

WE MUST CHANGE IN ORDER TO MAKE CHANGES

Prof. Menahem Ben Sasson

My friends, members of the Board of Governors, Mr. Chairman: Thank you for the faith you have expressed in me.

You have entrusted me with one of the greatest treasures of the state and the people of Israel, the Jewish people and the world of learning. I thank you for the partnership which has lasted decades and reached this point, and I thank you in advance for the continuation of this partnership in the future, in order to shape the destiny of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Dear governors and friends: there is no better leader to represent your commitments, expectations and professional involvement with the university than Dr. (honoris causa) Mickey Federmann, the newly elected chairman of the Board of Governors. Miki has been a member of the board since 1984 and has dedicated his talents and time to the success of the university. His experience and personality ensure that we are supported by the best of the Hebrew University community in facing the coming challenges.

With your permission, I would like to thank Prof. Menachem Magidor on behalf of us all for 12 years of dedicated service, night and day, with no time off for weekends or holidays.

Few among us are as talented as Prof. Magidor, or understand the higher education system in Israel and worldwide, with its academic and administrative aspects, as deeply as he does. Prof. Menachem Magidor is not only a man of profound and extensive learning, but a scholar in the best sense of the term, a true *talmid hacham*, with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. His dedication to the university is a consequence of his genuine relationship to learning and to higher education. In addition we owe a debt of gratitude to Prof. Magidor's family and his wife Sarah, for having allowed us to take him away from them during these years. Sarah! To the best of my understanding the hardest part was that even during the limited time Menachem was able to spend at home and with his family, his mind was still on the university. Our family is well aware of it and already today I thank them in advance for their patience and support.

Menachem, we will surely have further opportunities to work together, and the university community will certainly be gathering in order to express their thanks to you.

My friends, we face many challenges, some of them old and some new. We must grapple with them at a very difficult time, when a heavy cloud hovers over us and darkening skies cast a shadow over the university's ability to continue fulfilling its historic goal.

We accept the enormous responsibility of continuing to change the environments in which we live and create; and the responsibility of leading the forces of change in these worlds. We are committed to changing the image of Jerusalem; we are committed to changing and advancing research in Israel and to continuing to lead it to the highest international standards; we are committed to changing research in Jewish studies and to shaping Jewish education and modern Jewish identity; we are committed to building the future leadership of this people; and we are committed to leading in research in the future as we have in the past; we are committed to taking the lead in saving higher education in Israel, saving academic research in it, and stopping the immense "brain drain" from the Israeli academic community to other countries.

These are difficult times. Our planet is not as it was: Economic uncertainty and the worldwide financial crisis affect many areas of activity; the academic arena is varied and competitive; the public standing of higher education is in great need of improvement.

At home, the last seven years have been complex and difficult - because of budget problems, and even more so because it seemed that solutions had been found while this was not the case. Over the last difficult years the university has been forced to dispose of many and varied assets in order to survive, and despite this - continued to accumulate huge deficits. It seemed that the institution's pension obligations had been dealt with and this worry was removed from our agenda, but it is now clear that the problem is still with us and, year by year, threatens our ability to operate. The financial situation of the Hebrew University is serious, and requires all of us to draw significant conclusions and treat the problem at its roots.

Nevertheless there is no reason for despair. What is needed is a sensible leadership, determined to solve the problems of Israeli higher education in general and of the Hebrew University in particular. You and I will do this together.

It is time to recognize the urgent need for change; to continue and deepen processes of changing that have been started. This is the time to internalize the seriousness of the challenges we face, and to change the degree of personal involvement of every member of the university family – students, faculty members, administrative staff, and alumni. Together, all of us, we can bring about the needed change. This is the time for a "universal draft". We must continue to remind ourselves of our commitment to an academic mission and to the uncompromising commitment we have made to the pursuit of excellence and to testing the bounds of human knowledge. We must change in our organizational and managerial structure and make the institution's corporate governance as transparent as possible; we must change and define for ourselves – each unit and its own definition – our vision and mission, beyond the academic excellence which is at the base of all activity that takes place within the walls of the university; we must change in our relationships with communities outside the university, and explain our contribution to the generation of new knowledge for the advancement of mankind; we must change and become more open to the public by means of involvement (and commitment!) in the community, in the media, in broad cultural discourse, and in ties with the Israeli economy and society. We must build a structured process of designing a strategy which encompasses "branding", marketing, economic, financial, technological and academic aspects; we must change and

broaden the circles of contact and partnership between our faculty and our friends and supporters, wherever they may be; we must change in our relationship to our potential students – recruiting the best in Israel and abroad, courting them, drawing them closer to us and enabling them to get the best out of our education; we must change in our discourse with state institutions and place it on the footing of a proper partnership between the political leadership and the academic leadership – a partnership based on mutual respect and on complete academic freedom. It is necessary for us to continue and deepen processes of changing that have been started. It is necessary for us-all, to change in order to make these changes.

Friends, you have been partners in discussions of the budget; you are familiar with the numbers and appreciate their significance. We could make optimistic assumptions and create the appearance of less severe difficulties, but this would be shirking our responsibilities. We must prepare ourselves for the most difficult struggles and supply realistic options for dealing with various scenarios so that the university will continue to survive and function and even to thrive. In the short run, however, the financial situation is so severe as to cast doubt even on the opening of the next academic year. I call on the government of Israel to honor its obligations and keep its commitments so as to ensure the continuation of the work of this outstanding university and its staff; to ensure the further development of the university and to ensure the strengthening of the mother of Israeli higher education. We must take all necessary steps in order to ensure the continued functioning of the institution and the completion of the mission which we have taken upon ourselves.

More than a generation before the founding of the state of Israel as an independent entity it was clear that the existence of such a state would depend on a fundamental change in society – a change based on the foundations of research, knowledge and academic education. In this atmosphere the cornerstone of the Hebrew University was laid in 1918 and its gates opened in 1925. Let us all remember: the first historic step in establishing the state of Israel was the establishment of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The university has known crises in the past and dealt with them successfully, confident in the knowledge of its ability to change itself and others. We are now in the midst of another such crisis. With intelligence, partnership, sensitivity and the appropriate determination we will together change ourselves in order to change others. Together, in a true spirit of partnership, we will succeed in our historic mission!

At the beginning of the Jewish year, during a period of soul-searching, the *hazzan* begins his traditional prayer on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur by expressing the individual's fear of the responsibility imposed on him. He reads the prayer "here am I, poor of deeds". This is the prayer of an individual about to undertake a mission. The tasks facing us today are not for any individual but for the collective – faculty, administrative staff, students and friends. The prayer written by Aba Kovner, a survivor of the Vilna ghetto and one of the designers of the Israeli educational system, is the appropriate one for us:

During my first week in Israel, I stood by the Western Wall. I stood a foot away from the Wall, from the stones.

I felt distant, like I did not belong. I felt connected to another kind of experience and hesitated to take another step. But someone tugged my coat sleeve and asked me to join a *minyan*. I joined the *minyan*, I recited the *mincha* service and got to the prayer "ברכנו אבינו כולנו כאחד" "Bless us our Father, **all of us as one...**" That was unique; the most unique in Judaism, to be one of a *minyan*, to know that the nine need the tenth and the one needs the other nine. It is possible that this is the most significant thing about Judaism and there is nothing more unique and more Jewish.

My friends, members of the Board of Governors, I accept in all gravity, with respect and a profound sense of loyalty, the task of serving as the representative of this distinguished body. May I be worthy of channeling and refining all its hopes and prayers, and – empowered by them – going on together to improve our situation. **To change ourselves in order to make changes!**