintain a relationship with, even if stronger with some than others. With some of them, the relationships have been maintained even till today and this is a tremendous merit. This is also an opportunity for me to express gratitude to Moshko, from him I have learned the meaning of consistent hard work, a vision and inspiration. Today he is ninety-four, may G-d lengthen his days and years. I studied for my first degree in Hebrew University in the history of Am Yisrael and archaeology. During this time I learned night seder in Yeshivat Hakotel. After this, I decided to work in Jewish education.

I came back to the yeshiva and with the help of a recommendation from Rav Shlomo Levi, Rav Amital and Rav Lichtenstein accepted me at the age of thirty-two. (I learned in the Michlala in the first few years, I merited to learn much from Rav Yaakov Medan and Rav Yoel Bin-Yun.) I did the rabbinate tests and accompanied many students in their educational work. They accepted me to be a mashgiach, I try to oversee myself, sometimes I succeed. In 5753/1993 they accepted me to be a mashgiach (for a total of twenty-five years). I could say that most of my years, in one way or another, were in the yeshiva. I still feel that I am basically a talmid in the yeshiva.

I see the magic of the roshei yeshiva, their gianthood, their humility, role models of learning Torah, lives of Torah and dedication to Am Yisrael. I thank G-d for meriting me to come to this place and sit in their shadow. The attribute of truth of Rav Amital zt”l was piercing – he would repeat the phrase “and purify our hearts to serve You in truth” many times, I felt that with each repetition he was a little closer to getting there. The idea to build a yeshiva in Gush Etzion was a great challenge, with financial difficulties and other issues. Four years after the yeshiva’s inception, Rav Amital brought in the second rosh yeshiva, HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l. Rav Aharon’s expertise in every field (of Torah) was wondrous: Bavli, Yerushalmi, Tosefta, Midrashei Halacha, Rishonim, Acharonim etc. His dominance was such that one could ask him in any area and he would speak with complete command about the given topic. He was a giant in Torah, personal character traits and a tremendous ability to listen.

Once, Rav Aharon said to me “there is one thing I despise”, Rav Aharon never spoke in this way. “Laziness” – the idea of slacking, not using one’s time, simply letting the minutes pass by. When he would travel, we could calculate the time he landed from the time he arrived back to the yeshiva (he would travel straight without returning home in between). The lives of purpose and dedication that the founding roshei yeshiva led were exemplary. They said things like “I can’t miss a single shiur, because this is my life, this is what provides life”. Rav Aharon came in his Peugeot to visit us during the Lebanon war.

They raised a generation of talmidei chachamim and of Torah with thousands of talmidim from both Israel and overseas, deep and clear Torah. I merited to sit very close to my teacher, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l. One could understand from watching him that he was learning, he would start a chapter as if he was learning it for the first time. I don’t know if this was the two hundredth or the four hundredth time, he seemed to enjoy it so much [as if it was completely new]. (He possessed the ability to express emotion in both extremes:) To see him pray during vidui and weep. If he was crying, what do I need to say? Similarly, to see him cry during kinnos on Tisha B’Av. On the other hand to see him rejoice on chagim, he was radiant.

My family merited to be close the Tabernacle. The yeshiva is the mishkan, the kollel buildings are the courtyard. When hearing this Torah, one sees it sprout and bloom.

Rav Yitzchak brought an example from the midrash:

The Holy One, Blessed be He said to Israel: “I sold you my Torah, (as it were,) it as if I were sold with it, as it says “and take for Me a donation” – there is parable of a king who had just one daughter, one of the kings came and took her. He requested to take her back with him to his land and to take her as a wife. He (the father) said “My daughter who I gave you is unique, I cannot separate from her, but I also cannot tell you not to take her for she is your wife, however there is one favor you can do for me. Wherever you go, make me a small place so I can stay with you, for I cannot leave my daughter.” So said the Holy One, Blessed be He to Israel “I gave you the Torah, I cannot separate from it, nor can I tell you not to take it, instead wherever you go, prepare one room for Me so I can live in it, as it says And they shall make for Me a sanctuary” ”

If you learn Torah seriously, you don’t simply learn Torah, you meet the Giver of the Torah. The Ba’al HaTanya expresses it as “the entirety of the Torah seizes and envelopes him, he is found inside of the Torah, the Wisdom and Will of the Holy One, Blessed Be He.”

In the words of the famous introduction of the Eglei Tal:

“This is the main part of the commandment of learning Torah, to enjoy rejoice and take pleasure in his studies, and then the words of Torah are absorbed into his blood. After he benefits from the words of Torah, he becomes attached to the Torah…but learning for the sake of the commandment and taking pleasure in his study, this is [the meaning of] learning for its own sake, and it is entirely holy, because the pleasure is also a mitzvah.”

This Beis Medrash is a Gan Eden – on the basic level, not on the midrashic level. You have people who can immediately give you a serious, deep and comprehensive answer on the spot in every field in Torah. What is Gan Eden if not this? There is no problem to expose oneself and become more and more attached to Torah. Anyone who is here has a chance to be enveloped in Torah. Just like someone who immerses (in a mikvah) and there is an intermediary must immerse once more, so too one needs to immerse once more.

When someone learns seriously, his life changes. For example, someone who learns Hilchos Shabbos experiences Shabbos differently, this is true in every field in the world of halacha. Through studying halacha, aside from the Torah knowledge gained, there is an unusual opportunity to meet the Holy One, Blessed be He at every corner. Sometimes, I hear students saying that they don’t learn halacha because it doesn’t connect/appeal to them. I know that there is a halacha that one needs to learn halacha, I don’t know if it makes a difference [to the obligation] whether this connects to one or not.

Sometimes, at the end of the fifth or the sixth year, I ask talmidim “what do you know?” They (sometimes) say “I know Bava Metzia, kind of”. There is an obligation of knowing Torah, not just learning it – that people ask you and you don’t hesitate, if you do, you are not entirely there. It is important to write Torah, for the first year, maybe just to write summaries, from the second year and onwards, you learn on a deeper level, you can put an imprint on the Torah.

A person becomes more patient, more pleasant, but these changes are not automatic (although of course there are environmental influences which vary from place to place). This depends on decisions. The central question is how much space do you allow HKBH to have in your world? If this doesn’t happen in the years in yeshiva, I don’t know when in future life this will happen.

I try to set aside a bit of time for taking account of myself without books, a few minutes, everyone according to his own measure, every day or every week, to see what busies him, what he is really trying to make into a reality, what efforts he is willing to make to actualise/realise his dreams.

Rabeinu Bachyei quotes a midrash on the pasuk discussing the obligation to return lost items:

“And you shall conceal yourself from them, this means from people, you cannot hide from the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Who Knows all, as it is written “and I am He Who knows and witnesses, by the word of the L-rd.” (Rabeinu Bachyei Devarim 22:1)

One who conceals himself doesn’t just hide away from the mitzvah, but from the Holy One, Blessed Be He Himself. Such a person forgoes the chance to bring the Divine Presence to the world.

Everyone must ask what his letter in the Torah is, I remind you the words of Rav Kook. In the prayers of Yom Kippur we say: “My G-d, before I was created I was unworthy, and no that I have been created, it is as if I have not been created. I am dust in my life, how much more so in my death”. Rav Kook says that G-d chooses when He brings a person to the world, he [the given person] wasn’t needed before this, but at the time he is there, he is really needed, there are things for which the world needs him.

Every day, we say “how great is Your Faithfulness” – the Holy One, Blessed Be He Looks out at what we are doing every day with this faith. What job will you do for the length of your life, what sort of spouse will you marry, what sort of education will your children receive?

What we are doing cannot be disconnected from what the Holy One, Blessed Be He wants from us. A positive view on the reality, not just on specific events alone, but on life in general terms, a worldview in which you choose to focus on the positive – it is your choice. How much does one smile at the world, the Tiferes Yisrael calls this the first act of kindness, the person is far away from you and you already give him something. How much sensitivity do you have in prayer and towards other people in the world? How careful have you been not to be dishonest, not to cut corners, neither between man and his fellow nor between man and G-d? How much do you want to be a partner in a world which works functions more in the service of G-d?

The world stands (is dependent) on three things: on the Torah, on [Divine] Service and on acts of kindness (Avos 1:2) – I understand this to mean that the world is preserved, not just standing. On Torah, on Divine Service and on acts of kindness.

We spoke about Torah, let us move to service of G-d – how much do I prepare myself to speak with the Holy One, Blessed Be He, how many minutes do I arrive before tefilla. How much do you believe in the power of tefillah? Rav Chaim [Soloveitchik] speaks about two forms of kavana :1) concentration on the words 2) focus on the fact that one is standing before G-d. Rav Chaim says that if you didn’t stand before Him, you didn’t pray. The Shulchan Aruch speaks about how a person needs to visualise himself as if he as standing in the Hoy of Holies (with no barriers or walls between him and the Holy One), the Mishna Berura expands on this.

Rav Kook discusses a house which has windows, that is to say a synagogue which has windows, the very fact that a person sees a world outside the synagogue gives you the chance to see things fairly. For what are you given another day to function? How much do you care about the world? Are you a person who simply does kindness or are you a person that kindness is part of who you are?

The Rosh writes at the beginning of tractate Pe’ah:

“The Holy One, Blessed Be He desires [fulfillment of] commandments in which there is also fulfillment of the will of people, more than commandments which are between man and his Creator.” )Rosh, Pe’ah 1:1)

Rav Shlomo Wolbe in *Alei Shur* writes that someone who cannot acknowldge his fellow man cannot recognise his creator. Rav Kook in *Mussar Avicha* says that the verse “know Him in all your ways” means in every aspect of life.

The Tosefta in Berachos (4:1) says:

“A person may not taste anything without blessing [G-d] beforehand, as it is said “The earth and all that is in it belongs to G-d). One who benefits from this world without blessing has committed a sacrilege until the commandments permit him – a person may not use his face, hands, or feet except for the honor of his Creator, as it says “every work of G-d is for His sake”.

Which is our mission in regard to all of Am Yisrael? Who is here in the beit midrash who is willing to take responsibility for all of Am Yisrael in this generation? Rav Amital used to say: “Who is willing to listen with seriousness to the fact that the Holy One, Blessed Be He wants us to keep the Torah in Israel? Does a person see service of G-d in all his central decisions? What does a person see in his military service? What does a person see in his professional work? Is it just money or is it self fulfillment? Is his hesder service something convenient after high school or something true which carries value in its own right? In every profession a person may do, it makes no difference, does he take responsibility for the Torah life in his community, does he take responsibility for his life because this is what he is able to do and this is what he wants? For the sake of this, he won’t do the full (three year military) service, because he has another service. Everyone needs to choose the profession which is most fitting for him, but this is also a choice, he must decide for himself.

Rav Amital used to speak of a “spiritual parasite”. I am speaking about the opposite, when you say “The fact that inherited to learn Torah obliges me, wherever I will be, where I live, in the family that I will be in, in whatever employment I will be in.” The Sefer Mitzvos Katan counts looking to salvation (the Messiah) as a positive commandment. Rav Kook in Orot HaKodesh (part three) says that the meaning of looking forward to salvation is the question what have you done today in order to make salvation come. Have you prayed with concentration for a few seconds, have you helped someone? This is the meaning of anticipating salvation.

I advise you at this time to dream big – what do you want? What do you want to do between now and a hundred and twenty? Decide what you want to do in the coming years. It doesn’t matter if you are in your first year, in your fourth year back from the army or in your seventh year in the Kollel Gevoha, what character trait do you want to work on in the coming years? There are many fantastic role models to advise. There are so many values together, Torah and army, Torah and the country, Torah and secular studies. One needs to have both in strength. It is possible to take the dichotomy in two extreme directions both of which are incorrect: 1.using every second, but at the cost of personal sensitivity, at the cost of adovat Hashem with all one’s feelings. The other side is to coast without targets, both of these extremes are wrong. I have great piece if advice for you (I no longer work in yeshiva): you have a fantastic teaching staff to learn from. Converse with them, I learned a huge amount from them in many fields, they are in the beit midrash all day long, don’t miss this opportunity. Don’t just go to them when there are problems, you can go to them to learn as well.

There are many overseas talmidim which thank G-d arrive every year. Every time, I am blown away by their numbers and their abilities. For someone who doesn’t have a home or a family in Israel, yamim tovim and Shabatot are not straightforward. Thousands of talmidim have built homes in Israel and abroad, founded on Torah and mitzvot. One of the greatest awards of excellence of the yeshiva is the Darkaynu program.

Everyone serves G-d in his own way, there should be no self-promotion at all. Rav Amital used to say that the yeshiva is first and foremost for the students. The students have invested and built themselves a home here. It is always possible to build further.

There are several things I gained from the yeshiva: a loving relationship (with some more and with some less). A straightforward connection, there were chugim in my house after night seder on Mondays for many years. Talks about avoda, conversations with students before they would leave the yeshiva. I merited to accompany talmidim during their military service, both in the preparation beforehand and during the service itself, an important phase, a period of a chance for growth. From within the less than ideal in which we live, there is a lot which is ideal which we need to see, such as the chance to connect with all the sectors of Am Yisrael.

If someone who doesn’t do this now, the chance that he will do this in the future is even smaller. In the first year, there is a lot to do. I want to thank Amitai Grossberger and Yossi Etshalom for arranging great opportunities to volunteer and do kindness in bein hazmanim.

I remember that once a truly outstanding student came to me at the end of the fifth year and wept, he said “I adore being here, but I have no one to stay here with.”

All the excursions, from my perspective are first and foremost a chance to meet the Holy One, Blessed Be He. You meet different personalities and places. The gemara says that “Ever since the day that the Temple was destroyed, G-d is only found in the four cubits of halacha” (Berachos 8a). Before, how many cubits did G-d have? In a generation of redemption, we need to go back and meet G-d in all different places in Israel.

Everything that I have said is effectively aspirations and growth. Thank G-d, there are things I have succeeded more and things in which I have succeeded less. Rav Yitzchak quoted the Mishnah “You are not free to withdraw from it [i.e. the task].”

An attempt to live in all the areas of your life in front of G-d, from this comes the ability to take in and listen, to love each and every other person. These understandings are much harder in today’s generation, but I think that they are fitting.

Before we conclude, I would like to read to you three things:

The first of them is a quote from the Ramban in his commentary on the Torah:

“And you shall do that which is just and good in the Eyes of HaShem your G-d – on the basic level they said you should observe the commandments of Hashem, he ordinances and his statutes and intend at the time of their fulfillment to do that which is just and right in His eyes alone. And in order that things be good for you: a guarantee, saying that if you do that which is good in His eyes, He will do good for you, because G-d does good for those who are good and just in their hearts. The Rabbis have a pleasant derivation on this verse, [they understand it as referring to] compromise and going beyond the letter of the law. That is to say, at the beginning it says ‘that you should guard His statutes and His ordinances as He commanded you’, and now He is saying that also in that which you went commanded, concentrate and do that which is good and just in His eyes, for He loves the good and the just.” (Ramban Devarim 6:18)

The second thing comes from the Rambam at the very end of the hilchot Shemitah veYovel:

“And not only the tribe of Levi, but any man from the inhabitants of the world whose spirit endows him and his mind informs him to separate and stand before G-d to attend and serve Him, to know G-d and walk justly in His ways as G-d made him and to release from upon himself the yoke of the calculations of the masses which people asked for, this person is sanctified to be a holy of holies. And G-d should be his portion and his inheritance forever and ever and he will merit to have enough in this world like that which was gifted to the kohanim and leviim. [King] David, peace be upon him, says “L-rd, you are my Portion and my Cup, You uphold my Lot”. (Hil’ Shemittah Veyovel 13:13)

The third thing is chapter fifteen in the book of Psalms:

A psalm to David. O L-rd, who can dwell in Your tent who can dwell in Your holy mountain? One who walks perfectly and does righteousness and speaks the truth in his heart. He has not been deceitful with his tongue, he has not wronged his fellow and he hasn’t carried disgrace on one close to him. That which is disgraceful in his eyes is disgusting and those who fear G-d, He will honor, who can swear to his detriment without retracting? His money he did not give in usury and a bribe on behalf of a clean person he did not take, one who does (like) these (deeds) will not falter forever. (Psalms ch. 15)

I want to conclude by thanking all the talmidim from whom I merited to learn and enjoy a relationship with, I rejoice over this connection and I also want to say that I also learnt from many with whom I did not (necessarily) have a personal connection.

You should all merit to go higher and higher in the service of G-d and in the study of Torah. Blessings of G-d should be on all of you, you should be inscribed and sealed for a good year.