

2009 Semikha Remarks Rabbi Dov Linzer

My dear students,
Maurice, Ben, Kenny, Daniel, Steven, Ben, Drew, Michael, Benji, Devin, and Eric,

Today, as you become rabbis, you set out on your path as religious leaders for the Jewish people. What is the nature of this religious leadership?

The Torah, in yesterday's parsha, presents a form of leadership in the persons of כלב and יהושע. Men with courage to believe in the promise of God, despite the odds, and to defiantly stand up to those who would lead them to disaster. Men who had רוח אחרת עמו וימלא אחריו, a different spirit in them, men who followed after God. This, however, is not religious leadership, but political and lay leadership - to plan military strategies, to lead the people into battle, not to impart Torah, not to give religious guidance. As rabbis, you must work with your lay leadership, you must help them shape their leadership with a רוח אחרת, with Torah values, so they can see more than what is before their eyes, so that they are not led astray, so that they can see with a greater vision. But theirs is not *religious* leadership. Their path is not your path.

The Torah, also, recently described the path of the nazir. The nazir divorces himself from society, forswears wine, and lets his hair grow long, so that he can focus on his religious growth and connection to God. This is not the path of religious *leadership*. This is a path of self-serving religious growth, one that takes no responsibility for other people or for society. Even when the nazir serves the people, he does so in spite of his nezirut, not because of it. His deepest desire is to seclude himself, to free himself from such responsibility, so that he can focus on his own religiosity, on his own holiness. Do not be seduced by the life of the nazir. His is not a path of leadership. His path is not your path.

True religious leadership is to be found not in the model of כלב and יהושע, not in the example of the נזיר. No. True religious leadership is to be found in the כהן. His very name bespeaks his role. לכהן - to serve. His is a life of service. Of service to God – לכהן לה' – and whose service of God consists of his service to the Jewish people. The Talmud questions whether the כהנים are שלוחי דיהוה or שלוחי דיהוה, whether they serve God or serve the people. The truth is, the two are one – they serve God by serving the people.

The כהנים spent much time in the Temple, it is true, but they did not do so for their own selfish religiosity. The כהנים' charge was to sustain a holy space for the people, a place where God's presence could always be encountered, and to assist the people in their striving to connect to God in that holy space. Moreover, the majority of their time was spent outside the Temple. The כהנים were spread throughout the Land of Israel, bringing the holiness of the Temple and the Torah to the people. יורו משפטך ליעקוב ותורתך לישראל teaching God's laws to Jacob and God's Torah to Israel.

Indeed, immediately after the Mishkan was sanctified, and the Kohanim were dedicated to their service, 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 Tent of Meeting and they came out and they blessed the people, and the Glory of God appeared to the entire People. This is the true role of the Kohanim. To come out of the Temple and to bring the ברכה כהנים, the blessing of God and of the Torah, to all the people.

My dear students, *this* is your path. Create a sanctuary, a holy place, for people to go to encounter God. Be it the synagogue or the classroom, create and sustain a space where people can be inspired and edified, protected and supported. But do not rest there. Leave the security of this space, and go out and bring Torah, bring Kedusha to the people. Seek out all people, those who are close, and those who are distant, and, perhaps hardest of all, those who were close but have become distant. Spread God's Torah and God's blessing throughout the Jewish people.

Like the כהנים, be prepared to be with people even for the messy parts of their life. When they sin, and they come to you bearing their regret and their חטאת, their sin-offering, help them find their way back to a life of holiness. When they have illness, when they have their own form of physical or psychological צרעת, affliction, comfort them, console them, help them identify and name their problem, so that they can find healing and become whole. Like the כהנים, there is tremendous power in your actions and in your words. Always use them to heal, to elevate, and to inspire.

Know that to serve God by serving the people requires being honest with your responsibility to God and God's Torah. Never compromise your integrity or the Torah that you represent. Remember the famous statement of R. Yisrael Salanter, that a rabbi who fails to challenge his congregation is not worthy of being called a rabbi. But when you must challenge, do so with love and with grace. Remember the conclusion of that statement, that a rabbi of whom people are afraid, is not worthy of being called a man.

Know, also, that to serve the people you must not neglect your own, personal serving of God. Never lose sight of your own religious growth, of your need to nurture your soul. You will serve God's people best when you yourself remain deeply connected to God and to Torah.

The כהנים spent five years focused on their own growth so that they could prepare to serve the people fully. You have spent the last 4 years learning Torah, growing in your *avodat Hashem*, and gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to become religious leaders. You have not just learned how to *act* like rabbis, how to play the role of a rabbi, but, like the kohanim, you have become transformed and sanctified in the process. As rabbis, you will become an embodiment of Torah, and an embodiment of Kedusha. To say this of a human being would be almost an act of sacrilege, but it finds its justification in a life of service, a life of כהונה.

Eric, Devin, Benji, Michael, Drew, Ben, Steven, Daniel, Kenny, Ben, and Maurice,
My dear students,

You are a class of 11 that among you has 4 כהנים. But, in fact, today you all become כהנים, as you now dedicate yourself to a life of קדושה that comes through כהונה, a life of holiness that is found through service. Although not a כהן myself, allow me to give you the ברכה כהנים, the blessing of the Kohanim, a blessing that I know that each of you – in his own distinct and unique way – will bring to the entire Jewish people.

יברכך ה' וישמרך; יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך; ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May God always shine God's countenance upon you and may you only go from strength to strength. Mazel Tov!