

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

JUNE 5, 1966

Address at Home of Dr. Samuel Belkin
at Signing of Contract for the
Erna Michael College for Hebraic Studies

Mr. Michael, Dr. Belkin, my revered father,
members of the Board, members of the family, and friends:

I rise to address you this afternoon not as one of the principals, but rather in the traditional role of the "shadchan", the matchmaker. Indeed, I am thoroughly delighted and pleased by the successful culmination of my efforts towards this "shidduch". If there is any essential difference between my function at this happy match, and that of the "shadchan" at a usual wedding, it is that in the usual case the "shadchan" feels he has finished his assignment at the wedding; whereas I, in this particular instance, wish to remain together with the two principals for many many years to come!

This is, indeed, a most happy event. I feel moved to recite with special sincerity and relevance the words of King David in the Psalms: "This is the day that the Lord hath made, let us be happy and joyous on it". This is a great day marking a great event in the history of Jewish education and Jewish philanthropy.

It is not often that one has the privilege of attending such an event, marking a milestone in Jewish tzedakah, the usual Hebrew word for charity. The term has

special significance at this occasion. Maimonides, towards the very end of his "Guide of the Perplexed", has some incisive comments to make about the word and concept of tzedakah. He points out that it is derived from the related Hebrew tzeddek, which means justice. Yet the two words do not mean the same thing. If a man pays a laborer his well-earned wages, or pays a debt which he had incurred, we do not refer to such payment as tzedakah. As businessmen, we would be offended were our debtors to consider their payments to us as an act of tzedakah. We do find the word used in the Bible for occasions when a man does more than he is legally required to, more than justice demands of him - such as returning a pledge before he has been paid, or demonstrating some special act of trust in God. But how does such activity, termed tzedakah, relate to its root - tzeddek, justice? The answer of Maimonides is as simple as it is profound: when a man extends himself ethically, morally, or spiritually, going beyond the obligations of law and justice, then he is in effect "doing right" (tzeddek) by his own immortal soul! His own divine image, his own spiritual personality, his own ethical character, require of him the full measure of moral activity, over and above the demands of law. When a man, therefore, performs a great and noble act, transcending the call of duty (tzedakah), he is actually acting in justice (tzeddek) towards his own soul and the sacred sources of his own personality.

The present act of tzedakah is such an act of justice or tzeddek. The gift of a million dollars to the

Yeshiva University to create the Erna Michael College for Hebrew Studies is an act of "doing right by" the donor, the recipient, and the one in whose honor the school has been named.

It is right and fitting, Mr. Michael, that this gift to Jewish education has been made by you. The people in this room probably know that Jakob Michael is not a stranger to Jewish philanthropy. He has been a leader in tzedakah for many decades. Interestingly enough, the major beneficiaries of his philanthropy have usually had something to do with Jewish learning. Many years ago, he already began to support Jewish schools, to publish rare classics of Jewish literature - such as the Divan of Yehudah HaLevi, the Yosef Ometz, and others. He has demonstrated an affection and love for all aspects of Jewish culture, from literature to art, from history to music. This has been more than a kind of patronizing activity external to his own real interests. Mr. Michael is one of those rare philanthropists who does not feel that his personal obligation to Jewish learning has been discharged by giving money; he has concerned himself intellectually with various fields of Jewish learning, and is himself quite an accomplished connoisseur in such areas as German-Jewish history. It is indeed remarkable that a man with his far-flung interests in the world of finance and industry can take the time to become so adept in fields of scholarship.

There is something providential about the co-

incidence of the name "Jakob Michael" and the activity of this man on behalf of Jewish learning. Of our three forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the first was noted for his quality of love, the second for his reverence and service, and the third, Jacob, for his love of learning. Our Father, "Jacob" was the yoshev ohalim, the tent-dweller, which, according to the Rabbis, meant that he was the student, the one vitally interested in education. Furthermore, "Michael", as we know, is in Jewish tradition the name for one of the leading angels. Every angel, according to our religion, has a highly specific function. And Michael was a messenger of God for Jewish teaching! When Moses received his first revelation and, according to the Bible, saw "an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire", our tradition identifies that angel as Michael; for the angel revealed to Moses was assigned the task of teaching Torah to him and through him to all the generations. Indeed, our Rabbis of the Midrash (Exodus R,2) make a remarkable comment about this angel Michael. They say that whoever saw him thought that he was looking at rabbenu ha-kadosh, "our holy Rabbi," Rabbi Judah the Prince. What a fantastic reversal of the usual! Normally, one who admires a saintly rabbi will say that the rabbi looks or acts like an angel. Yet here, our tradition tells us that the angel looks like a rabbi! They meant, of course, that Michael had but one function: that of teaching, that of education, that of informing a new generation with the word of God -- which is indeed the function of the rabbi! So that both your given name and your family name, Mr. Jakob Michael, reflect your own individual

interest in Jewish teaching, in Jewish learning, in Jewish education. Your act of tzedakah certainly is an act of tzeddek towards your own most vital and precious interests.

This gift is also appropriate for the recipient, Yeshiva University, and for the great cause of Jewish education which it will now serve with even greater vigor and skill. The terrible shortage of teachers is not unique to the Jewish field; it is endemic to the entire country. Yet for us, this is more than an emergency; it is a crisis. The shortage of teachers in general schools will affect the quality of the future of the country; the shortage of teachers in Jewish schools will determine whether or not there will be a future at all for Judaism in America. Our fundamental problem is the difficulty in recruiting capable young men and women into the field of Jewish education, and then educating them properly so that the entire venture of Jewish teaching will become exciting and successful. Apparently our efforts heretofore have largely failed. We need new horizons, new vistas, new ideas.

The Erna Michael College for Hebraic Studies will be a new departure in teacher education. It will be based upon a new concept, first envisioned by a gentleman in this room - Mr. Louis Hurwich, for many decades head of the Boston Hebrew Teachers College and in effect the dean of Jewish education of the United States. The entire plan is too detailed to mention here. Briefly, it calls for both the

Jewish and secular components of higher education to be combined in one school, the Erna Michael College for Hebraic Studies. It involves a far-reaching fellowship program which will appeal to students, and which will give us a guarantee that in return for the education we give them, they will devote a specified number of years to the field of Jewish education.

We have no guarantees that our new plan will succeed. But we can guarantee Mr. Michael and the entire community that we will spare no effort to see to it that success is ultimately attained. We will be open to new ideas and to experimentation and to pioneering. If the need arises, we shall reinvestigate our plans and try new ones. None of us at Yeshiva will rest until we have achieved our goal; to make the Erna Michael College for Hebraic Studies the answer and the solution to this deeply distressing problem upon which hangs the future of our faith and our people. We shall proceed upon the venture, to use the famous phrase of a famous Supreme Court decision of several years ago, "with all deliberate speed". We shall not procrastinate; but neither shall we stumble headlong into premature decisions and operations. The project is too vital for either unwarranted delay or undue haste.

Finally, this milestone in the history of Jewish tzedakah is an act of tzeddek towards the memory of that gallant lady whose name the college shall bear. Erna Michael was, to use the Biblical idiom, an ishah gedolah, a great

woman, a "grande dame". Her life was devoted to deeds of munificence and philanthropy. She was, in the truest sense of the word, a phil-anthropist, a lover of people. She was, in addition, a profoundly devout and pious daughter of Israel. And she shared her husband's splendid interest in Jewish education.

There could be no more fitting tribute to her memory than this new school which we have begun to create here this afternoon. What tzeddek! How right it is!

I wish to conclude with a personal note to Mr. Michael. Our Rabbis teach us in the chapter of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) which we shall study this Saturday, that ha-neior ba-lailah, one who is awake at night, ve'ha-mehalekh ba-derekh yehidi, and one who goes on the way by himself, u-mefaneh libo le'vatalah, and allows idle and trivial thoughts to occupy his mind, ha-rei zeh mit'hayev be'nafsho, is guilty and forfeits his life.

What a strange remark! Were the Rabbis, indeed, prejudiced against insomniacs and people who do not like fellow travelers?

I suggest that what they meant is this: a person who is talented with great insight so that he can keep awake when others sleep, who has the vision and the insight and the foresight to dream great dreams when others slumber without any vision, who can see when others are blind and remain awake when others are asleep; and who, in addition, possesses the

priceless virtue of being able to travel the highways of life by himself, who cares naught for the applause of his fellow men, who has the courage of his convictions, who is able to strike out on his own if he thinks that that is right, who is willing to remain true to his conscience even if he is but one man against the entire world; one who possesses these fantastic talents of vision and courage, and yet misuses them for matters that are petty and trivial -- he has indeed forfeited his soul. For he has taken such invaluable spiritual qualities and abused them, reduced them to a joke. If, however, a man possesses such talents and uses them properly -- then he has not forfeited but affirmed and enhanced his spiritual image.

Mr. Michael has, especially by creating the Erna Michael College for Hebraic Studies, demonstrated that he has used these two precious talents purposefully and properly. Whilst so many others are blind to the needs of Jewish education, unaware of the emergency situation that abounds, he has had the vision and the foresight to appreciate that there can be no Jewish future without a Jewish present which is aware of the Jewish past. He has revealed a perspicuity unusual in our days in emphasizing the need for good teachers in order to ensure that there will in the future be good students. He has proved that he is awake when so many others sleep soundly. In addition, he has not been afraid to travel by himself. He has not cared one whit for the opinion of the mob and the crowd. Whereas other people have given large gifts but have limited them to glamorous

projects, which capture the attention of the masses, but may prove, in the long run, to be relatively insubstantial, he has not been afraid to take his insights and apply them courageously and, if necessary, single-handedly. He has dreamed dreams and seen visions, and he has applied them with courage and with conviction. The Erna Michael College is proof that these two precious virtues have not been misused for trivia, but harnessed for greatness.

I know from my own personal friendship with Mr. Michael -- a friendship which I shall always treasure and revere -- that he has fulfilled these two qualities not only figuratively, but also - unfortunately!- literally. For the past eighteen months, since the demise of his beloved wife, Erna, aleha ha-shalom, he has been a neior ba-lailah, he has experienced many many sleepless nights; and he has been a mehalekh ba-derekh yihidi, he has suffered unrelieved loneliness. Some people are embittered by such an experience, and they are in the category of mefaneh libo le'vatalah. They allow life to sour on them and their creative talents to go to waste. They contribute nothing to mankind.

Mr. Michael, no one can simply tell another person not to suffer. You have suffered much; but now, by this marvelous act of tzedekah, you have shown that the suffering has meaning. The sleeplessness and the loneliness have now found their redemption, culminating in the founding of this great college which will vindicate all the agony and the misery. It is an answer to your personal anguish, and it is the

fulfillment of your qualities of vision and courage.

I conclude with a prayer: may the Almighty give me, and all of us in this room, the years to see you, Mr. Michael, enjoy the fruits of your labors on behalf of this school and embark on other such historic projects, for many many years to come, in health and happiness.