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 5777—one of the most exciting eras in our history. Dramatic growth of talmud Torah and the world of the yeshivos. Strong kehilos 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, 5777, 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 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 Yozer 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:

"wis ben ya’aron es rehavah anomer: wis bishvat, tevu l’chamim
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.

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 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 ha’fuch—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 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.


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

And they, through 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.asherinu-mechashmu-kelam-nachum.

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.

And they, through 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.asherinu-mechashmu-kelam-nachum.

Struggle with your rebbeim for answers—im akvei az umer—but never cease to look to them for guidance.

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.asherinu-mechashmu-kelam-nachum.

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.