

What a pleasure and honor it is to serve as the installing rabbi of my classmate, colleague, and dear friend, your rabbi, Lisa Gelber. Our friendship began 25 years ago, when Rabbi Gelber came to New York after spending the first years of her rabbinic education in LA and Jerusalem. We became friends almost instantly, and have since shared life's inevitable personal and professional peaks and valleys. We have danced, cried, laughed and learned together. And today, we celebrate the blessing of Rabbi Lisa Gelber.

This is the title of my address, and you may think that it means that it is my role to bestow a blessing on today's celebrant, the rabbi you at Congregation Habonim are formally installing. You are in fact correct, but only partially so. Because while there are formalities to which I will soon joyously tend, let me say that today there are many celebrants. This is not just a blessing of the rabbi; it is a blessing for her community. You already know, but it bears repeating, that you are so fortunate to have Rabbi Gelber as your spiritual leader, a *kli kodesh*, a vessel of holiness. She is, by definition, a blessing. So not only is the phrase "the blessing of Rabbi Gelber" my prescriptive task; it is also a description of her essence.

In my Torah of relationships, "once a Hevruta, always a Hevruta." That is, once two people have studied Torah together, that partnership is permanent. Rabbi Gelber and I have been Hevruta for 25 years, and that continues by phone, email and text to this day. What do I look for in a Hevruta—a friend and study companion? I look for someone who brings talents and passions that I lack, that make me a more complete rabbi, Jew, and human being. The very qualities that I love in her are what make Congregation Habonim so blessed. She has an instinct for the spiritual that uplifts me. We heard it in her scholarly and soulful reading of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, and she can learn and teach Hasidut circles around me. I like to think I can daven, but I only wish I could pray like Rabbi Gelber. I love helping people enhance their minds; she does this and more—she also causes people's hearts and souls to swell. She nourishes *nefesh valev*. Her Torah is holistic, and that is a blessing.

Rabbi Gelber's commitment to issues that nurture body and soul are part of her rabbinic blessing, notably her devotion to those who have suffered domestic

violence. The spiritual mentorship she has received, she has gifted to others, blessing all those who come under her rabbinic canopy of shelter and care.

In this covenantal relationship between congregation and rabbi, there are so many blessings that accrue from Rabbi Gelber's rabbinate. Her responsibilities to you are the classic Jewish mission statement of Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hesed. She is mandated with teaching you in ways that enhance your mind, body, and soul. She is to shepherd you in sacred service, not just in prayer, but in the rituals of our tradition around the life cycle. She is to help you find meaning at moments of birth, Bnai and Bnot Mitzvah, marriage, divorce, illness, death, and healing. She is committed to inspiring you to reflect love into the world, by leading you in acts of kindness both within and beyond the congregational orbit. And in the rabbinate of the 21st century, Rabbi Gelber is also charged with motivating you to lead this kehillah kedoshah, this holy congregation, with vision and intentionality. No rabbi, not even one as gifted as Rabbi Gelber, can do so alone. It is, as she would say, a time for the Judaism of relationships, and I dare add that only communities that embrace this vision will continue to be meaningful to the Jews of today and tomorrow.

In this covenantal relationship between rabbi and congregation, there are also sacred obligations that you must fulfill so that she can reach the fullness of her capacity to bless. I have seen today how much you love her, and how much you treasure her—and Zahara! I know that you have supported her through her unexpected challenges, and that's a reflection of the beauty and goodness of this community. This day, I invite you to commit to three gifts—gifts that charge a rabbinic battery so that it can hover at or near 100%.

Gift number one is the time to study Torah. None of us answers this calling until and unless we have a passion for learning. I know, because I was at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem this summer with my hevruta, Lisa, I know how deeply she loves to learn for learning's sake. And I promise you that the more she learns, the more you will be blessed, because she won't keep it for herself. Torah Lishmah is not a selfish pursuit; to Rabbi Gelber, it is an opportunity to enhance the Jewish lives of everyone in her orbit.

The second gift is the space to nurture her soul. What makes this rabbi so special is that her spirituality is the product of ongoing care. It isn't a sprint, it's a

marathon! She works at cultivating many religious lives, but at the center of it all is her own religious life. There's an old joke that the only way a rabbi can really pray on Shabbat and holy days is by davening at home first, because rabbis are so preoccupied with the prayer experience of their congregants that they don't have their own time for God in shul. Believe it or not, we rabbis are religious works in progress. You bless Rabbi Gelber by allowing, in fact by requiring her to tend to her soul.

The third gift is the freedom to make a difference in the world beyond the daled amot, the four cubits, of Congregation Habonim. Each and every member of this community is fulfilling the Jewish mandate of Gemilut Hesed, acts of lovingkindness, and can put on your resumes that you volunteer for this shul, above and beyond what you do professionally or for your families. The happiest, most fulfilled, and most invested rabbis also have volunteer lives outside their home and workplace. It goes without saying that a communally-engaged rabbi brings the blessing of her synagogue's good name into the public square. (That was a fancy way of saying that it's good PR for Habonim!) But there's more blessing to be reaped—a rabbi whose impact goes far beyond the walls of the institution makes the world better for us all. And, let's affirm that we're in the religion business, and in the religion business it's crucial to remember that in the grand scheme of things, there's more to the world than just us.

Step back for a moment, and see the big picture. Just as I charged Rabbi Gelber with responsibilities to Habonim, I have presented the same challenge to the community. By giving your rabbi time to study, space to nurture her spirit, and freedom to engage in the larger community, you will be fulfilling the ultimate Jewish mission statement. For as we learn at the very beginning of Pirke Avot, Torah, Avodah—sacred service—and Gemilut Hesed—loving acts of kindness—are the pillars that sustain the world.

Rabbi Gelber, you and this kehillah kedoshah, this sacred community, are in deep. This is a precious relationship, a brit, a covenant. Your mutual obligations, as I have framed them, are about Torah, avodah, and gemilut hesed—Judaism for the mind, the heart, and the hand. May you, my dear friend, and may you, my friend's friends, feel blessing from head to toe, not only today, but for many meaningful years to come.

And so, having described the blessings of Rabbi Gelber, I will now prescribe a blessing in this ceremony of installing her as rabbi of Congregation Habonim...