

We at Yeshiva University hardly expect you to be full-fledged *posekim* (those who rule on Jewish law) and accomplished experts in human relations from the moment you are placed in your first, or even second, position. But your *baalebatim* do not know — and perhaps do not want to know — this, and so you must be prepared with some guidelines even as you expect to learn much “on the job.”

Of the many things that ought to be on your agenda regarding your *baalebatim*, let me mention three. The first obligation of a rabbi is *chesed* — loving kindness, care, generosity. You will be judged by your *menschlichkeit* (decency) as much as, or more than, your *lomdus* (learning).

You are not only going to sit in your synagogue office or classroom and dispense wisdom or offer a fine analysis of a halachic text. You will also have to take care of the poor and the single parent and the latchkey child. You will have to hear people's problems and counsel them and find help for them. And that is a state of mind, a spiritual mission, and an art — all rolled into one. It will take time, but you will learn it. So, work on yourselves! Both you and your people will benefit.

The second thing you must learn is courage — the courage to resist and to stand alone. You are entering a world that is crazy — from the French, *ecrase*, split or cracked — confronted by new problems even while wrestling with stubborn old ones, full of paradoxes and antinomies and contradictions and absurdities — especially those thrown up by science and technology, such as the potential for humans to direct the future evolution of the species.

You will have to consult your *rebbeim* (teachers) and older colleagues, and some day you may be called on to make such fateful decisions. You will confront a Jewish world disappearing at the margins, with an entrenched secularism that refuses to budge from old and tired formulas. You will be faced by young Jews who have suddenly become enamored of Eastern religions, spawning assorted forms of spurious spirituality.

You are already in a Jewish community of sharp denominational divides, where virulent anti-Orthodox sentiment has reached unparalleled proportions. You will have to work in an Orthodox community riven by internal conflicts and burning animosity — and, in our own part of the Orthodox community, lack of dialogue, an unwillingness to treat those who differ with even a modicum of respect, a spiralling intolerance, a hardening of confrontational postures. That is the kind of world you are entering — and you will have to have the courage to change it.

There will come a time, or many times, in your careers when you will have to make unpopular decisions — unpopular with your laymen, with your colleagues, with the media. But your conscience as men of Torah will allow you no other recourse. You may even,

sometimes, have to risk your very livelihood because of principle. True, leadership means you must get your people to trust and follow you; but you must also have the courage to go out front, by yourselves, and show what you stand for. You may be reviled, you may be attacked. But you must develop the backbone to resist and withstand.

Remember that the courage to go it alone when necessary is the mark of authenticity. The playwright Brecht puts into the mouth of Galileo the following sentences: “Good philosophers... fly alone, like eagles, not in flocks like starlings. A single Arabian steed can outrun a hundred plough horses.”

And centuries before him, a good — very good — philosopher named Maimonides, wrote to a student, in a letter preserved to this day in the “Guide for the Perplexed:” “I would rather please one intelligent man even if it means displeasing 10,000 fools.” You must brave the imprecations and the insults, and even the stones, that are hurled at you. If you speak out on the important issues of the day which demand the voice of Torah authority, you will be criticized, no matter what you will say.

And if you say nothing, you will be criticized for that, too. Even a deliberate decision to keep silent requires courage.

And third is an even greater challenge: the special code of conduct of a *rav*. The Rambam shows how a Jewish leader must comport himself: “One must not act with officiousness or vulgarity over the community, but with modesty and piety. A community official who intimidates the community excessively will be punished... And one must not treat people with contempt even if they are ignorant. Even if they be common and lowly, they are still the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they are the hosts of the Lord whom He took out of Egypt with great strength and a mighty hand. So must he bear patiently the bother and the burden of the community, as did Moses...”

This is a difficult standard, but there is no excuse for violating it. You must feel a basic compassion for your people and treat them with dignity — even if you feel they are undeserving.

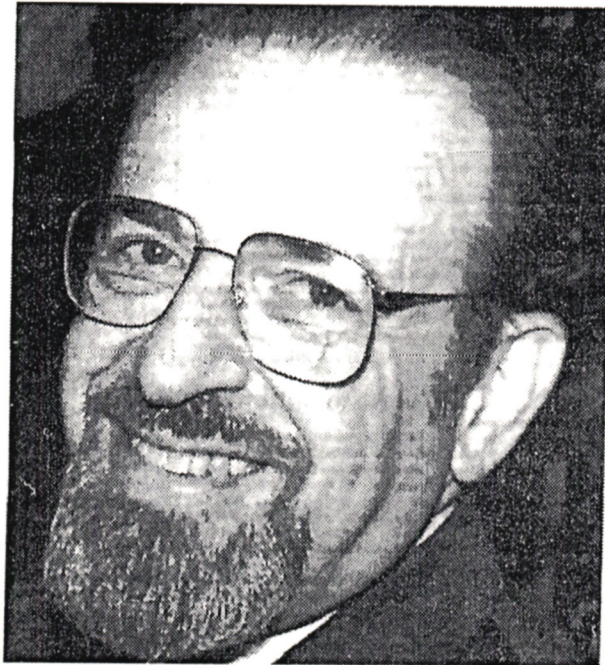
The “what” of your callings as congregational rabbis or educators is one word: Torah. Without it, your sermons will consist of insipid strings of pious platitudes; your counselling will be bereft of the wisdom of the ages; and you will be reduced to the level of pastoral entertainers or, at best, social

workers in rabbinic garb. There is nothing wrong with social work; but a *rav* must be a *rav* before and above everything else.

What gives you authenticity as rabbanim, as Orthodox rabbis, is your study of and commitment to Torah — and that means all of Torah, but primarily halachah.

Take it from someone with some experience in being busy: your communal and professional obligations, if you are sincere, will be overwhelming. They will make it seem forgivable to you to neglect your setting aside time to study Torah, and before long you will forget more and more. But if you keep up with your learning, your professional experience will become a source of edification; it will

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lead you to a form of Torah study of a different order.

You will be learning with your usual halachic acumen which you acquired under the tutelage of your distinguished rebbeim, but the very act of living with people and their intimate problems — experiences far beyond those you were exposed to during your years at Yeshiva University — will endow you with the ability to find in other branches of Torah marvelous secrets or dimensions you never knew existed.

The Torah — both halachah and *aggadah* (non-legal topics), Talmud, and Midrash — will enrich your ability to deal with people and will become, if you are wise and sensitive, a source not only of *derashot* (sermons) but of the wisdom of life itself.

Finally, we come to the “where” of your future lives. I can understand your reluctance at leaving the environs that have served you well for so many years. Even a fetus, psychologists tell us, experiences trauma on being expelled from its mother’s womb. But it must happen. You must leave and must make your way to wherever there are Jews who need you — Jews who need to be taught and instructed and

counselled and loved. You must do so as authentic bnei Torah, filled with *ahavat Yisrael* (brotherhood). And you must learn to fly, to soar on the wings of learning and love, to heights you never expected and to satisfactions you never imagined, along with frustrations and longing.

Your obligation lies first with the small, outlying communities, where you may well struggle financially, be disappointed at the absence of intellectual and Torah companionship, nurse your dreams in loneliness. But you will be working out your mistakes while making a supreme effort to do what Ezra and Hillel and other great rabbis did for the Jews of Eretz Yisrael in their generations.

You will be building reputations at the same time as you will be participating in the renaissance of Torah even in the hinterlands. Remember that the Jews who live there are as deserving of our attention and sacrifice as are those in the concentrated areas of Jewish life.

Rabbi Lamm is president of Yeshiva University. This article is adapted from his address at the 1998 Chag Hasemichah of the university's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan theological seminary.