



## Yeshiva University

Office of the President

Dear Friends,

This past Sunday we celebrated our commencement exercises for the graduating class of 2020. Our dear graduates have navigated these uncertain times with incredible poise and resilience, guided throughout by their values. In my remarks, which can be viewed in full below, I discussed how we should approach these challenging times. Our success in navigating these times will depend on our ability to distinguish between two modalities to how we live our lives: the Consumer and the Covenant.



When I served as a pulpit rabbi, I would often advise people who were dating. I was always struck by those who came in with long checklists about what they were looking for in a spouse. Some examples I would find on these checklists included a detailed style of dress, a specified amount of hours a day studying Torah, a very specific type of personality and a list of acceptable institutional affiliations and professional occupations. Of course compatibility is important, but a checklist is not how it will be found. Relationships, unlike purchases, are something that evolve and deepen--they are created together. A purchase is unilateral. If a car doesn't meet your specifications it won't serve your purposes. These two approaches underlie much of our negotiations with life. One approach, the consumer model, is how we acquire possessions. It values detailed

knowledge, metrics, research and analytics. It mitigates risks and prioritizes the known and certain.

But there is another approach--the covenantal model. And it doesn't involve checklists.

The covenantal model requires leaps of faith. It values empathy, commitment, loyalty, curiosity, discovery and resilience. In his book, which describes his grief after his wife died, C. S. Lewis noted that what he missed most about her was the way she surprised him. It was not what he knew about her already that excited him, it was what he did not know. It was the alterity, the mystery. It was the different and unexpected ways in which his wife grew and evolved which pushed him to grow and evolve as well.

There is a comfort to being a consumer. One knows the product, reads the warranty, has the instruction manual. Very little risk. In the covenantal, however, there is exposure, vulnerability, uncertainty and great risk. But the upside is different as well. The consumer is only transactional, the covenantal is transformational.

One of the primary challenges in living in a consumer culture is confusing the two modalities and approaching covenantal matters as consumers. This deeply impacts fundamental aspects of our lives, including the way we date, think about education and Torah, and plan for our future.

The new uncertain coronavirus world in which we currently live creates enormous challenges for those entrenched in a consumer mindset. We, however, who have been reared in a tradition which prioritizes the covenantal, are acutely positioned to face the challenges while uncovering the opportunities of our new reality.

Yeshiva University provides value and values. As consumers you will see Yeshiva University's value through your careers, your professional skills, and your network. Our values, however, emerge as part of your lifelong journey building relationships infused with meaning and purpose. You have not only been taught how to succeed in a consumer market but also readied for a life of the covenant. You do not only have the skills and resume to land the great job but the set of values to live a meaningful and purposeful life.

And in this new coronavirus world, the importance of these values is even more accentuated. No one knows where the world is going. The destination is unclear. But in a world consumed by fears of additional

waves, you have a moral compass that will help you navigate through the uncharted waters ahead. The famed author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” This is what we have given you at Yeshiva University. Consumers simply know how to buy labor and build ships, but as the class of 2020, members of our covenantal community, you also yearn for the vast and endless sea.

To our dear graduates, you are living through a challenging time brimming with opportunities. May Hashem bless you with good fortune and happiness. May you find joy in your life, love in your heart and purpose in all that you do. I have been inspired by you seeing how you have handled this chapter in your life, which gives me great confidence in the way you will write your next one.

Mazel Tov to you, your parents, family and friends who surround you and love you. We are so proud of your accomplishments and so happy for you today because we know that this is only the beginning of creating a life filled with meaning and purpose.

Warmest wishes,  
Ari Berman

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