



Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony June 17, 2019 Rabbi Marianne Novak

“What you are doing is revolutionary!

You are so lucky to be creating something new for the Jewish People!’

These were some of the comments I received when I began my studies at Yeshivah. While I was very happy for the support, I was a little uncomfortable with the idea of being a revolutionary—as revolution implied turning an established entity on its head and possibly destroying a structure of the Jewish community.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 31B the Gemara relates a piece of wisdom that echoes my worries:

תניא רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר אם יאמרו לך זקנים סתור וילדים בנה סתור ואל תבנה מפני שסתירת זקנים בנין ובנין נערים
...תירה

‘..It is taught in a *b’raitah*: Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar said: If elders tell you to demolish something and children tell you to build, you should demolish and not build, because the destruction of the elders is really construction/building up- and the buildings of the youth are really destruction.’

Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar is warning us that real change must come from a place of wisdom, experience and tradition—and if it doesn’t—even with the best design and intentions-it is destined to fail.

My touchstones for wisdom, knowledge and experience are my father’s, Rabbi David Novak’s, books. I use them for research -(the footnotes alone are pure gold), and to get to get a holistic theological approach to Halakha and Jewish tradition. In 1984, at the beginning of my senior year of High School, my father asked me to assist him in creating the index for his 5th book, ‘Halakha in A Theological Dimension.’ Together, we manually wrote down all the entries while camped out on the basement ping-pong table in our home in Bayswater, Far Rockaway. This very book contains, ironically, a chapter entitled ‘Women in the Rabbinate?’ (With a question mark!) This section was written during a tumultuous time in the Conservative Movement when my father and his fellow traditionalists with their understanding of an authentic Halakhic process, voted against women’s ordination. Additionally, my father was somewhat alarmed by the feminism at that time which seemed to embody a nihilistic tone that not only didn’t want work from within the Halakhic system but also seemed to want to destroy traditional Judaism altogether.

But at the end of his chapter, my father, quite preciently, suggests that if the women who desire to become Rabbis, “..choose the harder road of learning and reverence (*Torah ve-yirah*), then I for one am willing to say that...this traditionalist is willing to become their student.” (*Halakha in a Theological Dimension, D. Novak, pg. 70*)

Through this Yeshivah, we were and are doing the work, the *Torah ve-yirah* that is *l’shem shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven.

That is not to say, however, that many times my work hasn’t been very challenging especially when coming up against those who felt threatened by all women simply teaching Torah. And during those times of exasperation, it was so tempting to completely burn the house down and start over.

But, when so many want to destroy Torah from without, we can’t be complicit in that project, no matter how good and seemingly pure our motives might be, as Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar warned. We must resist the urge to completely destroy- for destruction we can be sure of, but rebuilding, sadly, we cannot.

We- my incredible cohort and I- have created and continue to create new Palaces of Torah with the building blocks of our wise foremothers and forefathers- including my father, who true to his word and incredible foresight, is here tonight to learn from our Torah.