

Ninth Annual Semikha Ceremony **Rabbi Dr. Wendy Zierler** **Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination** **Class of 2021**



Because I've taught for 20 years at a rabbinical school, it has long been assumed by those who have invited me to speak and teach in their communities that I was a rabbi. I have a drawer full of Rabbi Wendy Zierler name tags that were prepared for me that I was not able in good conscience to don - that is, until today. After all of these years, I am proud finally to put on a Rabbi Wendy Zierler name tag. I'm so sorry that my mom and dad, who both died during my studies at Maharat, aren't here to see me wear it.

In putting on this tag, I'm not merely adding another prefix to my name or another degree to my resume. Adding women rabbis to the Orthodox community is not simply an instance of "add women and stir". It's a paradigm shift. Rabbinic Judaism, of course, is no stranger to paradigm shifts and the kinds of reevaluations of core values that they occasion.

Take, for example, the entire institution of rabbinic prayer and the structure of the Pesach Seder, major shifts enacted after the destruction of the Temple. Or take, for example, the second and 18th *mishnayot* in the first chapter of *Pirkei Avot*. Mishna Two teaches in the name of Shimon Ha-Tzaddik, one of the last members of the *Knesset ha-Gedola*, that the world is sustained by three things, the number three corresponding to the three patriarchs: "*al ha-Torah ve-al ha-avodah ve-al gemilut khasadim*." "Torah, temple worship, and acts of loving-kindness." Mishna 18, in the name of Shimon ben Gamliel, who lived after the destruction of the Second Temple, rewrites the three things that sustain the world in light of lost sovereignty and the destruction of the Beit ha-Mikdash. Says Shimon ben Gamliel: "*Al shelosha devarim ha-olam omed. Al ha-din ve-al ha-emet ve-al ha-shalom*." Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel used to say, "Three things sustain the world: justice, truth, and peace."



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

The ordination of women as rabbis calls for the reformulation of the very idea of the Mesora, not only as *Pirkei Avot* but as *Pirkei Imahot*. As such, I'd like to offer a new formulation of the things that sustain the world, not just three things corresponding to the *Avot* - the three forefathers - but four, like the *Imahot* - the four foremothers. I offer these four things to highlight what has changed fundamentally with the advent of women's learning, teaching, and leadership.

Al arba'a devarim ha-olam omed: al ha-limud ve-al ha-ahava ve-al shivyon u-shleimut.

Al ha-limud - on learning, because women's learning, first and foremost, has changed everything in ways that we have only begun to appreciate.

Al ha-ahava - on love. Love is at the center of our daily liturgical declarations of faith - "*Ve-ahavta et Hashem Elokeikha*" - and at the center of our ethical convictions - "*Ve-ahavta le-reiakha kamokha*." And yet, it appears on neither of the prior *Pirkei Avot* lists of sustaining values. One of the contributions that women's leadership and teaching can offer is the restoration of love to the primary place that it ought to occupy in our religious consciousness, love of God, love of Torah, love of family, and love of humanity.

Al shivyon - on equality. The very first chapter of the Torah teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God. The ordination of women and the full enlistment of women in the project of Jewish leadership, decision making, and spirituality bring us closer to the actualization of that principle of fundamental equality and human dignity.

U-shleimut - and wholeness. If God is presented in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* as *ha-Melekh she-ha-Shalom lo* - the King whose domain is peace - the feminine noun *shleimut* urges us to consider the *havaya she-ha-shleimut la* - the divine being defined by wholeness and inclusivity in religious and social life. The principle of *shleimut* urges us in our democratic modern times to embrace and develop a more gender-inclusive theology, liturgy, social view, and religious practice that stand for true wholeness and peace in our community and our world.