

Ninth Annual Semikha Ceremony Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean of Faculty



This has been a year of social distancing and divine seeking.

The Mishna and Gemara teach us that the Shekhina is present when people are sitting and learning, when davening, and even gathering for court cases. When we seek God, God is made to feel present. This is true for a group of 10, five, three, or even just one person.

The rabbis understood that there is something special about a group who gather in worship, that being physically present with others helps to feel the warmth of another and ultimately of God. And they also understood that such an experience may not always be possible, that there may be times in human history when not even 10 could gather in one space, and we would still need to find God.

How do we know when the Shekhina is present? There's nothing to see or touch, and yet, her reality comes with particular Halakhic significance in terms of which parts of the tefilla we may or may not recite. Is the Shekhina present on Zoom or on a livestream? How do we find God in 2021?

Rabbi Yitzchak teaches that if someone claims to have worked hard, but not found - "*yagati ve-lo matzati*" - they should not be believed. If they claim to have found but not worked hard - "*lo yagati u-matazti*" - they also should not be believed. Only the person who worked hard can be believed to have found. "*Yagati u-matzati.*"

The Gemara immediately limits the idea to the context of hard work within the realm of Torah study. I'd like to offer that the same can be claimed for seeking to find God's presence, that perhaps "*matzati*" means I have found the Shekhina. This is true in our Talmud Torah, in our davening, in our interactions with our friends, and yes, even on Zoom.

The fundamental job of a rabbi is to support others in their search to find God, even when things feel dark, to answer the clarion call of Evan Hansen: “Even when the dark comes crashing through, when you need a friend to carry you, and when you're broken on the ground, you will be found.”

The students of Yeshivat Maharat serve as a model to me and, indeed, to all of us of what it means to work hard - *yagati* - and to seek to find God - *u-matzati* - in our world today.

Allow me to introduce the three graduating musmakhot of 2021, who live this simple idea every day of their lives.

Tanya Farber, you have been the anchor and the heart of our beit midrash for many years. Your neshama inspires all who are blessed to know you. Your gentle neshama seeks God in all that you do. Tanya, *yagat u-matzat*.

Dr. Liz Shayne, you have worked hard through many, many years of school, as have Ayel and Chasdai been hard workers on screen in yeshiva this year. You invented the Shekhinameter, the tool by which we measure the divine presence, and you should know and be confident that the Shekhina already resides in all that you do. Dr. Liz Shayne, *yagat u-matzat*.

Yael Smoocha, your commitment to your students and to your family guides you as you walk through the world. You are a gifted teacher, a lover of Torah, and a hard worker. Your ability to listen and hear the question behind the question brings God into every conversation. Yael Smoocha, *yagat u-matzat*.

Mazal tov to all the graduates.