

Head of School Address to the Graduates of 2021

Thank you, Mr. Monchamp. I would also like to thank our Board Co-Presidents, Jackie and Neville, for sending in their virtual and most heartfelt message. Rabbi Berger, thank you; I know that not being here tonight for you is as agonizing as it is for our parents. Vida, thank you for, as you always do, sharing your wisdom and your smile with all of us.

In my imagination – which I need to share with you is very left-brained, and thus not so rich in detail – I see and feel that our full community is here with us tonight. I know that you are here in spirit, and hopefully, technology willing, with us online. So, with that full belief, let me begin.

I want to thank all of you: our King David families, our friends, our community, and, most importantly on this wonderful evening, members of the graduating Class of 2021. On behalf of the staff of King David High School, a sincere thank you for celebrating what is truly a special day for all of us. This is the first graduation ceremony we have held in the King David Atrium in many, many years, and although we are saddened that extended families and friends cannot be here in person, we are fortunate that the COVID protocols allow all of our graduating students to share this moment together. If the same rules were in place as last June, this would not have been possible, so the glass is half-full – you are together. Your graduation ceremony is unique, and it is happening under the shrinking of the pandemic shadow, so there is a light for all of you, for all of us.

Before I share some thoughts with you, let's drift back and think for a moment of how we came to be here. Do you remember our Grade 8 Israel Trip – remember how impossible it was to get you to be quiet and listen to the tour guides? That feeling of floating in the Dead Sea? Or that indescribable and quiet moment of walking up to the Kotel? Take a moment to think of other experiences – from Keats retreats to Athletics, Music and Foods events and concerts to RAC Weeks, to the LA Trip, to meaningful assemblies and class discussions and so many school events, to just being with your peers and friends (dare I mention Grad Skip Day?) – take a moment and imagine how you arrived here and now.

In this moment, in the background, feel the love and support of your families. At our Grade 12 Havdalah on June 5, where each graduate had a chance to speak, I was so grateful to listen to the thanks that so many students shared for their parents in sending them to King David. I did notice that a few of you said King David was not your first choice for high school, but this was generally followed by thanks to your parents for not listening to you. In addition to the gratitude shared for parents and family, I heard so much appreciation for the King David staff who helped in your transformation. On your behalf, I would like to thank our staff once again. Graduates, I hope your high school years have demonstrated that the journey on which you think you are embarking is not always as it seems, and it may take you places you didn't think you could go, or wanted to go, and now cannot be imagined in any other way.

It also warmed my heart that so many of you mentioned how you have grown in your Judaism and how much more meaningful it feels to you now to be part of the Jewish community. I would like to thank the parents, grandparents and other members of our community who have invested so much to make this school possible – with all of you, with the Diamond Foundation, and the support of the Jewish Federation, it truly does take a village to raise a Jewish child. I have said many times before that I believe King David graduates know that they have received something both precious and priceless: something that cannot be held in your hands, but is held in your heart.

I have one extra thank you and that is to you, our graduates. You may not appreciate how much we, the King David administration and staff, valued your leadership this year. You came to school with a smile on your face and, although that smile quickly disappeared behind a mask, we could see it shining through in your actions, in your laughter and in your effort. You led as one should lead, through deeds, and you created the spirit and positivity that supported your teachers, your peers, and our younger students – we could not have asked for more. Thank you.

It is an understatement to say that this has been an unusual year. Last year, the pandemic struck us about mid-March. It has been relentless since then and affected so much of our daily lives in and out of school. And last year there were huge themes that continue – Social Justice issues remain top of mind and at the school we have been thinking about them a great deal, and taking small and deliberate steps to consider issues around equity, diversity and inclusion. Our Green Club continues to keep us focused on the environment and climate change – these issues have not gone away.

And although these are very important, events this year require that I speak about a theme that is more personal to all of us and is one that we cannot avoid. This year, I feel compelled to speak out and to share some thoughts on how we must address our Jewishness with hope and pride. Hope because what we know and recognize, we can deal with – you and me, all of us together. Pride in who we are and how we can use that knowledge to give each other strength. In the near future, you will be called upon to apply what you have learned at King David: everything from your academic knowledge to your ability to listen and to think critically, to making others feel heard and appreciated. We need you to stand up – and I know you can do it! Knowing that we have people such as yourselves preparing for leadership roles is one of the reasons I can be optimistic as the world becomes a place of shrinking empathy, a place where critical thinking is less welcome.

I am sure that each of you has been acutely aware of the sharp rise in anti-Semitism. I do not think it is coincidental that this is happening simultaneously with a decline in critical thinking and rational discourse where people can disagree and still get along, where they can find common ground, where a point of view is not the sum and total of a person.

How did we get here? I know some like to look south and blame their leadership. It is convenient to be able to blame. Though that does not explain the growing prevalence of Nationalism and the rise of right-wing and authoritarian ideologies around the world. The one thing that all of these movements have in common is less tolerance for others and a view that Jews, who make up 0.2% of the world's population, are responsible for so many of the world's problems. We have been down this road

before and we must stand up and refuse to travel this path again. My 91-year old father arrived in a railcar at Auschwitz in 1944 – he had just turned 14 years old. I am blessed to learn from him even today, but as he watches the news, he stares wide-eyed, unable to comprehend how we are once again living in a world where it is acceptable and often encouraged to dehumanize and attack Jews.

Events do not occur in a vacuum. But they do occur in the absence of the values, morals, education, skills and attitudes that you each embody as King David graduates and proud Jews. In a world where it's becoming the norm to dismiss a voice of one who thinks differently, you have the power to embrace learning and think critically. In a world where people are quick to inflict harm with their words and turn their hate into shaming, blaming and a justification to violence, you have the power to seek evidence, to find understanding and to work for reconciliation. In a world where social media anonymity and the allure of influence and “cancelling” those who do not act and think in a certain way, you have the power to be discerning, to not fall prey to following false narratives, but instead to look to what is right, what is just, and to rely on the strength of your character.

The growing anti-Semitic narrative that too many are again spouting as truth is gaining acceptance. It is a dark cycle of history that you have come to know and understand. But you also know it is a cycle from which we continue to rise, ever stronger, ever more determined. Your ongoing development as a Jewish young person is rooted in the values of our people, the strength of our beliefs, the unity of our community and the power we derive from our history and the faith that binds us. I have seen you grow, define and exemplify these qualities. Rabbi Berger and your teachers see it in the expressions of your learning and in your questions. We see it as you lead our school at Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations, in Yom Hashoah ceremonies and in commitment you have demonstrated to your school.

And now your time has come. So, I am asking for your help. Remember what I said earlier, knowing you, traveling with you, speaking with you and watching you grow – I am optimistic and I know you can do all of this. We are obliged, in one way or another as Jews, “to be a light unto the nations” – you must be that light for everyone, because we know the intolerance and hate that may start with Jews will not end there.

So, when you leave King David, wherever you find yourself, be comfortable with your Jewishness, your identity. Don't be afraid to share who you are – be proud. Do not try to change the mind of the mob, as it cannot be done. Use what you have learned at King David: dialogue with people, one-on-one or in small groups. Listen to them, ask them questions about what they know and share accurate information with them. Think critically: do not be frustrated by people who do not get it. They do not get it yet – but with your help, over time, they will. Do not get angry: they have not been educated as you have to know that there are at least two sides to the situation. If you have forgotten what to say, or do not know, reach out – you know where we live. In all the places that you go, we are always here for you, whatever your need. You are King David – our Shabbat table is your Shabbat table.

As you leave us as students and join us as King David alumni, I have one final message that I like to share each year with the graduating class. I have the utmost respect for you, so let me close by asking that you never lose your enthusiasm to make a difference in the lives of others. Study and work to create communities that will be healthy and safe for your own children, and for the children of others across this beautiful planet. Love yourself, your friends, and your family, and be sure to create time for yourself and for others. Be honest: you cannot buy integrity. Remember to say please and thank you. After you are married, remember to say sorry – and mean it! Before you leave King David, find the time to talk to those who have supported you: your families, friends, and teachers. Give them the kudos, the hugs, the thanks that they deserve for always being there for you and always wanting the best for you, even when they did not make it easy for you – that is how you know they really cared.

I wish each and every one of you a lifetime of challenges and achievements, always embedded in your compassion for others. On behalf of the King David community, Kol Hakavod to the King David High School Graduating Class of 2021!