



Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony
June 17, 2019
Opening Remarks from
Rabba Sara Hurwitz, President & Co-Founder

Thank you, Abigail.

This has been the year of hagba, of lifting up the Torah. Last year, I announced the inauguration of Maharat's synagogue skills class in honor of past board chair, Ariel Groveman Weiner, taught by the talented Rabba Wendy Amsellem. Rabba Wendy took our students through the halakhic source material for the many rituals we perform in synagogue: like receiving aliyot, gabbaing, and hagbah. Then, using the sefer Torah that we just officially welcomed into our space, gifted to us by Tova Reich (and please read the story of our Torah in your programs on your seats) we practiced those skills. You see, it is our philosophy that whether women perform these rituals on a daily or weekly basis or not, they must know them and experience them. And so, we all practiced doing hagbah. Then, in our first ever pre-bat mitzvah literacy program, our new Torah was used once again, to teach 5th and 6th grade girls about the rituals that they are taught to revere and love, and then they too, with tremendous enthusiasm, practiced doing hagbah.

It occurs to me that the ritual of hagbah is an apt metaphor to capture the achievements that we are celebrating here tonight. You see the origin of hagbah can be found in the book of Nechemia (8:5). After the Jewish people returned from the Babylonian exile they experienced a religious revival, where Ezra read from the Torah, after which it says: "Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people..." (Nechemiah 8:5).

יִפְתָּח עֲזָרָא הַסֵּפֶר לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעָם

In our tenth year, Maharat and the community writ large is also experiencing a religious revival. Not so long ago, the torah was only lifted, studied, and the laws within were only publicly practiced by men. Women were not found in religious public spaces. Today, the Jewish revival is in no small part due to the influx of women's voices who study it, teach it, and shape it.

About the ritual of hagbah, Masechet Sofrim (Sofrim 14:14) states that the Torah should be raised and shown in all directions "because it is a mitzvah for all of the men and women to see the writing." שמצוה לכל האנשים ולנשים לראות הכתב ולכרוע

I look out into our community and am so proud of the Torah that our 26 graduates are bringing to everyone - to men and women. האנשים ולנשים

In synagogues, schools, hospitals, and Jewish organizations, you are teaching a torah that is lofty, grounded in excellence, and accessible to all people. And now, eight more graduates are going out into the world to share their Torah- Rebecca, Jenna, Shani, Marianne, Tali, Devorah, Aliza, and Miriam: your torah is filled with depth, demands excellence, and is filled with light. The world needs you, and I am so grateful the Torah that is inside of you will now be shared with the many talmidim that you will inspire every day.



I also look out and see our emerging scholars, graduating high school students, Gabrielle Buch, Yonit Krebs, and Clara Sandler, who were selected from a group of 24 excellent applicants, for their dedication and commitment to Torah, leadership and spiritual growth. We are proud that Maharat can lift up your Torah, and support your continued growth as scholars and leaders. And, I look out and am grateful for the Torah of my incredible faculty, lead by Rosh Hayeshiva Rabbi Jeff Fox, the wisdom of my administrative team, the support of our board, the courage of Rabbi Sperber, and the Torah of Rav Avi that permeates everything. And to you Rav Hefter, for bringing the Torah of Israel to our Kollel students. Thank you for being here. And this year, our Beit Midrash has been lifted even higher, with the compassionate and brilliant one of kind Torah of our new Dean, Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower. You have all lifted me and this institution and taken it to greater heights. And tonight, we give honor to one more person who has lifted Maharat up to tremendous heights.

The Gemara (Megillah 32a) cites Rav Yehoshua ben Levi who says that after the Torah reading, the most distinguished member of the community is called up to receive the dual honor of Hagbah and Gelila. Zelda Stern, if the students and graduates of Maharat represent our Torah in all its diversity and spiritual depth, you, Zelda, are our Magbiah, you are the person who lifts them up.

Now we know that Ashkenazim lift up the scroll at the end of the Torah reading service, while Sefardim lift the Torah before the reading even begins. The Sefardi custom is fascinating, implying that the person doing Hagbah must have the vision and foresight to lift up the Torah before the story, before the words have even been heard.

Like the Sefardi custom of lifting the Torah early, you Zelda, had the vision and foresight, before the story of Maharat had been told, to elevate our students by helping them seed their positions, ensuring that money would never be the excuse that a synagogue or institution give to not hire women with Semikha. You recognized that communities may need help as they too took a risk to create positions for women in clergy. You, Zelda, understood that in order for the world to see the treasures- the gift that these women all had, you needed to elevate them, and put their talents on display. You have so far helped create and subsidize positions for 12 or more graduates- many of whom are here in your honor. . And you have ensured that they are paid appropriately. You knew that the funding must be time-limited, so that after a few years communities would need to take on the full responsibility for supporting women in clergy positions. Because of you, countless people have been impacted by Maharat; I have heard members say people they can no longer imagine their synagogue without female clergy.

But you didn't just lift these women up, you have nurtured them, mentored them, visited their communities. You have celebrated their accomplishments, and cried with them in their challenges. Just one of many many examples: Upon learning that Dasi would be opening the South Philadelphia Shteibel, you used your Philadelphia connections on her behalf, even inviting her to join you as your guest at a local yeshiva high school dinner -- though it was only days after the end of Shloshim for Stanley Z"L when you weren't sure you wanted to attend such a public gala, you rose to the occasion so as not to miss the opportunity to introduce Dasi in person to potential local supporters and congregants.



And Zelda, you have let us, your extended family of Maharat lift you up as well. We have been so blessed to witness your and Stanley's fairytale relationship. You let us in, standing next to you, as we watched him slowly leave this world, with the same grace, dignity and kindness with which he lived his life. Stanley was your greatest champion, lifting you up, as you committed over the years to lift us up. The love and care that our students and your fellow board members feel for you is captured in a book of letters that have been gathered and which I will present to you in a few moments.

Our mefarshim teach that that the person who lifts the Torah raises not just the scroll, but elevates all who are present.

Zelda, the work you have done in our community has elevated all of us. I am personally so grateful for your mentorship. For your ability to see what others could not. For the ways in which you have lifted not only our graduates, students, board and countless community members who have been inspired by Maharat, but how you have lifted me up as well.

So friends, I want to ask you all to please rise as I call our magbiah up to offer words of bracha that will surely lift our students up even higher as they go on their way, **Ta'amod Zelda Rachel bat Malka Devorah v Zvi Hirsch, hamagbiah**