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# "THERE IS A PROPHET IN ISRAEL"



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## "THERE IS A PROPHET IN ISRAEL"

This address is dedicated, as is my **שעור** tomorrow, to the memory of **מו"ר** Dr. Samuel Belkin ז"ל, whose tenth **yahrzeit** we commemorate in a few weeks, during **Chol ha-Moed Pesach**.

Because Dr. Belkin was not only my teacher for one year—the last that he taught—but also my predecessor as President, I had the opportunity to appreciate the full scope of his prodigious talents and insights—his greatness not only as a **תלמיד חכם** and as an educator, but also as a leader. And it is this quality of leadership that I choose to discuss on this, his tenth **yahrzeit** and the one hundredth birthday of our Yeshiva.

Dr. Belkin taught us by example that to be a **תלמיד חכם** you need "**לומדות**"; to be a **ירא שמים** you need **אמונה**; to be a teacher you need love of your pupils as well as your subject matter. But to be a **רב**, a rabbi in the classic Jewish sense, you need all these and much more: you need the gift of leadership.

Dr. Belkin himself was an orphan from Lithuania who became a renowned **תלמיד חכם** at a young age, wandered to the U.S., got himself a doctorate at Brown University, and then came to Yeshiva as both a **rosh yeshiva** and professor of Greek. His contribution to the Jewish world, however, was not confined to what he knew and what he taught, but was distinguished by the way he combined these with his vision, his goals, his determination, his readiness to use either gentle persuasion or confrontation—in a word, his leadership. It was the ability to integrate his Torah and his Mada with his leadership qualities that ensured his place in Jewish history.

Dr. Belkin was blessed with great gifts, both intellectual and personal, and few of us indeed can aspire to equal his achievements. But we can learn from him, each in his own way and in accordance with his own personality, to exercise leadership in our careers as rabbis; to bear in mind that the rabbinate is neither a service profession nor a life-long **kollel** at the expense of a congregation, but a challenge to take the initiative to dream dreams for the greater glory of God and Torah and Israel—

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and implement them; to teach, but also to direct and orient and mold and build and create.

Do not take this charge lightly. Leadership is not for the faint of heart, but neither is it for the light-hearted and the frivolous. If an ordinary person makes a mistake, he merely makes a mistake; if a leader errs, he *misleads*. Indeed, according to the *Pesikta Rabbati* (ch. 22), misleading, or the failure of a leader to exercise leadership, is a violation of one of the Ten Commandments! Thus, the *Pesikta* interprets the verse **לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹא**, not to take the Name of the Lord in vain, to mean: **שְׂלֵמָה תִּקְבַּל עֲלֶיךָ שְׂרָרָה וְאִי אַתָּה רָאוּי לְשְׂרָרָה**, not to accept an office when you are not worthy of it. The *Netziv* explains: the name **אֱלֹהִים** can be either **קֹדֶשׁ** or **חֹל**, sacred or profane, depending upon whether it refers to God or to a human source of power, such as a judge or a prince. One who is designated a leader therefore shares with God, as it were, the title **אֱלֹהִים**, and if he proves unworthy of it by neglecting his responsibilities, he weakens and desecrates that Name—thus violating **לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹא**, and taking the Name in vain.

**Leadership is not for the faint of heart, but neither is it for the light-hearted and the frivolous.**

But there is not only danger in undertaking leadership, there is also glory. If abuse or disuse of responsibilities as a leader puts one in violation of **לֹא תִשָּׂא**, then the proper execution and positive assertion of one's leadership is nothing less than a **קִדּוּשׁ הַשֵּׁם**, the sanctification of the divine Name.

Let me explain this by referring to a fascinating story recorded in Tanakh (II Kings, ch. 5) and which will be read as the Haftorah this coming Shabbat.

Some 2,800 years ago, there was a king in ancient Israel—Jehoram, and a prophet—Elisha, the

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disciple of Elijah. The Kingdom of Israel was then effectively a satellite of Aram or Syria, and the Israelite king was a vassal of the king of Syria.

Naaman, the general of Syria, was a leper. A captive Israelite girl told Naaman that he could find relief by consulting Elisha the prophet. The king of Syria thereupon sent his general to Jehoram, the king of Israel, asking that the latter provide the cure from his leprosy. Jehoram panicked, for he had no idea how to cure lepers, and suspected that the Syrian king was using this as a pretext for attacking him.

When Elisha heard about that, he sent word to Jehoram that he, the prophet, will effect the cure: **וידע כי יש נביא בישראל**, let him know that there is a prophet in Israel. Elisha then sent a messenger to Naaman telling him how to proceed in order to be cured. Naaman's advisors prevailed upon him to follow the prophet's advice, which he did, whereupon he was healed.

The story then reaches its climax in the words of Naaman: **הנה נא ידעתי כי אין אלקים בכל הארץ כי אם בישראל**, Now I know that there is no God in all the world save in Israel. It is the act of **קידוש השם**, the glorification or sanctification of God's Name.

Three things stand out in this story, and they make of it a parable of eternal and cogent relevance.

First is the description of Naaman: **והאיש היה גבור חיל מצורע**, the man was a mighty hero, but a leper.

What a startling juxtaposition, what a striking contrast: mighty, but a leper . . .

The **גבור חיל מצורע** is a symbol and picture of modern society, expressive of a painful paradox of Western civilization: technologically powerful, but ethically leprous; scientifically progressive, but spiritually regressive; materially mighty, but morally a midge. From the distance, when you behold this **גבור חיל** who symbolizes modern society, you think he is self-confident, assertive, optimistic, problem-



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solving. But draw closer to him and you see that he is—a **מצורע**, a leper, corrupt, frightened, in despair and disrepair, uncertain and perplexed, rotting and withering away inside.

Second, within the camp of Israel itself, there is a troublesome tension between king and prophet. The captive girl recommends the prophet, but the king of Syria sends Naaman not to the prophet, but to the king of Israel. The latter, in his despair, rends his clothes out of sheer frustration and worry—and he does not even think of sending the leper to the prophet! Ultimately, however, it is only the prophet who can, by imploring God, heal the leper: **וידע כי יש נביא בישראל**, so that all may know that there is a prophet in Israel.

In Israel there is always the tension between prophet and king, between the sacred and the profane, between that aspect of the life of Israel that is represented by the king—wordly knowledge, power, material wealth, cleverness—and that represented by the prophet: **קדושה**, the supreme word of the Lord, Torah, the spirit, and Jewish way of life. We have often erred and misled others, by offering to the world the king instead of the prophet as the source of Jewish healing. We have told ourselves and others that the ancient vision of salvation from Israel will come through a Jewish government or through Jewish nationhood, through Jewish scientists or Jewish Nobel prize winners, through Jewish wealth or through Jewish writers or Jewish intellectuals.

Not so! Those who are symbolized by the king of Israel can help; they are, indeed, indispensable. Without *Mada*, without a material framework, without a proper natural and national context, without secular knowledge, without the profane, the prophet cannot flourish. But the main task of healing the Naamans of the world of their spiritual ills, of resolving their inner contradictions, of banishing the leprosy of the heart and soul, can come only through prophecy and Torah, **וידע כי יש נביא בישראל**.

The third thing we learn from this passage is that if and when the prophet is ready to take the

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initiative and let the kings, Jewish and non-Jewish, know that there is a prophet in Israel ready to heal the moral sickness that plagues the world, the result is—**קידוש השם**, the sanctification of the divine Name.

What held true for Elisha the prophet holds true for each of you: Lead, for Heaven's sake; lead **לשם שמים**; and **וידע כי יש נביא בישראל**, let the world know that there is a new and reinvigorated and energetic and authentic rabbinate, that there are still prophets in Israel! There is hardly a greater **קידוש השם** than the awakening awareness that **רבנות** is alive and well and that Torah is thriving in Israel!

**Let the world know that there is a new and reinvigorated and energetic and authentic rabbinate, that there are still prophets in Israel!**

As we induct you officially into the **רבנות**, we charge you with the holy burden of spiritual, Torah, intellectual, and communal leadership.

Leadership means creating, encouraging, and inspiring followers. **אין מלך בלי עם**, there can be no king without a country. And this task will demand of you new talents, largely untried during your student days—talents of motivation and organization and personal vigor and communal relationships. Rabbis must have "baalebatim" and congregations, and teachers must have pupils and schools. And if they're not there waiting for you, go out and beat the bushes, find them and mold them and elevate them, **וידע כי יש נביא בישראל**.

Yeshiva is, in many ways, a social cocoon. Although we are much more open to variety than other yeshivot, nevertheless, we are more or less homogeneous. In the exercise of rabbinic leadership, you must learn to be open to *all* Jews from *all* backgrounds—Ashkenazim and Sephardim, old and young, men and women, Orthodox and non-

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Orthodox, affiliated and non-affiliated, those already on the way to תשובה and those not yet at that level, confirmed secularists and those who simply go along with the crowd unthinkingly—you must be the רב of all of them, whether or not they belong to your shul, whether or not they identify with our worldview. They—all of them—must know that you represent the prophet in Israel, the מסורה of רבנות; that you bear the ring of authenticity; that your love and concern is broad and not parochial; that even the Naamans of life can come to you for help.

**To be a תלמיד חכם you need a head. To be a ירא שמים you need a heart. To be a גומל חסדים you need hands and feet. To be a דרשן you need a mouth. But to be a leader—you need a חוט השדרה, a spine, a backbone.**

At a time when the vacuum in Jewish leadership in the community is being filled by well-meaning people who often lack any Torah orientation, it is time for our רבנים to take their place in community leadership—whether of ועד הכשרות or מקוה, UJA or Federation, Soviet Jewry or PACs. You must breathe a נשמה into the established Jewish leadership by forthrightly articulating what we stand for, and doing so with דרכי נועם.

But, of course, you must never become just another "macher." You must ever remember that the source of your legitimacy as rabbis is—your status as בני תורה and תלמידי חכמים. Unless you continue and deepen your תלמוד תורה, unless you teach and are מרביץ תורה, your credentials are suspect, your legitimacy is in question, your effectiveness is crippled.

This is a time of growing Jewish literacy among an emerging group of our Orthodox "baalebatim," and many of you will be undergoing a בחינה every time you give a שיעור or דרשה or answer a שאלה.

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Only through your knowledge of Torah will people know **כי יש נביא בישראל**.

To be a **תלמיד חכם** you need a head. To be a **גומל חסדים** you need a heart. To be a **ירא שמים** you need hands and feet. To be a **דרשן** you need a mouth. But to be a leader—you need a **חוט השדרה**, a spine, a backbone. And in age when, as we are told, the majority of the population suffers from back pain, that is no simple matter.

Leadership means not only marching at the head of a column of loving and admiring followers, but also the ability to put up with criticism, justified and unjustified, often harsh and pitiless; with sarcasm and innuendo and vicious rumors; with yes-men who shield you from the truth and, more often, implacable adversaries who expose you to falsehood; with inertia and with hysteria; and with a lot more. Leadership means to put up with all this, and yet to hold fast to your principles despite all; to draw strength from your supporters—and even from your critics.

This has been the policy which our Yeshiva has followed for itself for one century—and **בע"ה** will do so for at least another one. We did not become what we are by timidity and fear of criticism.

I have been connected with Yeshiva for 40 of its 100 years, ever since I came here as an 18-year-old student. I know something of its previous history. The way that Drs. Revel and Belkin chose for us was often beset with pain and controversy. It was never easy. We were told by Jews who were authorities in the world of secular education that "yeshiva" and "university" were antonyms, that they could never coexist in one institution. And the rivals of Yeshiva in certain non-Orthodox camps which today speak so admiringly of "pluralism," sneered at us, mocked us, wrote our obituaries. We were too Orthodox, too East European, too Old World.

At the same time, other yeshivot refused to recognize our existence—they too believed that "yeshiva" and "university" could never live together, conveniently ignoring the tradition of



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יפיפיתו של יפת באהלי שם. For them, we were too Modern, too American, too New World. To this day, at a wedding or ח"ו at a funeral where our people mingle with those of certain other yeshivot, the others will be announced as the Rosh Yeshiva of this or that yeshiva, this or that Kollel, this or that Beis Medrash. But our Roshei Yeshiva, distinguished גדולי ישראל and גאונים of this, the Mother of American yeshivot, are introduced with all kinds of devious euphemisms—the Rav of such and such a shtetl, the תלמיד of such and such גאון, the son-in-law of such and such גדול—but rarely as ראשי ישיבה בישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן.

Yet the greatness of our Yeshiva is that we kept to our דרך with strength and with courage, that we conducted ourselves with individual and institutional dignity, that we refused to reciprocate petty insults and trade invectives, but continued to relate to others according to the principles of כבוד התורה and כבוד הבריות. This will continue to be our policy—one from which we will not be deterred, neither by flattery nor by threats. ידע כי יש נביא בישראל.

**There is only one way: straight ahead. Only with such firmness of method wedded to sacredness of purpose will the world know כי יש נביא בישראל.**

What is true for Yeshiva as an institution is true for each of you as individuals. Only a few years ago, the rabbi of a significant congregation in this city was beset by problems and attacked viciously for a ruling he had made in good faith. He was pressured and buffeted by all sides.

Because he was not a מוסמך of our yeshiva, he asked me to introduce him to our revered mentor, the Rav שליט"א. I did so. It was פרשת ויצא. The Rav heard him, thought silently for a few minutes, and said to him the following: "Our Sidra ends with

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the words **ויעקב הלך לדרכו ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלקים**, and Jacob went upon his way, and he was met by the angels of God. That is my advice to you: Go upon your own **דרך**, your own way, without looking right or left; and if you do so with sincerity and truth and honor, with the conviction that this is what Torah demands of you at this time and in this place, then you will be met by **מלאכי אלקים**.

That wisdom is worth sharing with you, our newest **מוסמכים**. If you are to be leaders, if your goal is the honorable one of **ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלקים**, then don't be overly concerned with what others say or press you to say; don't pander to the Left and don't cower before the Right. In Torah there is neither left nor right—if your "way" is **על פי** **לא תסור ממה**, then what follows is **התורה אשר יורוך**. **שיגידו לך ימין ושמאל**. There is only one way: straight ahead. Only with such firmness of method wedded to sacredness of purpose will the world know **כי יש נביא בישראל**.

I hope I have not frightened you with this charge of leadership. Truth to tell, it is a hard, often painful way. But remember: nothing is easy. The "**חזון איש**" writes wistfully, in one of his letters, **כל הדברים חמורים ודבר קל כמעט שלא פגשתי**, everything comes with difficulty, and I have rarely encountered anything that is easy. If it was so for him, how much more so for us!

It is a mission that you dare not take lightly, but of which you must not despair. It will raise you up even as it wears you down. It will both exhilarate you and exhaust you. It will inspire you and scare you. You have chosen it—and it has chosen you. **לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ואי אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה**.

You will not, in the exercise of your rabbinic leadership, avoid mistakes. But if you approach your tasks with a stout heart and deep commitment to **הקב"ה** and to Torah; if you are frank enough to admit an error and correct it; if you are bold enough to stand up to others in the name of what you know to be right and proper and truthful—you will ultimately bask in the warmth of knowing that you brought to bear in your communities the presence of the contemporary counterpart of a

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נביא בישראל; that you made a genuine and lasting contribution to reducing the manifold leprosies of our ailing people and diseased times; that you did your share in effecting a קידוש השם; that you made it possible to be met by מלאכי אלקים in the form of children you sent to yeshivot, adults who deepened their life of Torah and Mitzvot, of a community endowed with a new and proper respect for Torah Judaism, of other young people whom you directed to our Yeshiva and who will some day take their place as מוסמים and as leaders.

Such rewards are enough to give you the courage to survive all the tests and rigors and pains of leadership. Not all of you have all the requisite personal attributes for great leadership, but each of you has some capacity for moving ahead and inspiring others to follow you, whether in the congregational rabbinate, in חינוך, or in any area of עבודת הקודש. Take that capacity, great or small, work on it, develop it, and express it להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה.

The mantle now is given to you as the dawn breaks on a new century for our beloved Yeshiva. You are not only our alumni, but our pride and joy, our emissaries to the Jewish community.

Wear the mantle, the mantle of the prophet who wanted all the world to know that יש נביא בישראל, with distinction, with resolve, with hope.

And may the רבש"ע grant you and your families the years, the health, the strength, some day to pass it on to a new generation, and another one after that, עד ביאת הגואל במהרה בימינו אמן.

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