



**Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony**  
**June 17, 2019**  
**Opening Remarks from**  
**Zelda R. Stern**  
**Board Member, Maharat Mentor, Inaugural Funder**

A little over 10 years ago, Rabba Sara Hurwitz asked to meet with me to discuss funding for a Yeshiva she and Rabbi Avi Weiss wanted to create. We met at my apartment where Rabba Sara explained their dream of creating this Yeshiva, which would educate, ordain and prepare Orthodox Jewish women to serve in communities throughout the world.

After listening for awhile, I said, “I don’t know if this is going to work out”.

Friends, this is not what a visionary and fundraiser wants to hear. No.

Rabba Sara asked, “Why isn’t it going to work out?”

So I explained. For many years, I had seen Orthodox Jewish women serving in rabbinical positions, especially in shuls. They were given designations such as Congregational Intern or Community Scholar. And they were true pioneers and trailblazers. They taught classes, gave sermons, counseled, and answered halakhic questions.

But there was no way for them to advance. There was no career path.

These women were hired often without their shuls and communities having been sufficiently prepared for their arrival and their work, though I give great credit to the rabbis who hired them. Their job descriptions were often ill defined. Their salaries were poor. They lacked a cohort of peers to share experiences and Torah, to nurture each other, to lend support. They had no female mentors. Funding was insufficient. They were lonely, sometimes feeling as if they had been thrown into the lion’s den.

They had no rabbinical credentials, no recognized title, no semikha.

They were hired, but not supported. They were often dependent on one person for their position and their salary.

Over fifteen years ago, I began what I called The Parsonage Project, where over a period of 8 months I interviewed Orthodox women in leadership positions to determine if they were receiving a parsonage allowance — an important economic benefit which involves deductions for housing expenses. The interviews with these women turned into meetings of distress and dismay, as woman after woman told me of her feelings of pessimism and often despair about numerous aspects of her job, not only of her inability to claim a parsonage allowance.

One woman NOT in a shul setting was a highly talented leader of a Jewish organization, who was serving in a rabbinical role. Her predecessor, who performed the same work as she, was a male rabbi, and he had been claiming a parsonage allowance. Because this woman did not have a title, and her organization would not vouch for her, she could not claim the parsonage allowance. And she needed and deserved this financial benefit.



Soon after, she left the organization and the Jewish communal world entirely, disheartened and disillusioned.

And this is what I saw again and again with Orthodox Jewish women in leadership positions. Woman after woman left their shuls, their organizations, the schools in which they were teaching.

And we — all of us — were losing out on their scholarship, talents, compassion, wisdom, inspiration, and leadership skills.

This just about crushed my soul.

So I carried this painful history with me when Rabba Sara asked me to be her funding partner for the Yeshiva she and Rav Avi wanted to create. I shared with her what I had been seeing and living through for too many years.

I said, “If your Yeshiva doesn’t work out, that’s IT for the next generation. For why would any woman want to be a rabbi when all she has to do is look back and see that nothing worked out”.

Rabba Sara, ever the optimist, responded, “But it IS going to work out”.

So, I gave some money, but to be honest, not that much. Because I was skeptical, and I was beginning to despair of ever seeing an Orthodox woman be able to answer her calling — to grow, thrive, flourish, advance and succeed — and — be well financially compensated.

I held my breath for a few years.

And now...here we are 10 years later.

To Students, Alumnae, and the 8 women receiving Semikha now, you are working in and impacting dozens of Jewish organizations such as JCRCs, JCCs, and Hillels. You teach in day schools, afternoon Hebrew schools, yeshiva high schools, universities, in Yeshivot, and in adult education settings. You work in hospitals, nursing homes, group homes, prisons, shuls. You are developing your own communities in the United States and abroad.

You serve on the Vaad in various cities and you are members of the International Rabbinic Fellowship.

And one day you will serve, along with men, on Batei Din.

To you, the 8 women now graduating: Because of Yeshivat Maharat, you are credentialed; you have a title — one of YOUR choosing; you have Semikha.

Now you have career choices and career paths and opportunities for advancement that those who came before you did not have.

And you have each other. You are no longer alone in your journey. You support and nurture each other; you share Torah and you problem-solve. You help each other craft sermons, give input on teaching a



particular topic, or give suggestions on how to best work with the parents of a sick child. You cheer each other on. One colleague's success makes all of you happy. One colleague's difficulty concerns all of you.

And you have us: Faculty, Administration, Board members. You are now backed by a robust and growing institution that will be there for you, long after you graduate.

You are including and embracing heretofore forgotten or underserved populations: The LGBTQ community, people of color, new and changing families, those struggling with mental illness, physical differences, substance abuse. You collaborate with the other Jewish denominations and with people of other faiths.

Dear graduates, the road you are traveling is still fraught with obstacles. I do not naively think otherwise. You will continue to meet those who will try to subvert what you are doing, tell you women cannot be rabbis, and, well, you know the rest.

But keep moving forward, keep doing what you are doing. The world is benefitting mightily from the spectacular talents you bring all of us.

I have a philosophy about NO, YES, and MAYBE. When I want to do something, and someone tells me "yes", it's yes. When someone tells me, "maybe", well, that's a yes, too. And when someone tells me "no", well, THAT is a maybe!

Don't take "no" for an answer — ever! Make it a maybe. Keep pushing. And keep your wonderful sense of humor.

Keep doing Gd's holy work for the sake of all of us, for the sake of a better world, the kind of world in which you and we and all future generations want to live.

Yeshivat Maharat has helped fulfill your dreams. But YOU, all of you, have fulfilled a long-held dream of mine: That someday Orthodox women would be ordained. I did not know if I would live to see that day. But I did. And you made this happen.

We are ALL so very lucky to be part of making history.

My sweet husband, Stanley Rosenzweig, of blessed memory, always referred to Gd as "She". A few weeks before he died, he and I were blessed to have some special visitors while he was in Hospice: Rabbanit Devorah Zlochower, Dean of Yeshivat Maharat, and Rabba Wendy Amsellem and Rabba Yaffa Epstein, Alumnae of Yeshivat Maharat.

As Stanley was talking about Gd in the feminine, a question occurred to me, and so I asked my husband, "Do you think Moshiach will be a woman?" In his usual thoughtful way, he paused and reflected, and said, "Will Moshiach be a woman? I don't know. But if she is, she for sure went to Yeshivat Maharat".