

Semikha Remarks
Rabbi Dov Linzer
June 2008

My dear students,
Max, Charlie, Alex, Mike, Yerachmiel, and David,

Today, as you become rabbis, you begin to fulfill your dreams as teachers and leaders of the Jewish people. You will begin to build and shape communities according to the values of the Torah. How should such communities be built?

In פרשת במדבר, which we read yesterday, the Torah tells us just how to construct a community that has God and Torah at its center. God's command, ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם, Make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst – is now given true shape as the Children of Israel depart from the Mount Sinai and begin to move and settle as a camp, as a community. The Sanctuary, God's presence, lives in the center of the camp, and the tribes are arranged, each with its distinct position, each with its banner, around the Sanctuary.

What we learn, first of all, is that even when we depart Mount Sinai, even as we live in the larger world, outside of our shuls and our schools, we must remain oriented towards God's presence, directing our actions towards God, and bringing Torah into the larger world. But we also learn that to have God in our midst, we do not need to ever enter the Temple, it is the orientation that is critical. Some people will seek to enter the Temple on a regular basis, others may only enter in once a year, or perhaps never, but each one of these people has God in his or her midst.

We further learn that to be one people is not to be a homogenous mass; that unity is not to be confused with uniformity. True unity, creating a bonded, cohesive community, comes from respecting differences – איש על דגלו – each tribe with its own uniqueness, its own distinctiveness preserved. Some are on the left, some on the right, some North, some South. What held them together was a shared commitment to respect each other's boundaries, to value their דגלים, their diversity, and to exist together as one people with a shared orientation towards God's presence in their midst.

The final lesson is one of accessibility. True, a small number of impure people were temporarily excluded from the Sanctuary during their period of impurity, and the Levites comprised the innermost ring around the Sanctuary. Nevertheless, any person had the ability to enter the Levite camp and to even enter the Sanctuary itself. All the people participated in the making of the Sanctuary and all the people had access to it and a part in it. Not only was the Sanctuary accessible, but the leadership was as well. Moses' tent was no longer outside of the camp, but in the very center of it, open to all who would come. Only in such a camp, where every individual understood that he and she counted, that they had a right to engage and a right to be heard, could those who were impure say

to Moshe, למשה, בני ישראל, במועדו בתוך בני ישראל, למשה יגרע שם אבינו מתוך משפחתו כי אין לו – “בן, תנה לנו אחוזה בתוך אחי אבינו” – why should we be excluded, why should we not be a part of the community – and only in a camp led by a true leader such as Moshe would the response be, not condemnation and silencing, but a humble bringing of their just concerns before God.

My dear students - You have been blessed to have been at a yeshiva that embodies these teachings – orientation, difference, and accessibility - and you have lived these teachings in your own lives. From El Salvador to Uri L’Tzedek, from helping the homeless to consoling the newly bereaved, you have embodied what it means to live a life in the larger world that is infused with God and Torah. In your powerful bonding as a class, despite your hashkafic and political differences, you demonstrate that true unity comes from a respecting of difference. And throughout your four years you have had modeled for you a community of welcoming and a leadership of accessibility – a leadership that solicits input and is responsive to suggestions, a leadership that embraces student collaboration and participation.

David, Yerachmiel, Mike, Alex, Charlie, and Max,

It is now your responsibility to begin to shape communities according to these values. This is no small task. Much of the rabbinic leadership today believes that the only Jews who count are those who act within a narrow definition, a definition that is getting narrower each day. It is a leadership that is fearful of diversity, that believes that unity can come only if all Jews act and believe in exactly the same way – their way. Your leadership will be a different one. You will spread God’s Torah and its teachings, and at the same time you will teach a respect for all Jews, that even Jews who never enter the Sanctuary can have God in their midst. You will have a different vision of Klal Yisrael. You will teach a unity that is fused by a shared orientation, not by sameness, a unity that values and respects difference. In a world where small-mindedness and intolerance is rife, in a world where Jewish identity and shared values are elusive concepts, this is a Herculean challenge indeed, but in the striving to achieve it, you will do much to transform the Jewish community and our respect for one another.

Finally, in your role as rabbis, you will create welcoming and accessible communities – communities that build bridges rather than walls, communities that reach out to those who are marginalized and those who have been excluded. And at a time when rabbinic leadership is, as a whole, becoming more authoritarian and unbending, you will embody a leadership that has pride for the Torah and the tradition that it represents, but that is also humble and accessible, that seeks participation and collaboration. You will be leaders who can admit your mistakes, and learn from them, and for this you will be respected and loved all the more.

Max, Charlie, Alex, Mike, Yerachmiel, and David,

This is your task, this is your leadership, these are your people. With God's help, you will succeed. עלה והצלה!