

Open to Embracing Jews; Open to Embracing the Mesorah

Transcribed from Rabbi Penner's address to the 5774 Chag HaSemikhah

My dear musmakhim:

It is such an exciting day in such a historic time. It's not just the Chag HaSemikhah. It's the time we live in. It's תשע"ד, — one of the most exciting eras in our history. Dramatic growth of talmud Torah and the world of the yeshivos. Strong *kehillos* and thriving *mosdos*, both in Eretz Yisrael—in Eretz Yisrael after millennia of *galus!*—and around the world. What an exciting time for Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan. What an exciting time for you to become rabbanim!

And yet, תשע"ד, is a time of uncertainty and immense challenge. You, our precious talmidim, live in a rapidly changing world and in a Jewish community struggling to define itself and grappling to find the Ribbono shel Olam in an increasingly G-dless world.

With your permission, I would like to travel to another such time in Jewish history. For just a moment, come with me to Eretz Yisrael, to Yerushalayim, in the years before the miracles of Chanukah:

It was a time of terrible confusion after the death of the *gadol hador*, Antigonus ish Socho. Two of his students, Tzadok and Baytus, had begun a process that would lead to the questioning of the very basics of our faith. *Ikkarei ha'emunah*, once



Rabbi Menachem Penner

Max and Marion Grill Dean, RIETS

taken for granted, were under attack. Antiochus IV governed Eretz Yisrael, looking to force his subjects to adopt the worldview of Yavan, and to abandon their own. It was the days before the miracles of Chanukah, when so many struggled to see the invisible hand of the Ribbono Shel Olam. And when young men and women, including bnei Torah from the most established Torah homes, were disappearing into a sea of assimilation.

Yes. It was a time very much like our own.

But it was more than a time of questioning and it was more than a crisis of assimilation. There was a frightening vacuum of leadership. Hellenized *kohanim gedolim*, *manhigim* who lacked the basic credentials to serve in their posts, held sway over much of the nation. So many *kohanim*, once looked to for *hora'ah*, had adopted the ways of the Greeks. And it seemed that no one towering rabbinic figure and no one rabbinic body could carry the mantle of Torah leadership. Two men—a pair,

a “zug”—would henceforth be needed to stand in the place where one *gadol hador* had led.

Those two chakhamim were Rabbi Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzereida and Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan of Yerushalayim. Their sayings, mishnayos in *Avos* (1:4-5), are famous. But to fully appreciate them, we need to consider the challenges that their generations faced and the radically different solutions that these two gedolim proposed:

יוסי בן יועזר איש צרדה אומר: יהי ביתך בית
ועד לחכמים

Make your homes gathering places for talmidei chakhamim. To do so, create homes where the most righteous will feel comfortable. Then, fill those *batim*, and your *batei kenesiyot*, with those who want to learn, to daven, to follow closely and unquestioningly in the ways of Chazal.

והוי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם

Then, attach yourselves to the sages. Walk in the ways of your rebbeim with modesty and awe. Understand your place vis-a-vis the guardians of the *mesorah*.

And soak in their teachings. Be *mechazeik* yourselves, for you will need much fortitude to stand up to the winds of change. Redouble your efforts to find Torah clarity in a world of confusion. Create a safe haven in your homes in a world filled with darkness and falsehood.

Divrei chokhmah, no doubt, in challenging times. Surround yourselves with fellow *ma'aminim*—in fact with those who are on a higher *madreigah* than you. Follow in the footsteps of those who grew up in simpler times and whose lives are guided by the timeless *chokhmas haTorah*.

It's hard to argue with such an approach. But someone did. A second *gadol BeYisrael* suggested a radically different path for the preservation of klal Yisrael. He presented a vision of the home open not only to the *chakhamim*—but to the masses as well. And not just open. Open wide.

Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan, the Av Beis Din, warned that times of uncertainty, when assimilation is at its highest, are not the time for erecting walls, not even protective fences. Instead, those who held to the *eitz hachaim* with every ounce of their strength had a *chiyuv* to connect with the people. And not just to reach out to them and to teach them, but to sit with them, to listen to them, to hear their concerns and to reaffirm the unity of klal Yisrael.

יוסי בן יוחנן איש ירושלים אומר [יהי ביתך פתוח לרוחה]

Open your houses wide! And if I might add to his words, open your *batei kneisiyos* wide as well. Invite in the people, *amkha*. Make them feel welcome, respected and loved—regardless of who they are.

And let those who are poor—not just *aniyim mamash*, but those who form the lower strata of society, uneducated and unsophisticated as they may be—live among you. Become as familiar with the needs of your *kehillah*, your congregational family, as you are familiar with the needs of your nuclear family.

Two Reb Yosi's. Two mishnayos. Two solutions.

An approach of *yirah*—*yiras Shamayim*—protecting ourselves and our precious *mesorah*.

[Be] open to exposing people to the beauty of yiddishkeit without insisting that they become just like you.

An approach of *ahavah*—*ahavas Yisrael*—embracing others, our precious brothers and sisters.

My Dear talmidim:

The Jewish world in which you will serve beyond the *koslei hayeshiva* is thriving and strong—but no less challenging and no less confusing as the one that faced these two *gedolim* in Hellenistic times.

We, too, live in a rapidly changing world in which the very principles upon which our Torah lives are fashioned are under daily attack. An *olam hafuch*—but not the one seen by Rav Yosef brei d'reb Yehoshua in *masekhes Pesachim* (50a). In our upside-down world, morality is close-mindedness and immorality is righteousness. Truth is passé and lies

are welcomed—and sometimes even printed—with enthusiasm. We live in a *bein hashemashos*, an historic time, part *kodesh*, part *chol*, but filled with *irbuvia*, with confusion.

And we have two mishnayos to guide us. We need to study these mishnayos well. But perhaps, most of all, we must remember that they are best understood as two parts of one whole. I don't believe that the *derekh* of Rabbi Yosi ben Yoezer—the creation of homes filled with *tzidkus* but, by their nature, somewhat intimidating and foreign to the uneducated—can sufficiently meet the challenges of today. **There are just too many people, precious *neshamos*, not just among the world of the unaffiliated, but among day school and yeshiva high school and, yes, even Yeshiva University graduates who will be left behind.** Nor do I think that Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan's openness alone, filling our homes with so many common folk that *chakhamim* are left without a seat at the table, is what Chazal were looking to create. These two beautiful mishnayos understood together, these two ideals expressed side by side, with each aspect pursued with passion and *yiras shamayim* need to guide you as the leaders of tomorrow.

“*Yehei beiskha pasu'ach lirvachah.*”

You need to be open. Yes—you heard me correctly. Orthodox Judaism needs to be and can be open. *Pasu'ach lirvachah* to the Jewish people.

You must be open to Jews of different backgrounds, understanding that each precious *neshamah* needs special attention and a unique path to connect to Hashem. You must be open to the opinions of those with whom you disagree, open to explaining the truth, the totality of the Torah, to those

whose worldview has been shaped by outside influences. You must be open to examining our time-honored institutions and considering new ideas and approaches. And, perhaps more than anything else, open to exposing people to the beauty of yiddishkeit without insisting that they become just like you.

You, the musmakhim of RIETS, need to be open if you hope to lead a generation that desires, and will sometimes insist, that its *manhigim* listen as frequently as they speak, accept as often as they judge and innovate as often as they walk in the ways of their ancestors.

And, barukh Hashem, we are open, and you are open—open to learn, to grow, to listen, to devote your lives to klal Yisrael. Open to leaving New York! Open to work on secular college campuses with students who did not receive the gift of a YU education. Open to teach in day schools, in every grade and to every type of student. Open to make a kiddush Hashem in your hospitals and law firms.

Open to put the needs of klal Yisrael before your own.

You are open to lead all of klal Yisrael *bederekh haTorah*.

But not every door and every window can be left open during a storm. As open as you must be, you must never leave our precious *mesorah* exposed, out in the open. When something is precious, precious and yet so fragile, a precious gift for which so many have given their lives to transmit to you, you must protect it and guard it with every fiber of your being.

Don't underestimate your role as a link in the chain of the *mesorah*.

משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים. ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה.

And they, through the *chakhmei hamesorah* passed it to your *rebbeim*, those on this stage. And today, they pass it to you.

יהי ביתך ועד לחכמים

You must assure that your *batim*—not just your homes, but your *batei knessiyos*, and your *batei sefer*, resound with the *kolos* and the spirit of your *rabbeim*. They must be open and exposed to the *gedolei Yisrael*.

הווי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם

Struggle with your *rebbeim* for answers—*ויאבק איש עמו*—but never cease to look to them for guidance.

הווי שותה בצמא את דבריהם:

Continue to learn from the *chakhmei hamesorah* who sit beside me and behind me—through phone calls, through listening to their *shiurim* from afar and *iy"H*, through many visits back to the *batei medrash* in which you grew to become talmidei chakhamim, rabbanim and *manhigei Yisrael* yourselves. *אשרינו מה טוב חלקינו* to have these people in our lives.

There are many yeshivos and many young men today studying for semikhah. But you are unique—because Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan is unique. **There is no other institution that better represents the ideals expressed by Rabbi Yosi ben Yoezer and Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan together.** Please don't forget how special you are and what you, and possibly only you, can accomplish.

We believe in you and what we say to others about you. You are grounded in Torah and tradition. And you are ready to lead. It is a daunting task that lies before you. But it is a thrilling time to step onto the stage of Jewish leadership. There has never been a group better prepared and more open to meet this challenge.

Chazak ve'ematz. Mazal tov.

