

10

ישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן

חג הסמיכה

“THE WHO, WHAT, AND
WHERE OF THE RABBINATE”

ADDRESS AT THE

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RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BY

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I n greeting you on our last Chag ha-Semikha of this troubled century, and on the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, permit me to share with you some thoughts as to your role in a future that is, at one and the same time, both frightening and beckoning. To help you in your transition from a relatively cloistered existence in the Bet Midrash and college classroom to that varied and oft fearsome "outside world," allow me to turn practical and offer you some thoughts on the "who," "what," and "where" of your developing careers. (The "when" is obvious—Now—and requires no elaboration.) And while I address you as pulpit rabbis, those of you going into education or allied fields, simply apply my words to your own context.

The "Who" consists of your relationships with your "baalebatim," your lay people, whether congregants, pupils, parents, board members, etc.

Many of you have expressed apprehension, during the sessions I have had with you as Semikha I and Semikha IV students, as to how to deal with the myriad of problems a rabbi has to contend with. I sympathize with you. We at Yeshiva hardly expect you to be full-fledged *posekim* and accomplished experts in human relations from the moment that 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. I must repeat what the Rav, of blessed memory, would always caution us about. He would tell us what his grandfather, R. Hayyim Brisker, told his son—the Rav's father and predecessor here at Yeshiva, R. Moshe Soloveitchik—when the latter was about to leave for his first "shtelle": "Listen to me, Moshe: a Rabbi must not only know 'how to learn'; the test of a Rabbi is if he practices *chesed*." So, you will be judged by your "mentschlichkeit" as much or more than by your "lomdus."

You are not only going to sit in your synagogue office or classroom and dispense wisdom or offer a fine analysis of a halakhic text. You will also have to take care of the poor and the single parent and the latch-key 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. The Rav quotes R. Hayyim as saying, "I am basically a cruel person and I am also stingy, but I worked on myself and turned my cruelty into kindness and miserliness into generosity." 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 *ecrassé*—split or cracked), confronted by new problems even while still wrestling with stubborn old problems, 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* and older colleagues, and some day you may be called upon 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 internecine conflicts and burning animosity—and in our own part of the Orthodox community, a lack of dialogue, an unwillingness to treat those who differ with even a modicum of respect, a spiraling 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 back-bone 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 plow-horses.”

And centuries before him, a good—very good—philosopher named Maimonides or Rambam wrote to a student, in a letter preserved to this day in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, “I’d rather please one intelligent man, even if it means displeasing ten thousand fools.”

Moreover the same Rambam codified it as a *halakha* when he established this prerequisite for a *dayyan* or for a Rabbi and for any principled Jewish leader:

Learn from Moses, the teacher of all prophets: when the Holy One sent him to Egypt...tradition tells us that He said to Moses and Aaron, "[you must accept leadership] on condition that [you are prepared] that they will curse you and stone you"¹

So you must brave the imprecations and the insults and even the stones 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 will 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 first part of the same *halakha* in 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 still are 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...²

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. Follow the example of Moses who, even if he didn't particularly *like* his Jews, he did *love* them...

So much for the "Who."

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 counseling 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 all else.

What gives you your authenticity as *Rabbanim*, as *Orthodox Rabbis*, is your study of and commitment to Torah—and that means all of Torah but primarily Halakha.



¹צא ולמד ממושה רבן של כל הנביאים כיון ששלחו הקב"ה במצרים ונאמר ויצום אל בני ישראל אמרו מפי הקבלה שאמר להם למושה ולאחרך על מנת שיהיו מקללים אתכם וסוקלין אתכם באבנים-הלכות סנהדרין פרק כ"ה ה"א
²אסור לאדם לנהוג בשררה על הצבור ובגסות הרוח אלא בענוה ויראה, וכל פרנס המטיל אימה יתירה על הצבור שלא לשם שמים נענש, ואינו רואה לו בן תלמיד חכם שנאמר לכן יראוהו אנשים לא יראה כל חכמי לב. וכן אסור לו לנהוג בהן קלות ראש אע"פ שהן עמי הארץ, ולא יפסיע על ראשי עם הקדש, אע"פ שהן הדיוטות ושפלים בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב הם וצבאות השם שהוציא מארץ מצרים בכח גדול וביד חזקה, וסובל טורח הצבור ומשאן כמושה רבינו, שנאמר בו כאשר ישא האומן את היונק, והרי הוא ואומרו ואצוה את שופטים זו אזהרה לדיין שיסבול את הצבור כאשר ישא האומן את היונק, צא ולמד ממושה רבן של כל הנביאים כיון ששלחו הקב"ה במצרים ונאמר ויצום אל בני ישראל אמרו מפי הקבלה שאמר להם למושה ולאחרך על מנת שיהיו מקללים אתכם וסוקלין אתכם באבנים.

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 lead you to a form of Torah study of a different order. You will be learning with your usual halakhic 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—will endow you with the ability to find in other branches of Torah marvelous secrets or dimensions you never knew existed. The Torah—both Halakha and Agada, Shas 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* but for the wisdom of life itself.

One of the greatest and still under-appreciated giants of Hasidic thought, R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin, tells us³ that there are two traditions about the number of facets Torah possesses. According to one Midrash, there are 49;⁴ another passage puts the number at 70.⁵ How explain the difference? R. Zadok says that it depends upon the nature of the Torah studied, for there are two kinds, each with a different provenance. Torah which has 49 aspects stems from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But the other famous tree in Gan Eden, the Tree of Life, has an even greater efflorescence; it has 70 facets, as opposed to the 49 of the Tree of Knowledge.

Thus, the learning of Torah that issues from the Tree of Knowledge is more restricted: 49 aspects are the maximum one can attain by the pure exercise of intellect in the pursuit of knowledge. But when you study Torah that derives from the Tree of Life—the fruit of a life of holiness in the here-and-now, experience in the hustle and bustle of the daily struggles of existence, there you will uncover and discover not only 49 but 70 aspects of Torah! And those extra 21 facets of Torah will be yours as you move from the Tree of Knowledge to the Tree of Life.

So—learn from your experience, and learn to find your guidance someplace in the 70 dimensions of Torah. Don't separate Torah from life. Each enriches and expands the other.

Finally, we come to the "Where" of your future lives.

³ "פרי צדיק" לבמדבר כ"ד ע"א

⁴ הרי מ"ט פנים התורה נדרשת-מדרש תהלים (בובר) מזמור קי"ט

⁵ שבעים פנים בתורה-במדבר רבה (וילנא) פרשה י"ג

You are now, as I indicated earlier, in a state of transition—between school and career, yeshiva and the rabbinate, absorbing and giving, being led and leading. Some of you are prepared to go to the ends of the earth (one of you is here from Hong Kong and another from Turkey!) to teach Torah. But many of you, alas, feel that you must stay close to home, i.e., New York, or at most Israel—and even then, only Jerusalem; that everything in America west of the Hudson is the equivalent of beyond the mythical River Sambatyon, and everything north of Rockland County is the remote area of the Hills of Darkness. The Rav used to say that he never met anyone as parochial and provincial as the typical New Yorker. How right he was!

I can understand your reluctance at leaving the environs that have served you so well for so many years. Even a fetus, psychologists tell us, experiences trauma upon being expelled from its mother's womb. But it must happen. To you the Psalmist says, "I have today—*today!*—given birth to you."⁶ 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 counseled and loved, and you must do so as authentic *benei Torah*, filled with *ahavat Yisrael*. Yes, despite phones and fax machines and email and the Web, you will be distant from your *Rebbeim*, your colleagues, your family. But even a chick must be pushed out of the nest at some point. And you too must learn to fly—and 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 and loneliness.

Some of you will question what I say on the basis of a *Beraita*. Let me bring it into the open, because it speaks to your and our situation.

R. Yosi b. Kisma said: I once was walking on my way when I was accosted by a man who greeted me, and I returned his greeting. He said to me, "Rabbi, what place are you from?" I said to him, "from a great city of scholars and scribes." He said to me, "Rabbi, would you be willing to live with us, in our place, and I will give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinarim and jewels and pearls?" I said to him, "Son, even if you gave me all the silver and gold in the world, and all the precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not live in any place other than a place of Torah."⁷

⁶ אני היום ילדתיך-תהילים ב' ז

⁷ אמר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ופגע בי אדם אחד ונתן לי שלום והחזרתיו לו שלום אמר לי רבי מאיזה מקום אתה אמרתי לי מעיר גדולה של חכמים ושל סופרים אני אמר לי רבי רצונך שתדור עמנו במקומנו ואני אתן לך אלף אלפים דינרי זהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות אמרתי לו בני אם אתה נותן לי כל כסף וזהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות שבעולם איני דר אלא במקום תורה-אבות פרק ו משנה ט

I can imagine that scene: the forward, aggressive Shul president accosting the holy R. Yosi: "Hi, Rabbi, I heard your lecture last night. It was terrific! Listen, I'm the president of a shul and the head of the Search Committee for a rabbi. Come to our *shtelle* and I'll guarantee you an enormous salary, terrific benefits, retirement package, insurance, car, apartment, trip to Israel—the works..." The man must have been shocked at R. Yosi's response.

Apparently this *Beraita* argues for your remaining in this, the largest Jewish community in the world, and not venturing to the hinterland where gold and silver rather than the discourses of "scholars and scribes" are the tokens of success.

And yet I tell you that go you must, if you are to be true to the mission towards which you have been educated. And that is so for two reasons.

First, the view of R. Yosi b. Kisma is not the only authentic voice of our tradition. There are other views, other than that of R. Yosi b. Kisma. Thus, Resh Lakesh, in the Talmud (*Sukkah 20a*), tells us that several times Torah was all but forgotten in Eretz Israel, and only the infusion of strength in Torah learning by *individuals*—such as Ezra, then Hillel, then R. Hiyya and his sons—who were willing to struggle in a new environment for the sake of Torah, leaving behind the secure walls of Babylonian *batei midrash*, was able to restore Palestinian Jewry to its former eminence.⁸

Imagine if the elite of Polish Jewry—the Babylon of this historic epoch—would have gone on aliyah to Israel. How different the State of Israel would be and look now, 50 years after its founding!

Imagine if some of the greatest *gedolim* at the end of the 1800's and early years of this century had decided to come with ordinary Jews to the United States to introduce Torah learning here on a grander scale. R. Jacob Joseph would not have been a voice in the wilderness and it would not have taken 80–90 years for Orthodoxy to mature to where it feels it has a chance in this country.

Imagine if Dr. Revel and his early predecessors as well as Dr. Belkin and the Rav had decided to nestle in the warm and supportive environment of Eastern Europe—or the lush oil-fields of Oklahoma—and not ventured here to build Torah and our yeshiva. Where would we be today?

Imagine if R. Aaron Kotler had preferred to stay in Brooklyn, where he had all the comforts and support that an admiring Orthodoxy could give him, and not gone to Lakewood to build a great Yeshiva.

⁸ אמר ריש לקיש: הריני כפרת רבי חייא ובניו. שבתחלה כשנשתכחה תורה מישראל עלה עזרא מבבל ויסדה, חזרה ונשתכחה עלה הלל הבבלי ויסדה, חזרה ונשתכחה עלו רבי חייא ובניו ויסדוהו.

So, R. Yosi b. Kisma offers a legitimate view of the role of the rabbi and his preference for the “great city of scholars and scribes,” but others offer competing visions. And I submit to you, freshly minted *musmakhim*, that 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 R. Hiyya and his sons did for Eretz Israel Jewry in their generations. You will be building reputations at the same time that you will be participating in the renaissance of Torah even in the hinterlands. Remember that they too are Jews, they are as deserving of our attention and sacrifice as are the Jews of Boro Park or Spring Valley or Teaneck or the Upper West Side.

And then there is a second reason for urging you to be more adventurous geographically: perhaps R. Yosi b. Kisma didn't at all mean what most people assume he meant. Rather, he meant something totally different—something that I believe is of supreme importance to you as you leave the sacred precincts of the yeshiva.

Note the recurrence of the term “*makom*”—place, not town or city—in this whole passage. The discerning but materialistic and somewhat brash shul president asked the Rabbi, “what *place* are you from?” Every man and woman has a *makom*—a place or locus, spiritual-psychological rather than geographical, a rootedness that determines and fixes his character and his aspirations, his dreams and ambitions and orientations. Mr. President wanted this talented and famous rabbi not only to move to his town—that would have been quite appropriate—but to change his *makom*, his locus, to transform his very identity from a scholar of Torah to a clerical professional, from a perpetual student to an efficient administrator, from a spiritual to a social persona. Rabbi, you've got to be like one of us, one of the boys, “to live with us in our *makom*,” to adjust to our self-identification, and then you can aspire to all the wealth and social prominence that goes with it. And the answer of R. Yosi b. Kisma is loud and clear: all the money and fame in the world will not move me to change my *makom* from one of Torah to one of vulgarity—rich, comfortable, well-meaning, kindly, benevolent vulgarity, but vulgarity none the less. I'm ready to go any place to teach Torah, but I am never going to transform my very identity from *ben Torah* to anything other than that. That is my *makom*—that and no other.

So perhaps, after all, R. Yosi b. Kisma was not speaking against moving to a smaller and remote community, but against transmuting his locus, his *makom*, his very identity.

Therefore, when we urge you to raise your eyes and look beyond the confines of neighborhood and city, to broaden your horizons and expand your scope, it is purely a matter of geography, not identity and spirituality. Indeed, wherever you go and whatever you may eventually do professionally, inside the rabbinate or outside, your *makom* must always be here, firmly fixed within the walls of our Bet Midrash forever and ever, for this is the *makom* which nourished your souls and sharpened your wits and fostered your dreams, where dedicated and brilliant *Rebbeim* taught you how to learn, shepherded you through abstruse texts and educated you in the art of applying the light of Torah to illuminate the most dark and difficult of human situations. It is this *makom* to which each of you must always return to refresh your *neshamah* and reenergize your mind and reconfirm your commitment.

Do so, and you will find that your *makom* is very, very crowded. You will find there, with you, your *Rebbeim*, and our giants of yesteryear—the Rav and Dr. Belkin and Dr. Revel and “the Meitchiter Iluy” and all the *Gedolei Yisrael* who graced our yeshiva with their learning and their teaching. They will always be with you.

It is in this spirit that I conclude with one of the pearls of wisdom of the great Tanna, R. Meir:⁹

R. Meir had a favorite saying: [God says:] Learn with all your heart and soul to know My ways and to be energetic when approaching the doors of My Torah. Keep My Torah in your heart, and may the fear of Heaven always be before your eyes—then I will be with you in every *makom*, for wherever your destiny takes you, your *makom* will always be in My precincts, the *makom* of Torah and fear of Heaven.

Indeed, may He be with you for years without end, years of accomplishments for Torah, for yourselves and for your families, for of us at Yeshiva and for all our people wherever they may be.

⁹ מרגלא בפומיה דרבי מאיר: גמור בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך לדעת את דרכי ולשקוד על דלתי תורתך, נצור תורתך בלבך ונגד עיניך תהיה יראתי, שמור פך מכל חטא וטהר וקדש עצמך מכל אשמה ועון, ואני יהיה עמך בכל מקום—(ברכות דף י"ז ע"א)

