

THE SPIRIT OF
ELIJAH

RESTS UPON
ELISHA

AN ADDRESS BY
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AT THE
CHAG HASEMIKHAH
RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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THERE IS A
BITTER-SWEET QUALITY
TO THIS CELEBRATION.
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IN A SENSE, BOTH THE JOY AND THE sorrow speak to the same theme—the transferring of spiritual authority from one generation to the next, the passing of responsibility for the entire *mesorah* and Torah leadership from teacher to student.

Permit me, therefore, to refer you back to an incident in the early history of the Jewish monarchy, when the prophet Elijah invested Elisha as his disciple and successor, as related in I Kings, chapter 19. It is a chapter which is itself worthy of study and also serves as a metaphor for your *Semikhah* at this juncture of our history.

Elijah had just gone through a soul-searing experience. Having challenged the prophets of Baal, confronted their royal supporter, Ahab, and therefore earned persecution by the infamous Isabel, Elijah finds himself distraught, in total despair, having given up hope that his people are ready for their mission as the *am Hashem*. He is so filled with grim fore-

bodings and feelings of inadequacy that he wants to die. God instructs him to stand at the mouth of the cave, where He reveals Himself to him. Elijah learns that God speaks to him not in the howling winds or the raging fires or the savage earthquake, but in the sound of gentle stillness, i.e., in patience and sensitivity. God then gives him three very specific commands: to anoint Hazael as the new king of Syria, Yehu as the new king of Israel, and, last, "Elisha, son of Shaphat, as a prophet in your place."

What does Elijah do? Does he proceed to follow the divine instructions exactly as they were given, namely, to anoint the two kings and then Elisha as his prophet successor? No, he does not. He changes the order. We hear nothing, for a long time, about anointing the new kings of Syria and Israel. Instead, he immediately does the last thing first:

[Elijah]... found Elisha the son of Shaphat who was plowing ...And Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle upon him. And [Elisha] left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and mother and I will then follow you"—then [Elisha] arose and followed [Elijah] and attended him.

Why the change in order, appointing Elisha first and leaving his diplomatic mission for later? I suggest that this was to teach posterity that, important as political moves and international relations

and diplomatic maneuvers are, **the single most important task before the Jewish people in every generation is to ensure the continuity of its spiritual leadership!** Let kings and heads of state wait; let matters of historic mo-

ment bide their time; let the politicians stand aside and let the statesmen cool their heels in the outer offices of our attention. The priority of priorities is that there be prophets of God and teachers of Torah and models of moral conduct and exemplars of Torah ethics to make our people worthy of saving.

And so it is with us. Of all the causes that the Jewish community including Yeshiva University espouses, the teaching of Torah and the education of *talmidei chachamim* and *rabbanim* is the most important. Unless we immediately attend to the future, the past is pointless and the present turns puerile. That is why this *Chag Hasemikhah* is such a very important occasion. You who have become *musmakhim* these past four years are our Elishas, and your *rebbeim* are your Elijahs. We consider your learning, your *Semikhah*, your future development, as our greatest mission, and it is to that end that we expend every effort in preparing your *shiurim*, counseling you, worrying about your education, and—yes—in the endless and thankless task of raising funds to ensure

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your ability to learn without worry and distraction—and without tuition fees. Because without Elisha, Elijah's life and prophetic career have no continuity. We need you. And you need us.

And let no one minimize the difficulties we face and which will undoubtedly continue and **intensify** during your careers.

You *musmakhim* who sit before me this day are being formally inducted into the rabbinate during one of the most tumultuous, perilous, and fateful periods in American Jewish history. Since the last *Chag Hasemikhah*, the danger to our continuity as a people has been encapsulated and symbolized in the National Jewish Population Study which showed that over 52% of American Jews are marrying out—a sure sign that the majority of American Jews is unalterably assimilating and, thus, being lost to Jewish posterity.

These shocking statistics are not the end of the story. The problem is not only demographic but spiritual as well: Jews who are marrying out are not only marrying Christians, they are becoming wedded to Christianity! The group which claims to be the largest “denomination in Judaism” has, by virtue of its “outreach to the intermarried,” opened the door to the most radical dilution of traditional Judaism in American Jewish history. Even a faculty member at a Reform seminary has complained in an official publication that what began as a welcome to non-Jewish spouses in the temple, and progressed to non-Jews becoming members of the temple (and thence to serve as officers of a

Jewish congregation), has now developed to the point that non-Jewish spouses are permitted to participate and lead in "ritual" activities in and on behalf of the congregation. And if Christians are now to conduct Jewish services, can the importing of Christianity itself be far behind? How sad!

If anyone is skeptical about the danger of such *shemad* and the ultimate christianizing of the Jewish community, such doubts dissolve in a Jewish Telegraphic Agency report at the beginning of this past January that **some 20% of the Jewish community—or about a million Jews—attended church services on Christmas.** We are in deep and unprecedented trouble—if even half these figures are true!

And not only are we in trouble in America; the situation in Israel is not much less disturbing. The peace process and the political, diplomatic, and security future of the Jewish state are matters of critical importance—and in the light of recent events doubly so. But in the long run the uncertain **Jewish** future of the state is even more critical. Israel is far more secure Jewishly than the Diaspora—that is why we encourage *aliyah* for our students—but not far enough. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz said recently, with too much

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justification, that the great question in Israel is not whether there will be a Palestinian state, **but whether the State of Israel will be a Jewish state.** Under such conditions, we cannot comfortably dismiss any worry about the spiritual as well as demographic destiny of American Jewry by assuming that the prophetic promise of "out of Zion shall go forth Torah" is at hand in these "Messianic times," and that, therefore, we can rely upon Israel to do for us religiously, culturally, and educationally what we cannot or will not do for ourselves.

Moreover, all is not well in our own Orthodox community. To illustrate this point let me refer again to that scene of the old prophet and his young new disciple and this time pose a halakhic question: Elijah is commanded to **anoint** Elisha as a prophet. But since when does a *navi* require *meshicha*? We know that a king and a *kohen gadol* and other "officials" require anointing—but a prophet? A *navi* is always a charismatic individual, an inspired nonconformist, not a formal office-holder, and there is no other case of a prophet being anointed.

The solution—and it is a relevant one—may be found in the Talmud (*Horayot* 11b), which asserts that the son of an anointed king does not require *meshicha*, because he inherits his father's status automatically. But, the Gemara asks, why then was Solomon anointed? Was not his father David anointed, and do we not constantly speak of King David as the Anointed King?

The answer the Talmud gives is that, in a time of *machloket*, of dispute and controversy and rancor, when the social and political consensus has been broken and the legitimacy of the new leader may be challenged, there should be a modified form of anointment—*meshicha be'afarsemei dakhya*, anointing with pure balsam oil; the original kind of oil, the *shemmen ha-mishcha*, was not used, but there was **some** kind of anointment, in order to confirm the new leadership and dampen the polemics. And that is why Elijah anointed Elisha—it was a necessary symbolic confirmation of his mission in stormy times.

For the same reason, your *Semikhah* at this critical crossroads of our history is so very important. Your *Semikhah* is a *meshicha* at a time in which we suffer from a fragmented polity, a lack of consensus, and therefore threats to our very existence. And when radical changes are upon us and the earth is shaking under the entire Jewish community to a degree the Richter scale cannot even contemplate, our own Torah community is split and polarized—and unnecessarily so.

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The polemics that infect the body politic of our Orthodox community are not always ideological. In truth, the ideological differences are not unbridgeable and the problems are not insoluble, because all of us aspire to the flourishing of *talmud torah* and *yir'at shamayim* and wish to enhance and increase Jewish education and the observance of the *mitzvot*. If only, when your generation comes to power, you could remove the personal and organizational egos, and along with them the inevitable enmity and envy; if you could concentrate on working together instead of proving your credentials by attacking the other; if you could scrap the monumental silliness that so often seeps into the most serious of our dialogues—then you would indeed successfully cooperate with mutual respect, and even love, to enhance the goals we all cherish. If the Chofetz Chayyim and Rav Kook, and the Chazon Ish and Rav Herzog were able, **despite their differing views on the communal policy of loyal and observant Jewry**, to learn with each other and address each other with *derekh erez* and affection, why cannot we do the same—without demanding that the “other side” first abandon its own principles? Why do we insist that all *chilukei dei*ot must lead to *machloket*? And if there must be ideological or even political *machloket*, why must it always be so uncivil, so destructive, so arrogant and self-righteous? Why must we imitate the *goyim* of our times and insist that there are “politically correct” ways of acting like Orthodox Jews,

and that all who do not conform are beyond the pale?

It is not differences of opinion that are troublesome—these can be trying but also very healthy—but unrestrained contempt and verbal aggressiveness that make any kind of dialogue exceedingly difficult and preoccupy all of us with paltry politics and petty polemics, thus distracting us from confronting cooperatively the larger and far more consequential menaces to our common future. Nero fiddled while Rome burned. And we compliment our ancient foe by emulating him in our own circumstances.

All in all, this is not a pretty picture that I have painted for you, but it is unfortunately all too real. It is into this troubled world that you enter as rabbis and educators, and your *Semikhah* is, therefore, a kind of anointment with balsam oil. It confirms our faith and trust in you as you grow in Torah and mature as *rabbanim*.

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In order to do so successfully, I recommend five guiding principles, two negative and three positive.

First, despite all that I have said, **you who are this day being invested in the rabbinate dare not be discouraged!** The *Sefer Chasidim* of R. Yehuda Ha-hasid teaches us that one who composes *chiddushei torah* (Torah writings) and does not publish them is guilty of being *mo'el be'hekdeshe*, of illicit use of sacred property, because our intellectual achievements in Torah are the gift of the Almighty and we dare not keep them to ourselves and deny them to our fellow Jews. And if this is true of Torah novellae, which another *talmid chakham* may well be able to disprove, how much more so is it true of creating Torah personalities, of making Jews who will live and support Torah?! You have no moral right to be frightened, no right to abandon your fellow Jews, no right to hoard Torah for yourselves and deny it to others—even though you are reluctant and they are unreceptive!

Some of you who are blessed with the gift of leadership may soon rise to be the agents of great, perhaps dramatic, improvements in the relationship between Torah and Israel. But each of you can, if you will it, make at least a dent here and

a change there, so that together you will have achieved mighty contributions, together with other *musmakhim* of our Yeshiva and

FIRST

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other yeshivot and *beni torah* from all over the country.

The second “negative commandment” is: do not allow yourselves to be sucked into any of the fashionable extremisms that are tearing our people apart. They are tempting, even seductive. Supporting them can make us feel good emotionally without burdening our intellects.

Extremism threatens to rip off the thin membrane of civilization that covers the inner volcano of violence. Violence from the mouth of a gun is a cancer that grows from the verbal violence from the mouth of a careless speaker or the pen of an irresponsible writer. And the oncogene—the cancer’s seed—is extremism in dehumanizing your adversary.

There is a special obligation that lies upon all who have influence over the public—especially younger people, who are less prone to make fine distinctions, who are often at the mercy of boiling hormones. You will soon be in such positions in your congregations and classrooms. Remember what King Solomon taught: *ha-chayyim ve’ha-mavet be’yad ha-lashon*,

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the tongue has the power of life and death; speech has consequences.

The Rabbis of the Mishnah taught:

Sages, be heedful of your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile and be exiled to a place of evil waters, and the disciples who come after you drink thereof and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned.

—*Avot 1:11*

In Halakhah, exile is the punishment for manslaughter, unwitting murder, for incurring careless loss of life. The negligent teacher who uses loaded words indiscriminately will thereby arouse the evil waters—the surging waves of hatred—to churn into violence. And younger, impressionable students, bright but still immature young people controlled as much by their glands as their minds, will imbibe these words and cause death and destruction to themselves and others. And the re-

sult will be—a terrible, massive *chillul Hashem*.

So I say to you—and to your teachers and faculty and administration and myself—*Hizaharu be'divrekhem*, be heedful of your words!

Beware of carelessly stigmatizing another person. Let no hothead dare call the

SECOND

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Prime Minister of Israel a “traitor.” Let that same Prime Minister be heedful and think twice before branding all *olim* from the Orthodox community of Brooklyn “a foreign implant.” And let all of us be very, very careful not to belittle any adversary as an “*apikores*”—or even as an “extremist”—before thinking carefully twice and three times.

Beware of intolerance, and beware of tolerance for the intolerant. There is a fine line that separates passion from violence and zeal from zealotry.

Beware of the tendency to deny that any other position can have merit, that your one concern takes precedence over every other consideration, that the adversary is invariably demonic, that every means is legitimate to achieve your end. Those who passionately take strong positions in Jewish life must know that there are unbalanced people who flock to extremes and who can, with what they consider good intentions, subvert the noblest goals.

Hizaharu be'divrekhem. Let us never forget the lesson of this past week or two of dreadful history: extremism begets fanaticism and fanaticism leads to the worst of evils—bloodshed and the dese-

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cration of the Divine Name—the most horrific terms in the lexicon of Judaism—all in the name of high principle and noble ideals and love of one's people.

As you grow and gain influence in the rabbinate, do what you can to bring peace and reconciliation and harmony to our harassed community. Reach out to others in the community to cooperate in bringing Torah to the masses of Jews who are alienated from it, so that they can join you in staving off the insatiable monster of mass assimilation. And, above all, learn not only to speak and speak out, but also to **listen**.

Remember that, as King David put it,

“Then did the God-fearing speak (*az nidberu*) to one another, and the Lord listened and He heard.” Why, indeed, is the Almighty so attentive to us? Because David writes not *az dibru*, that they **spoke**, but *nidberu*, in the transitive form, that they **let themselves be spoken to by others**. This means that, unlike our normal conversations where we are interested only in holding forth and declaiming to others, a truly God-fearing person is genuinely interested in lis-

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tening to what the other has to say; he is as willing to be spoken to as he is to speak—and he is not anxious to invalidate the other as not God-fearing. That is why the Almighty, as it were, perks up, emulates us, and does likewise: **He listens to us—and He hears!**

So, be ready to listen, to understand, to be sensitive and civil and respectful of others. But do so without submitting to ideological demands imposed upon you by others.

The third, and positive, item is—to continue to immerse yourselves in Torah study; never stop. Your Torah will be your refuge and your strength, your consolation and your joy, and your inspiration to greater aspiration. And it, above all else, will help you help your people. It is our firm belief that, as the Sages told us, the eternal light of Torah will lead people to the paths of goodness and holiness, and that “the people” in this case refers both to your congregants or your pupils, and to you yourselves as well. It is inevitable that your long immersion in the world of *Gemara* and *Rashi* and *Tosafot* and *Rishonim* will inspire you to devote your

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lives to spreading Torah and to the Jewish people. It is inconceivable that your adventures in the fascinating universe of *Shakh* and *Taz* and *Peri Megadim*, in arguing with R. Akiva Eger and R. Chaim and the *Minchat Chinukh*, should leave you unready and unwilling to bring these giants of the intellect and the spirit to the loving attention of all your fellow Jews. After having been immersed in Torah in the sacred precincts of our Yeshiva, we expect you to dedicate the best efforts of your life to Torah and *am Yisrael*. For you will one day be the Elijahs who will place your mantles upon the shoulders of yet unborn Elishas.

The next positive thing you will need, and in great abundance, is the love of Israel, *ahavat Yisrael*. Truth to tell, it is a quite difficult *mitzvah* to perform. Not all Jews are lovable, and some are downright unlovable. But we were not commanded to love only those whom we admire or respect or already love. This *mitzvah* applies not only to individual Jews, but also to *Kelal Yisrael*, to us as a people.

Do not be put off by those who are openly antagonistic to Torah. We have accepted the burden of responsibility (*arevut*) for all Jews, regardless of the labels they wear. Save your aggressiveness for the battle against *am ha-*

FOURTH

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aratzut—that and the ubiquitous hedonism and rampant materialism which are so pervasive in our society. Be prepared to fight indifference to Jews and Judaism—by showing love for the very Jews who are indifferent. Work for them, befriend them, draw them close, sacrifice for them—and they, or many of them, will respond. Jews today, more than ever before, are attracted by spirituality and authenticity, and that means such things as your *kavanah* in your “davening,” your *yirat shamayim*, your genuine commitment to Torah—and true and palpable love of all God’s creatures, all humanity. Share these traits with them in true friendship, and you and they together will be prepared to face the greatest odds and wrest victories out of them. Remember what the Baal Shem Tov told a hasid who was broken-hearted because his son had abandoned Torah Judaism: “**Love him more**”...

Finally, and very briefly, what you will need, after learning and love, is gratitude. It is a theme that has been occupying my attention in recent years, probably because it is so rare and I miss it so much. You will be in the position, as a rabbi or a

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teacher, to do favors for people, to help and guide and support people. Do not expect their gratitude so that you will not be disappointed. **But for yourselves, remember that it is a criterion of both your *yiddishkeit* and your *menshlichkeit*.**

Your gratitude must be extended to all who deserve it, and I here specifically mean our Yeshiva—yours and mine—which has given us the best of Torah, the only source of Torah Umadda, the warmest climate of intelligent piety and, along with it, intellectual challenges and high ethical standards and, not least, a free Torah education that has put us on the road to becoming Torah scholars. Do this by keeping and nourishing your links to Yeshiva. We will always support you. But soon it will be your turn to help support us—by sending students, by rallying supporters to us, by giving of your own substance. And I am proud to say to you that of all our alumni, it is the rabbinic alumni who are, relative to their ability, the most generous to their alma mater. May you continue in this grand tradition of *hakarat ha-tov*.

FIFTH

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The world you are entering as you bear the sublime mission of our holy *mesorah* is more complex, more opaque, more hazardous than that of your teachers. At times, and in time, when you will be called upon to

wear the mantle of Elijah, it may seem that the sheer novelty of the problems and volume of the challenges you face are so overwhelming, so vastly different from and much more difficult than those faced by your predecessors and mentors that, like Elisha, you will feel abandoned, and perhaps even resent that "Elijah went up in a storm to heaven," that they live in a Paradise, in heaven, in an ivory tower of the *Bet ha-Midrash*, while you must man the front lines, whether in your community or your classroom.

But do not lose courage. Because with the help of the Almighty, you will be granted the request for a double portion of his spirit—*pi shenayim be-ruchakha*—that Elisha made of Elijah as he bade him farewell; a double portion of your teachers' spirit will rest upon you. For our efforts, invested in you, will come to full fruition, and you will add to them your own internal resources of love of God and Torah and Israel, of courage and spiritedness.

And then your contemporaries will say of you, as the onlooking fellow disciples of Elijah—the *benei ha-neviim*—said of Elisha, "the spirit of Elijah now rests upon Elisha."

So may it be His divine will.

FOR YOU

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