2026 DINNER and AWARDS for ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Vardit Ravitsky, Ph.D.
Ethical Leadership Award

Thank you for this wonderful award. It's heartwarming to be recognized by an organization I value so dearly. The missions of **FASPE** and the **Hastings Center for Bioethics** are beautifully aligned, so it feels like one sister organization validating the work of another.

I am honored personally, but I also see this as a celebration of bioethics more broadly.

I want to say a few words about the role of bioethics today, but also share why I chose to do this work. And that involves a story about my beloved grandfather.

Growing up in Jerusalem, I called him Saba. Saba Shmuel.

Saba Samuel was born and raised in Lodz, Poland. He was refused admission to university because the quota for Jewish students was filled for that year, so he followed his dream. In 1934, at age 18, he traveled alone to Eretz Yisrael, then Palestine under British Mandate, to attend the recently founded Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Other than his younger brother, who joined him 3 years later, that was the last time he saw his family. His parents died in the Lodz ghetto, his sister and her little boy were murdered in Treblinka, and most of the extended family did not survive the war. He carried that trauma silently, and built a beautiful family in Israel. And he was the best grandpa anyone could ever have.

In the 1980s, when the first groups of Israelis received exceptional permissions to visit Poland despite the lack of diplomatic relations, Saba decided to return, 50 years after leaving. He invited me, his eldest granddaughter, to join him. I was 18, and that journey shaped the rest of my life.

We went to his family home in Lodz. He took me through the park he crossed every day to go to school, remembering how he wore shorts even when it snowed. He was a child again.

But then we went to Auschwitz. This was before the Internet. I couldn't look at pictures beforehand and didn't know what to expect. Walking through the famous entrance gates and seeing the piles of shoes, glasses, hair, I felt physically punched in the gut. I read dozens of books about the Holocaust, but at that moment, the **power of place** hit me.

Then we entered the gas chambers, the "showers." I was too overwhelmed and unable to think about the victims who had stood exactly where I was standing, so I looked up, at the opening in the ceiling through which the Zyklon B pellets were thrown.

All I could think about was the person up there, releasing the poison. That person, doing it, going home later that day, living his life.

For months, even years, I became obsessed with that person. Was he different? Could it be anyone? **Could it be me**?

So I became obsessed with ethics. What drives us to make good or bad choices? How can we influence people to do the right thing under pressure? How do we recognize the moment **before** we cross the line, so we can stop in time? As individuals. As a society.

That is why, when I first read about FASPE, it felt as though a certain David Goldman had somehow reached into the darkest depths of my soul and found a way to turn the question that haunted me into a **mission**.

My passion for bioethics grew out of this most fundamental question about the human condition:

- How do we understand the normalization of evil?
- How do we become complicit in moral collapse?
- How does a doctor become Mengele?
- What can we do to prevent it?

These are not questions about **history**. They are questions about the ethical guardrails we need today, to pursue **progress and innovation** responsibly.

These are the questions I have explored throughout my career. When is it ethical to help a patient die? To help a patient have a certain kind of baby? Who should get that kidney, and why?

And fast forward: When is it ethical to edit human DNA, implant a device in the brain, use AI for mental health?

This is the work that the *Hastings Center* has pioneered since the 60s, as one **birthplace** of the field. This is why I am so touched that this award recognizes the impact of bioethics on the lives of patients, families, communities.

I shared the story of my younger self, because that experience led me to think that ethical failures don't happen only in extraordinary circumstances. They can emerge in everyday decisions, and in societies that **gradually** lose their moral compass. That is why these questions are so urgent today.

Today, we are all talking about the crisis of trust. At Hastings, we focus on broken trust in science, medicine, and healthcare.

Trust is broken when people cannot access the care they need, when they are financially devastated by getting sick. We have seen how deep the anger and frustration have become in our healthcare system. The recent killing of a healthcare CEO, 7 blocks from here, and the public reactions to it, are a disturbing reminder of just how profoundly trust has eroded.

And trust is broken when misinformation floods the public sphere, when the authority of scientific evidence is being undermined, when life-saving childhood vaccines are doubted while snake oil is promoted. And increasingly, misinformation comes right – from – the – top.

So what is the role of health and science professionals in times like these?

I'm excited to share that Hastings is launching a new Center for Ethical Leadership in Health. Our goal is to equip health professionals with the moral courage and practical skills they need to lead in these challenging times. Thank you, Shonni Silverberg and John Shapiro, for your generous support of this new initiative.

I'll end with this:

Research shows that even when people lose trust in institutions, they still trust people: doctors, nurses, those who care for them. But trust has to be earned. I always say that when my beloved husband tells me, "Oh, trust me, it's gonna be fine," that's when I become suspicious.

We need to focus on being **trustworthy**. Let's get up every morning and ask: What can I do today to be worthy of the trust of one more patient, research participant, student, client, reader, or member of my congregation? This is a priority for Hastings and for FASPE. We truly are partners, trying to save the world in our own ways.

Thank you again – FASPE - for this recognition. Thank you to everyone at Hastings for your incredible work, and to our wonderful Board that keeps us on track. Grateful to my wonderful husband, whose ethical company offered sponsorship tonight, and to my best friend since we were 3 Naomi, visiting from Jerusalem.

Finally, I am particularly pleased that 2 of my kids are here. I want them to see rooms like **this**, where people genuinely care about the society **they** will live in, where people roll up their sleeves to do the daily work of ethics. Because that work is never finished.

I'll conclude with words from an ancient text from my own culture called "Ethics of the Fathers":

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה

“It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it.”

Thank you, and onward!