



Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony June 17, 2019 Darshanit Dr. Miriam Udel

Kneytsh bak un shtel farb. Literally, “Pinch your cheek and put in some color.” That’s Yiddish for, “Woman up.”

In the midrash on Parshat Beha’alotecha, which we will read on Shabbat, the Sages insist that Moshe is flummoxed by God’s instructions for executing the menorah—even though the Holy One uses the demonstrative word “zeh,” which the rabbis read as the pointing of a divine finger at an illustrative figure, like some supernal version of Google Image. Yet after several failed attempts, when Moshe is thoroughly frustrated, Bezalel—effortlessly, it seems—crafts the perfect vessel. An incredulous Moshe marvels, “Bezalel! You must have been standing in the shadow of God, *b’tsel el*, when the Holy One showed me how to make it!” I like to imagine Moshe’s *timahon*—his surprise—signaling a sense of encouragement, of audacious hope.

While God has been whispering in *my* ear, pointing visions only parts of which I understand how to fulfill, you—women of Maharat—have stood in the divine shadow, intuiting the rest. We have each played the Bezalel to our sisters-in-learning. It is a wonderment to witness our complementary strengths and capacities, for it is through collaboration that the divine will is carried out by fallible people in this imperfect world. Whether for quandaries halachic, pastoral or interpretive, somebody in our sacred and beloved community steps forth to discern and execute the “zeh” of the holy word.

And—to pinch a cheek, to *kneytsh bak un shtel farb*. To be sure, Yiddish is parsimonious with personal pronouns, and it presumes that unless otherwise specified, we keep our hands to ourselves—so the cheek you are assumed to pinch is your own. But that leaves open an interpretive loophole (and you *know* what we do with those!): to realize that sometimes, the cheek in need of pinching may belong to another.

Maharat is a place of actual hugs and metaphorical *kneytshes*. We bolster each other’s abilities and infuse each other with confidence, dismantling imposter syndrome one conversation at a time. This encouragement is itself a sacred task. After all, shame is pallor. To humiliate others is to be *malbin panim*, to drain the color, the lifeblood, from their faces. When we pinch each other’s cheeks, we refuse shame and claim the honor of the Torah that we learn and teach.

Looking out at the *musmachot* and future *musmachot*, whether already enrolled as students or still looking forward to becoming bat mitzvah, looking out at all of you who have come here tonight to encourage us in our work, I feel the enlivening blood rush to my cheeks, I know that together we can craft the holy vessels that our community so desperately needs, and I feel *sanguine* on behalf of the Jewish people.