

Rabbi Dov Linzer's Remarks on his son's bar mitzvah  
Shabbat, April 10, 2010 – Parshat Shemini

Dear Kasriel:

Well, the day of your Bar Mitzvah has finally arrived. It's been a long time coming, with much preparation, anxiety, anticipation, and hard work, and now it is finally here. And what an amazing job you did. You read your *leining* expertly. But more than that, we all felt the love and passion that you brought to your *kriat haTorah*, your Torah reading. Mommy and I – and everyone gathered here - could not be happier for you, or more proud of you, than we are today, and you should be so proud of yourself.

Kasriel - today you have made an important transition; you have become a bar mitzvah, you have assumed the responsibility of a Torah life and of the mitzvot. And your parsha, parshat Shmini, also opens with a day that marks a transition into a new role of responsibility.

For seven days, Aharon and his sons prepared for their new role as kohanim, to serve in the newly built mishkan. For seven days they brought the same sacrifices and repeated the same rituals. And Moshe served as the kohen during this time, modeling for them how they would act when they became kohanim. And then, as we read today, the eighth day arrived. The day that Aharon would become a kohen in his own right. This day did not come easily. Not easily for Aharon and not easily for Moshe. Aharon was afraid to step forward – “קרב אל המזבח” – “Draw close to the altar” Moshe prods him – indicating that Aharon initially hesitated to take that fateful step forward. And it was not easy for Moshe to step back either. Every day leading up to this eighth day, Moshe would do the ritual slaughtering of the animals, and the Torah describes this with one word, וישחט. But that word has a special trop sign on it - a שלשלה – a trop which shows the extreme hesitation on Moshe's part - and here is how it's read: וישחט. Just be grateful that wasn't in this week's parsha!

Just as Aharon was not quite ready to take on his new role, Moshe was not quite ready to step back from his special role of working with Aharon and preparing him for this day. And even though Moshe knew that he could continue to play a role in the mishkan – שחיטה כשרה בזר – somehow after today it wouldn't be quite the same. And somehow for Aharon, although the sacrifices of today, the eighth day, were largely the same as those of the previous seven days, something was significantly different. For starting today it wasn't just practice, starting today it was for real.

Kasriel, it has been hard for me knowing that after today, I would be stepping back somewhat. That period of the מילואים, of the working together and the training that has lead up to today, has been so special to me. Some of the happiest times I have had this last year were when we would spend time learning together, davening each day together, and – most recently – putting on tfillin together. Seeing your commitment to Torah and mitzvot - when you would respond “Sure, Daddy,” whenever I would remind you that it

was our time to learn, (or when I would forget about our learning and you would have to remind me!), seeing your hard work and determination – to learn the davening without a community of daveners, or to struggle to learn how to tighten the tfillin, how to keep them tight, and how to get used to their awkward feel – seeing these things each day touched me and inspired me. I have deeply treasured this last year we have spent together preparing for this day, and hesitate now to step back. I know that I will, in some capacity, continue in this role after today, but I also know that it will be subtly and significantly different.

And for you, Kasriel, I know that your initial response a year ago was to recoil. The idea of *leining* for an entire congregation, let alone making a presentation as you so beautifully did just minutes ago – this was all quite scary for you. You had to be gently encouraged - קרב אל המזבה. But take that step forward you did, and we are all bursting with pride. For what you, Kasriel, are all about is looking your challenges in the face, and – with all the anxiety and concern that they may provoke – attacking them with hard work, with discipline, with determination. With the help of the so many wonderful people that Mommy mentioned, you have gained tremendous understanding of yourself, and you know how to advocate for yourself, and how to use strategies to cope with difficult situations, and to confront life's challenges.

So now you have done it – you have read your parasha, parshat Shmini, and entered into your own figurative eighth day, this day when you fully assume your Torah obligations. You are strongly committed to Torah, to mitzvot, and to halakha. You relate to the concrete, detailed nature of halakha and you are drawn to the life of discipline and a life of structure.

At the end of parashat Shmini, the Torah describes the task of the kohanim: להבדיל בין הטמא לטהור ובין החיה הנאכלת ובין החיה אשר לא תאכל – to distinguish between the pure and impure, and between the animals that may be eaten and the animals which may not be eaten. This work, of noticing the obvious and less obvious characteristics of the world around us, and putting things in their appropriate categories – in short, arranging the world around us – this is what you Kasriel excel in. This is the world of halakhic Judaism – the kosher and the non-kosher, the obligations, and the exemptions, and in this way we participate in the work that God did when God created the world, separating the light from the darkness, the water from the earth, bringing a system to organize and order the world.

So, Kasriel, you now have stepped forward, have taken on this role, and I, your father, must take a step back. While you have taken a step forward, you are not alone. Your mother – whom I love so much, who has made not only this bar mitzvah possible, but whose love, dedication, and tenacity has ensured that you – together with your brother Netanel – have always received the education and support that was right for you and who you are, your mother whose love, insight, and wisdom guides us every day - your mother will always be there for you. And your brother – Netanel – who is your best friend in the world and you his, whom you share so much with and who loves you more than anything – he will always be there for you. And your amazing teachers, therapists, religious

teachers, rabbis, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, relatives and friends – they will always be there for you. And I, your father, Daddy, I will always be there for you, and we will continue to learn together and to grow together.

And so we read in today's parsha that after Aharon completed his initiation and assumed his role as a kohen, that he lifted up his hands and blessed the people. And so, now, you – as a full member of the Jewish community - will begin to share your blessings, your gifts, your talents with the Jewish people. But, the full blessing did not come through Aharon's hands alone. For it is after Aharon's blessing that we read: ויבא משה ואהרן אל אהל מועד ויצאו ויברכו את העם וירא כבוד ה' אל כל העם – and Moshe and Aharon entered into the Tabernacle, and they came out and blessed the people, and then – and only then – did God's glory appear to the entire people. And so, Kasriel, it is my blessing to you that you will share your blessings with the Jewish people, but that you and I will continue to enter into God's tent together, that we will continue to grow together, to learn together and to learn from each other together, and that we will both be blessed to help bring God's presence to the people.

Mazel Tov!