

**RABBI ARTHUR SCHNEIER
SENIOR RABBI, PARK EAST SYNAGOGUE
FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, APPEAL OF CONSCIENCE
FOUNDATION**

**COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AT UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI
December 12, 2019**

President Frenk, Faculty, Board of Trustees, for you, Graduation is a time of joy and fulfillment. You have contributed much to the future of the graduates. To the parents and families, I know how proud you are. Members of the graduating class CONGRATULATIONS. You have worked so hard to reach this special day. Your hard work, your dedicated efforts and your commitment to excellence is recognized today and we all share in the joy of your achievements and look forward to celebrating your future successes as you begin the next chapter in life. We are rewarded by your accomplishments and you have our love and support. You can leave your Alma Mater with self-confidence, ready to face the challenges and tests ahead of you.

I speak as a grandfather of University of Miami alumnae Lauren and Casey Dresbach, and a future alumnus, my grandson Brendan Schneier.

It is an honor to join the distinguished honorary alumni of this great University.

December 12th, 75 years ago, was a horrifying day for me in Nazi occupied Budapest, Hungary; a small number of us who escaped the deportation to Auschwitz and other concentration camps were hunted by the Hungarian fascists the Arrow Cross. It was a day of hunger and persecution. I doubted whether I would survive another day.

My initiation to the onset of the Holocaust started in my birthplace Vienna, after the Anschluss in 1938 when I became unwanted: shunned by my classmates and my friends who became ardent members of the Nazi Youth Movement. When I watched jubilant police and firemen help in the burning of my Synagogue on November 10, 1938, on Kristallnacht.

I owe my life to Carl Lutz, the courageous Swiss Vice Consul who like his fellow Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg issued safety passes that were sometimes honored with survival. And finally, the liberation of Budapest by the Red Army, part of the Allied Forces that defeated Nazi tyranny. I experienced the Best and the Beast of man. The tyrants who destroyed life – the hero diplomats who saved life. I could not have imagined to be blessed with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren living in the Land of Freedom, the United States of America.

I was determined not to give up or lose hope. I made a vow should I survive, to devote my life to make sure no people would endure the pain and suffering brought about by man's inhumanity during the Holocaust. The scars remain – however, I am not paralyzed by the tragic past. It would have been easy for me to avoid stepping into my home town of Vienna – I use it instead for a place of reconciliation between East and West. I have not lost faith in God and not lost faith in humanity. And most importantly I chose to devote my energies to help perfect an

imperfect world. To build bridges of understanding, and to respect every member of the human family regardless of creed, race, majority or minority. Not to remain silent in the face of injustice, **silence and complacency abet the perpetrators**. I was determined to confront the tyrants and oppressors of freedom, to hear the cry of the oppressed and to speak for those that have no voice.

Graduates, life is cyclical with ups and downs. My message to you: “Never give up hope, have faith and do not be deterred by obstacles and hardship that may come your way. There are no instant solutions, every discovery or invention requires my copyright prescription, the three P-s: Prayer, Perseverance, and Patience.

As Rabbi of Park East Synagogue and founder of the interfaith Appeal of Conscience Foundation, I have forged coalitions to help implement my life’s mission. Seeking religious freedom for the faithful in China, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Cuba; the liberation of Soviet Jewry and release of political prisoners during the Dirty War in Argentina;

rallying top religious leaders from the former Yugoslavia to end the civil war and ethnic conflict resulting in the Dayton Accords and Peace Agreement. Building coalitions with religious and business leaders of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities to condemn the misuse and abuse of religion for conflict and terrorism, and today helping stem the tide of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and hatred.

On one of my frequent missions to the Soviet Union on behalf of human rights and religious freedom, I was privileged to meet Andrei Sakharov, the prominent nuclear physicist who was exiled to Gorky for courageously challenging human rights violations in his own country. Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev during the initial period of Glasnost and Perestroika, ordered his release. Sakharov and I were part of a small delegation that met with Secretary Gorbachev at the Kremlin. Sakharov thanked Gorbachev for his phone call to Gorky which brought about his freedom. Gorbachev responded: with freedom comes responsibility. Later Sakharov received the Nobel Peace Prize and European Union established the Sakharov Prize for Human Rights Advocacy.

Each one of us has the freedom of choice and can make a difference and thank God, we live in this great country, with unlimited opportunities. You must not only think of your own advancement but how you can make a contribution to society in building a better world. Don't be afraid to take risks. Be deliberate about choosing courage like Paul A. Volcker, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, my longtime friend and Trustee of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, whom I mourn and remember for his integrity and wisdom that made him a dependable leader for economic stability and a passionate defender of human dignity and freedom. He stood tall for over six decades and was an exemplary public servant with devotion to our country.

In this week's Biblical portion, we read about the reconciliation of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob, after years of enmity and hatred. I believe every conflict comes to an end. It is important to put your differences aside and become bridge builders for peaceful co-existence. Tolerance is not

enough, “love your neighbor as yourself” with mutual respect and mutual acceptance.

Be thankful for each day; it is our precious gift and if properly used a promissory note for a good future. Dream, reach high and make every day count. Pick a cause and pursue a purpose. A recent Harvard study shows that those who have a purpose in life, increase their longevity by 7-10 years.

In gratitude to our Country, I was proud to represent the values of our Founding Fathers, by serving four United States administrations and to be a voice for democracy representing the United States at the United Nations. My dear friend and colleague, Coretta Scott King, a year later held the same position as United States Alternate Representative to United Nations, transforming her grievances into service and reconciliation.

To you, the graduates: I see before me today, a new generation of leaders in business, technology, anthropology, the arts, architecture, education,

criminology, engineering, history, medicine, music, nursing and healthcare, philosophy, policy, psychology, and science.

You are entering your professional careers at a time of transition in a turbulent world of disarray. You will be faced with the challenges of technology and societal and environmental changes, and you will have to overcome unexpected barriers, but how you conquer these challenges is what is most important. It is your opportunity as future leaders to search beyond your immediate comfort zone of your particular field or your monetary desires. With wisdom and heart make a commitment of carrying the torch of freedom forward for peace and unity in diversity. It is your turn to give back.

Be a blessing to your families, the University of Miami, our Nation and all of humanity. As you embark on your journey, May God bless you in your comings and goings. Congratulations.