

Installation as Dean

October 21, 2007

Rabbi Dov Linzer

Thank you. I am deeply grateful to all of you who have come here today, and to the so many people who have been there for me. Please forgive me that I cannot thank all of you individually. As myself a person of the sandwich generation, I am blessed to have my father, Dr. Melvin Linzer, and my father-in-law here, Dr. Yitzchak Zlochower, here with me, and I am bursting with pride to have my sons here with me, Kasriel and Netanel Linzer. I would also like to thank my brothers Elliot and Jeremy for coming here and for their support. Thank you Devorah, *ahuva li kinafshi*, for always being there for me and the kids, for always sharing your wisdom, your sensitivity, and your insight into people. Thank you, Rabbi Love, Rabbi Katz, and Rabbi Helfgot for giving of yourselves at all times and for always being there to turn to whenever I needed help. Thank you Rabbi Blanchard and Dr. Friedman for your insightful and expert help whenever difficult and sensitive issues at the yeshiva arose. To my *talmidim*, present and past, now rabbis, to Oksana, to Ruthie, to R. Levy and R. Berman, to all the office staff, thank you all for all you give to me and to the yeshiva every day. And to our board, to our supporters, and to everyone here, thank you for your support, for your enthusiasm and for your steadfastness. And finally, thank you, Rabbi Weiss, for your patient mentorship, which has enabled me to grow as Rosh HaYeshiva and now to assume the title of Dean. I can truly say that none of this would have been possible without you.

Being named Dean in addition to Rosh HaYeshiva is a great honor and a great responsibility. As Rosh HaYeshiva these last nine years, I have been responsible for shaping and overseeing the Torah and Halakha learning and curriculum, a deeply rewarding undertaking, and one which I could not have accomplished without the help of my fellow rabanim and colleagues. Now, as I become Dean, I will be responsible for all parts of the curriculum, the Torah, the pastoral, and the professional, for the learning in the Yeshiva and for the training in the Rabbinical School. I would thus like to use this opportunity to reflect on what, in my view, is the ideal Orthodox rabbi.

First a foremost, a rabbi must be infused with Torah knowledge and with Torah values. He must be a *talmid chacham* in the classic sense, fluent in Gemara, Rishonim, Shulkhan Arukh, and Poskim. But this does not suffice. For such learning often nurtures the intellect but not necessarily the spirit. A rabbi must engage Torah in all its breadth and richness. He must study Tanakh and *machshava*, Chasidut, and *mussar*, *Aggada* and Jewish philosophy. Torah, in its broadest sense, must nurture his *neshama* and shape his vision. Such a rabbi will be able to provide religious guidance to individuals and to his community that is not narrow and rigid, but Torah true, true to the richness and complexity of Torah. Through his sermons and classes, through his shaping of lifecycle events, and through his interactions and discussions, such a rabbi will touch peoples' minds and souls. He will teach the Talmud in all its intricacies and halakha in all its details, and he will teach a Torah that inspires, a Torah that opens hearts and minds, not a Torah that shrinks the soul and dampens the spirit.

A rabbi is not only a teacher of Torah and Torah values, but also a *posek*. His smicha is Yoreh Yoreh – the authorization to give Halakhic rulings. He is deeply rooted in halakha and the Halakhic process. He has studied these areas in depth, from the Gemara through the Rishonim, Shulkhan Arukh and poskim. He knows not only bottom line positions, but the unfolding of the Halakhic process, the different *shitot* and the weight that they carry, and ways in which poskim have grappled with the application of pristine codified law to the messiness of human circumstance. He knows that to *pasken* is an art and not a science, that it is a constant balancing

between sensitivity and responsiveness to the one asking the question on the one hand and the rule of the law, its blacks, its whites, and its grays, on the other hand. He knows when he can say yes, and he knows when he must say no.

A rabbi must also be a religious caregiver, providing psychological, emotional, and spiritual sustenance. Helping people at times of transition and crisis, when they are sick, or when a loved one is sick, or just to be there for someone. They must do this with sensitivity, with training and self-awareness, so that the help that they provide is of true and lasting benefit.

Finally, a rabbi is also – perhaps primarily – a religious leader. It is a religious leadership that I – that all of us at Chovevei Torah – believe must be guided by a desire to build bridges, not walls, by a love not only for Judaism, but also for kol am Yisrael and for kol yoshvei tevel. It is a leadership that understands that a modern Orthodoxy cannot only ask what we can gain from the outside world, without also asking what we must give to the outside world.

Some of the most important leadership that a rabbi can provide will be exactly in these areas of religious and communal policy – what is our responsibility to the victims of terror in Israel? What is our responsibility to the victims of genocide in Darfur? What is our responsibility to the local homeless? How do we allow for greater participation of women in the synagogue and in communal leadership? What type of interaction do we have with the non-Orthodox synagogues and rabbis? What type of interaction do we have with leaders of other religions? How do we deal with intermarried couples in our synagogue? With homosexual individuals or couples in our synagogues? These are all questions of the greatest gravity, and they shape the religious, ethical, and social character of the community. A rabbi must provide mature, balanced, and thoughtful leadership in these areas and more. He must be guided by a deep respect for all people, and by the value of inclusiveness, and yet he must be careful not to do something that would compromise communal identity and integrity. How to shape an inclusive community that is true to itself and its own identity is perhaps one of the largest challenges that a rabbi – certainly an open Orthodox rabbi – has today.

This brings us to perhaps to the most pressing question that we must face. Is it possible that a rabbi guided by such principles of inclusiveness, of *ahavat am Yisrael* and kol yoshvei tevel, might overstep the bounds? Might cross a line that should not be crossed? It is. As Chazal tell us, *ahava mikalkelet et hashura*. And our students must learn that ahava must be joined with *yirah*, and that *rachamim* must be balanced with *din*. There are limits and there are boundaries which cannot be crossed. But if such a danger exists, is it worth the risk? Would we not be safer to reject all this openness and to protect our boundaries? Would it not be safer if we taught our students to refer all serious questions, rather than to make decisions by themselves?

These types of concerns are real. But to give them inordinate weight is to sacrifice the Torah values that we hold dear, values of *kavod habriyot*, of *tzelem E-lohim*, of *halakhta bi'drakhav*, values of *rachamim* and *anava*, values of *pikuach nefesh* and of the entire world of *mitzvoth ben-adam-lichavero*. To focus on these boundary concerns and let them overly determine our path is to become a religion of fear. We must give these issues the full weight and gravity that they deserve, but we must also stop looking backwards at old fears and old battles, and must begin to look forwards to current challenges and new opportunities. We cannot only ask “what if”, we must also ask “what could be?”

It is a dismaying fact that Orthodoxy, even Modern Orthodoxy, has allowed such fear to dominate its psyche and worldview, and has bought in knowingly or unknowingly to the ethos of da'as Torah. Rather than live in a world of ambiguity and grays, we run to a world of absolute answers,

a world of black and white. Rather than trusting ourselves to make difficult decisions, rather than even trusting our local rabbi to deal with the complex human and communal issues that is his role and responsibility, we turn and we ask that he turns to some capital-P *posek* to make the decision for us and for him. We are so concerned with what if some boundary line might be crossed that we are willing to sacrifice our Torah true values and we are willing to infantilize ourselves and our local rabbis.

I, for one, believe that we must treat our rabbis and laity as adults. We must trust our rabbis to make decisions that are within their learning, their training and ability, and we must trust them to consult when necessary and we must trust them to know their limits, and to refer to a greater authority when necessary. We must reject the perverted perception that rabbis can only rule based on a perceived “*mesorah*” which in truth is nothing more than one or two generations old. Is this really the Halakhic process? A rabbi handing down rulings from his rabbi? Here, at least, is how Rav Moshe Feinstein describes the process -

אלא כפי שנראה להחכם אחרי שעיין כראוי לברר ההלכה בש"ס ובפוסקים כפי כוחו בכובד ראש
וביראה מהשי"ת ונראה לו שכן הוא פסק הדין שהוא האמת להוראה ומחוייב להורות כן...

Rather what appears to be the truth to the sage after he has investigated the matter appropriately, clarifying the halakha based on the Talmud and the decisors according to his ability, approaching the issue with gravity and fear of God. [Once he does this] and it appears to him that the ruling is as he concludes it to be – this is truth as far as halakha is concerned, and he must rule accordingly...

It is this trust in individuals, in their expertise, and in their judgment, that guides not only how a community should approach its rabbi, but also how a rabbi should relate to the members of his community. He should not withhold information or misrepresent halakha because he does not trust his community to handle the truth. He must value the expertise and the voices of each and every member of his community. He must not only be sympathetic to his congregants and their needs, but if he is truly to respect them as they respect him, then he must include their voices in his *psak* and his religious leadership, and include them in his decision process as much as possible.

This is the type of rabbi we are trying to create. Deeply rooted and nurtured by Torah and halakha, one who teaches and inspires, one who renders *psak* with full sensitivity to the human being and his or her condition, one who provides religious and emotional comfort and aid, and one who provides a true, inclusive religious leadership, a leadership which is non-authoritarian, which respects the expertise and the voice of every member of the community as adults, and where his own expertise and his own leadership is respected in return.

As is well known by all here, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah excels in educating its students in all of these areas. We have succeeded in doing so to a large degree, I believe, because we – the *rebbeim*, the faculty, the staff, and the students - have been guided exactly by this type of mutual and reciprocal respect. A lesson that I learned early on from Rabbi Weiss is to surround yourself with expert people and to step back and let them do what they do best. Rabbi Love, Rabbi Katz, Rabbi Helfgot are profound *talmidei chachamim*, and each one gives unhesitatingly of himself and of his tremendous *yediat haTorah*. But what has made our Torah education truly succeed has been our ability to respect our distinctive talents and expertise. Our ability to turn to each other for help, to not feel threatened by another's expertise, but enriched by it, has allowed us to provide a multi-faceted and multi-vocal Torah to our students. Rabbi Blanchard's philosophical and theological background has given him the unique ability to shape the religious culture of the

yeshiva and to teach a methodology of approaching text religiously, and has been critical to nurturing the religious outlook of the *talmidim*. Ruthie Simon's natural ability to connect to students and to juggle dozens of tasks while putting out fires and attending to daily details has created order out of chaos, and has been essential in shaping the student culture. Rabbi Chaim Marder brings to the yeshiva his unique talent in shaping the professional development program, in teaching homiletics and synagogue life, and in drawing on lay and rabbinic professionals to teach everything from pedagogy to leadership skills. And when it comes to pastoral counseling, there is no one who can compare to Dr. Michelle Friedman, who shares not only her own extensive knowledge and experience, but who, likewise, brings in other experts to educate in their respective fields of expertise, and who oversees the process group leaders, doing what they do best, and helping students understand themselves and gain insight into their interactions with others and as a group. And finally, the students themselves have been and continue to be significant contributors in the shaping of the program. Some of our best programs have developed as a result of attending to students' concerns and suggestions, of having a curriculum committee and including students' voices in our curricular process.

It is my good fortune to be able to work with such amazing and talented people. My job, now as Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean, will be to allow and encourage these individuals, and all the others who teach at YCT, to continue to do what they do best - to oversee and integrate their efforts, to bring all the pieces together to create a glorious whole. For it is when we continue to open to new ideas and new voices that our program and our training continues to get better and better. And it is when we are able to bring everyone's expertise together, that an amazing synergy occurs. The type of learning that you all participated in today is a sample of the type of rabbinical education that takes place at Chovevei Torah on an ongoing basis. When community rabbis and *halakhists*, educators and psychologists sit at a table together, listen to each other, and reflect and integrate each other's insights and contributions, then we have taught students what a true, sensitive, respectful rabbinic leadership can be. Students may well struggle with how to best balance all these voices, how to be true to halakha and responsive to the human condition, when to act as a pastoral counselor and when to act as a Halakhic advisor - but it is in such struggle that true leadership is born. Our excellence in each of our disciplines – Torah, Halakha, Pastoral Counseling, and Professional Development – has made us a rabbinical school with a curriculum to be envied. But it has been our openness to revise and refine, to listen to all voices and incorporate them in our thinking, and to bring all the disciplines in conversation with each other, that has made our program the gold standard of rabbinical school training. As Dean and as Rosh HaYeshiva, I will give my maximal efforts to maintaining this excellence, and to helping all of the amazing people that I am blessed to work with to bring their efforts together to help train the next generation of Orthodox rabbinic leaders.

Thank you all for coming and for your continued support. We could not have succeeded without you.