



Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony
June 17, 2019
Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

Our forefather Yaakov has just left his home. He is alone and afraid. As the day grows darker, he sets up camp for the night, falls asleep and has a dream. He sees a ladder with its base in the ground and its top ascending to the heavens, and behold! There are angels of G-d ascending and descending the ladder, and there is G-d before him, offering him a message of protection.

The gemara in Chullin 91b explains what the angels are doing: עולין ומסתכלין בדיוקנו של מעלה ויורדין ; ומסתכלין בדיוקנו של מטה ; the angels go up the ladder to see the image of Yaakov as it is engraved on G-d's Throne of Glory, and then descend to earth to see Yaakov as he is now. In Heaven, they see an image of a holy, perfect Yaakov. Then they come down the ladder and they see Yaakov as he is at the moment, someone who has just deceived his father and brother, stolen the blessing, and arrived at a mountain of G-d without even sensing its holiness. Breishit Rabbah comments, "up above they found his picture engraved as Israel glorifying God, they came down and found him fast asleep." The angels are so bothered by the difference between what Yaakov could be, and what he is, that they wish to harm him --but G-d protects the sleeping Yaakov. As Rav Hirsch comments, G-d says - you are angels, you only see what is in front of you. But I am YKVK, the G-d who is beyond time: I was, I am, and I will be. I see the Yaakov who is lying here. But I also see in the person sleeping below who he can be in the future.

Many of the women here have had dreams that seemed all but impossible. We wanted to be talmidot chachamim, wise and deeply learned. We saw the opportunities that were available to men to advance their Torah learning, and we cried over the chasm between where we were and where we wanted to be. And then we experienced the power of YKVK in our own lives, the G-d who sees beyond where we are to where we will be, and helps us reach our potential. We merited to live in a time when passionate, committed leaders started building institutions of higher learning for women, like Maharat, so that we could begin to access the Torah scholarship we had dreamed of.

Throughout my life, I have also tried to build ladders, to teach and provide opportunities for others to experience the great joy of Torah study. Their obstacles may be that they did not grow up studying Torah, or that they were taught in a way that felt destructive or dismissive of who they were, or that they had physical differences, or that as girls and women there were no structures in place for them to advance in their studies. I am grateful to build ladders for them, as others have built ladders for me.

Baruch shehecheyanu v'kiyeman v'higyanu lazman hazeh.