

 **Columbia Law School**

**Remarks of Zohar Goshen  
Columbia Law Graduation  
Monday, May 20, 2019**

Thank you Merilin for those kind and generous words.

Class of 2019, families, friends, colleagues, and distinguished guests.

Wow. A few days ago, someone wrote on LinkedIn that being on stage is like eating tiramisu. It's not.

It is with great honor and happiness that I receive the Willis Reese Teaching Prize. I am extremely grateful. Teaching is my passion. And I feel fortunate to teach the best students in the world, here at Columbia.

I have many reasons to cherish this teaching prize, and I would like to share with you one of them. In 1949, one year after the establishment of the state of Israel, all the Jewish people living in Yemen were flown to Israel in an operation known as Magic Carpet. My parents, each 20 years old, walked two months to the secret airport to board the first and only flight of their lives to start a new life in a new country.

My mother, may she rest in peace, believed that the road out of poverty for her five children was through education. She made it our first priority, and every day when she came home from her job in a sausage factory, she checked our homework.

It took me until sixth grade to notice that she was holding the notebook backwards. "You do not know how to read," I said. "Yes," she replied calmly. "And now that you know, you will teach me." And she learned. I thus would like to dedicate this wonderful prize to my mother and to all the parents and family members who support and encourage us to be the best we are. Thank you.

When I told my 8-year-old son, Yair—he's there—that I planned to talk about my mother today, he said, "Why not you talk about the people who are still living and loving you like me, mom, Ken, and Nadav." Yair, I just did. I love you all.

And a few words for the road and words that I believe are the reason you have chosen me to speak. Some of you believe that your talent, hard work, and dedication brought you to this exciting moment, while others, like myself, are afraid that the registrar will suddenly announce: "Zohar Goshen! We are sorry. We made a mistake. You should not be here. Please step aside."

Joking aside, this difference in attitudes reflects not just different levels of self-confidence, but also different beliefs about the role of luck in life.

After completing my first law degree, I gained some self-confidence and, by the end of my twenties, I believed that 90 percent of what happened in my life was in my hands, and the remaining 10 percent was luck. Bad luck.

But the belief that, in real time, you can tell whether something that is happening to you is good or bad is often wrong. Sometimes it takes years until an event reveals its true nature as either a good or a bad thing.

Now, in my fifties, I know that only 10 percent is in my hands and 90 percent is in God's hands.

What are the implications of this realization? To begin with, you have to work the 10 percent that is in your hands as if it were the 100 percent.

And, as you do it, just remember that it is difficult to evaluate your achievements or failures and their effect on your current or future happiness. Tying happiness to achievements is a futile exercise. When you do that, you start saying to yourself, "I will be happy when I finish college, when I get into Columbia Law School, when I get rid of Goshen, when I finish law school, when I make partner, when I get married, when I make a million dollars."

Achievements are a moving target and you will be doomed to live a life of "pursuing happiness" rather than actually being happy.

Being happy is very simple and free, like enjoying a sunset, a child's smile, or a joke at your expense. Work hard, but enjoy the road that is your life.

And what about the 90 percent that is in God's hands? You might say, there is no God, it is all pure luck, and there is nothing you can do to affect the dice.

Of course, I am not trying to make you believe that God exists. But you know: You will burn in hell if you don't.

But if you believe in any god, even in a non-religious god, how can you affect the 90 percent? My experience has taught me that there is only one way: Be a good person.

There are many ways to do that. Embrace the one that suits you. You can do good in the world through public service, or through being the best litigator in America, or by founding a successful start-up. If you pay attention to your conscience, and you will realize the way you were designed to bring goodness into the world.

Congratulations on earning your Columbia degree. It is an extremely valuable asset that will serve you wherever you go. I wish you good luck and a wonderful journey during your life.

I will miss you, Columbia will miss you, so keep in touch. Thank you again for this wonderful prize, and for honoring me with the chance to speak with you today. Thank you.