

2-23-24 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene – *Tetzaveh* (and you shall command)
Torah Portion; Exod 27:20 – 30:10
Haftarah: Ezek 43:10-27,
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Rom 13:1-7

Semicha and Rabbinic Authority

Central question of this message: How should we carry-out the concept of rabbinic authority in these days, in our congregations?

Today we are in parasha *Tetzaveh*, which means “and you shall command.” Its name comes from the second Hebrew word in the passage in the Torah, and the concept embodied by the first four words in the English translation.

Ex 27:20-21 20

And you shall charge the sons of Israel, that they bring you clear oil of beaten olives for the light, to make a lamp burn continually. 21 In the tent of meeting, outside the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall keep it in order from evening to morning before the Lord; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout their generations for the sons of Israel.

It is not uncommon for each synagogue to have a smaller replica of the Temple Menorah, and to light it during Shabbes.



But today, the *ner tamid* is most often represented in synagogues by a single electrical light in a stylish housing, normally hangs from the ceiling, just in front of the Ark where the Torah is secured.

Interestingly, we find, in the first few words of this passage, the first time in Torah (since the introduction of Moses) that G-d tells Moses to give the command *personally*. Our Sages noticed this linguistic nuance and discussed this at length. The Torah commentator Ḥayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar, (1696-1743) also known as Or HaChaim, wrote:

G'd meant for Moses to add his own exhortation to that of G'd. The expression תצוה [you shall command] rather than צו [command] was meant to make the directive appear as having emanated from Moses rather than from G'd Himself. G'd mentioned to Moses that although the directive was phrased as תצוה, [you shall command], and not as תדבר, [you shall say] and this was to convey the impression that it emanated from him, this was no reason to treat it more lightly than if it had appeared to emanate from G'd Himself.

Thus, G-d was establishing a high level of personal authority in Moses over the people of Israel.¹ This is important, because it constitutes a divine recognition of a passing of authority from G-d to Moses regarding matters of *halacha*² [how precisely the people would live-out the directions of Torah].

It was clear that Moses *was not* taking the place of G-d as ultimate authority, but that Moses spoke with *derived authority*, and his words

¹ This authority would be questioned during the Korah uprising (Num 16-18), and the authority of Moses, and the choice of Aaron as the first High Priest, would once again be made very clear by signs from heaven as well as the immediate punishment of those who rose up against that authority.

² The word “halacha” literally means “walking.” This has become the common word signifying the way a believer lives his life. Examples are: “Walk by the Spirit” as found in Gal 5:16, or “Be careful how you walk” as found in Eph 4:1, or “Walk as He walked.” as found in 1 Jn 2:6.

were also to be followed by the people.³ This authority not only included the authority to set *halacha*, but also to sit as judge and to render legal decisions regarding individuals who have a dispute between themselves.

The initial conferring of authority upon Moses is seen by our people as establishing the first office of “Rabbi.” Moses is referred to often as “*Moishe Rabbeinu*” (Moses our teacher⁴). As the end of Moses’ work was approaching, G-d instructed him to transfer that rabbinic authority to Joshua.

Num 27:15-23

15 Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, 16 "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, 17 who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd." 18 So the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; 19 and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all

³ Thus, when Moses offers his long personal discourse called Devarim (known also as Deuteronomy), it is proper to include his words as Scripture with the same status as the remainder of Torah.

⁴ Literally, “rabbeinu” means “our great one.” Since G-d has directed that we choose wise and G-dly teachers, those who are great in knowledge and wisdom, it is appropriate to have the term Rabbi also mean “teacher” which assumes relative greatness as well among our people.

the congregation; and commission him in their sight. 20 "And you shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him. 21 Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation." 22 And Moses did just as the Lord commanded him; and he took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation. 23 Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

Verse 23 above gives us, through the action of Moses toward Joshua, the Hebrew title for this ceremonial conferring of authority.

כַּאֲשֶׁר	וַיִּצְוֶהוּ	עָלָיו	יָדָיו	אֶת־	וַיִּסְמְךָ	23
as	and gave him a charge,	upon him,	his hands		And he laid	
<u>834</u>	<u>6680</u>	<u>5921</u>	<u>3027</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>5564</u>	
		מֹשֶׁה: פ	בְּיָד־	יְהוָה	דִּבֶּר	
		Moses.	by the hand of	the Lord	commanded	
		<u>4872</u>	<u>3027</u>	<u>3068</u>	<u>1696</u>	

It is called *semicha*, and that word carries with it the concepts of laying on of hands, or to lift up in an exalted fashion.

OT:5564 סָמַךְ **camak** (saw-mak'); a primitive root; to prop (literally or figuratively); reflexively, to lean upon or take hold of (in a favorable or unfavorable sense):

The original *semicha* was from G-d to Moses, as found in today's parasha. That *semicha* then passed from Moses to Joshua, as found in Numbers 27. And the same authority was passed then from Joshua down in unbroken succession, by ceremonial *semicha* to others, who passed it down to others for generations.

Likewise, the judges appointed by Moses at the urging of Yitro⁵, to handle smaller matters of halacha as well as to resolve lesser disputes, received *semicha* – authority – to make those rulings and decisions.

The practice of appointing lower judges during the wilderness wanderings, was refined after entry into the Promised Land, when such judges were to take their seat to judge in each town.⁶

When Ezra was given the commission to rebuild Jerusalem from King Artaxerxes, he was at that time directed to likewise appoint judges in that land, all of whom were to know the Torah, which judges had the authority from that pagan king to render Torah-based judgments for all the people

⁵ See Exodus 18:17-21

⁶ See Deuteronomy 16:18

in that region regarding ownership of property, for imprisonment, or even to carry out the penalty of death.⁷ This did not constitute official Hebraic *semicha*, but practically, it had the same effect.

From Moses onward, the strict practice of conferring *semicha*, only by a ceremonial laying-on of hands, continued in unbroken fashion until it sometime between the years of 360 and 425 CE. *Semicha* continued after that time, but other forms of conferring authority began finding acceptance in the Jewish community. Today, in the Orthodox community there has been a higher level of faithfulness to the more formal and ceremonial form of *semicha*, and for preserving the lineage of rabbinic authority directly back to Moses.

In the Diaspora⁸, as different branches of Judaism developed, individual rabbis remain generally loyal to the particular “school” of Hebraic teaching in which they were educated. Each division of Judaism today has its own version of theology, and paths of *halacha*. Each division has its own yeshivas⁹ which graduate students who have completed their required course of study, and who then are given a certificate declaring that they are a Rabbi in that particular stream of Judaism.¹⁰ There are

⁷ See Ezra 7:25-26

⁸ The Jewish people dispersed into the Earth outside of the Land of Israel.

⁹ Religious rabbinic schools.

¹⁰ The three broad streams of Judaism recognized by the bulk of the Jewish people of today are Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. There are many distinct levels of Orthodoxy as well, and each of those seems to be a completely different path, with different *halachot* as well. At this time, Messianic Judaism (which recognizes Yeshua

levels of authority generally recognized by the Jewish community, depending on which branch of Judaism granted the *semicha*. That hierarchy (from highest to lowest) is: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

In the first century, Rabbis believed in Yeshua as Messiah. They were not rejected by the people for belief in Yeshua, because the vast majority of the people were to one degree or another very “messianic” in that they were anxiously awaiting the promised Messiah. So many of the people were proclaiming Yeshua as Messiah that the ruling powers in the Sanhedrin believed Rome would annihilate Israel unless Yeshua died.¹¹

At the Council of Yavneh, following the destruction of the Second Temple, the leaders of Judaism determined that all of the various divisions must come under a single discipline – that of the Parushim. This also solidified in Judaism the halachic and judicial authority of the Rabbi.

Since many leaders of the Parushim¹² at that time had rejected Yeshua, the Messianic Rabbis among them were likewise rejected as being “divisive,” and so a rift formed in Judaism.

as Messiah) is not generally viewed with favor by the other divisions of Judaism. But there is some discussion in the Orthodox community that the broader tent of Judaism should include Messianics as well.

¹¹ John 11:47-53

¹² Generally, “Pharisees.”

From that point forward, Rabbinic Judaism has gone forward with an increasing rejection of everything that the normative Christian church might stand for¹³.

Thus, today a Rabbi given *semicha* by a Messianic Jewish yeshiva is not recognized by any of these divisions of normative Judaism as having a legitimate *semicha* for purposes of rendering judgments.

However, if an Orthodox Rabbi accepts Yeshua, it's somewhat more difficult for Jews to reject him and all his judgments.¹⁴ And as the years go by, more and more Jews are seeing that Yeshua must be Messiah, if there is ever to be a Messiah ben Yoseph in Israel.

Please allow me a small diversion from the point of my teaching to address another matter that ties-in to the division between the church and the synagogue of today.

Because many Messianic leaders of today have come into the Messianic “movement” from the pews of Christianity, they have brought with them into their congregations their distinctively Christian practices and forms

¹³ The antisemitism of the church fathers, the Crusades of the Middle Ages, the Church-led pogroms of Russia, and the Lutheran underpinning of the Holocaust in Europe contributed to the apparent hostility between the Church and anything Jewish.

¹⁴ Maybe the best example is that of Rabbi Yizhak Kaduri (1898-2006) who professed to know the name of the Messiah, and left a letter to be opened one year following his death, in which that name would be known. I have seen a copy of that letter. It contains five lines of handwritten Hebrew. The first letter of each word in the second and third lines combine to spell the name “Yeshua”

of worship. This has consequences – one good and a couple that are not so good.

The good one is that Christians, who are leaving the shallow faith characterized by most normative churches and come into Messianic congregations, are finding enough familiarity to be comfortable. This allows them a comfortable place to learn Torah and a bit more of G-d's ways of living. Yeshua can shine as a bright light in such congregations with significant distinction to the "Jesus" of the Church.

But there are some sad consequences as well. Primarily, since the goal of the message of the good news was to reach the Jewish people first¹⁵, and since the normative Christian church of today has adopted teachings, forms, and practices which substantially reject anything "Jewish," all the while adopting certain things that are clearly contrary to Torah's instructions, Jews generally have entirely rejected the Church, and the Jesus that it proclaims as Savior¹⁶. So, if a Jew goes into a Messianic congregation which adopts too much of the normative Christian church, he will find some things to be attractive, but will still likely find some offensive things as well. The question is whether the offensive things are sufficient to turn him away from the truth of Yeshua's messiahship.

¹⁵ Romans 1:16, 2:10

¹⁶ Sadly, my experience is that the "Jesus" taught by the Church bears only a passing resemblance to the Yeshua who is Messiah. And the Church's portrayal of some of the teachings of Paul, although misplaced, make the separation complete.

Another sad consequence is that when a Jew attends a Messianic congregation that is somewhat “churchified” he will be convinced (and probably a bit disgusted) that these worshippers are only pretending to be a real shul¹⁷ but are really not part of the Jewish community of faith at all. Thus, he may well go away somewhat “inoculated” against the gospel and will possibly never consider it again.

Another sad consequence is that when church people who attend a “churchified” Messianic congregation go into the Jewish community to witness of Yeshua as Messiah, they will likely not be able to even follow-along well in the synagogue services. And they won’t have the deep understanding of the significances of, or even the traditions surrounding, the different parts of worship that are a part of the normative synagogues around the world. Thus, their witness will be very weak indeed. Credibility in the Jewish community comes from being observant in a Jewish way to a holy life.

It is this dynamic that urges me to adopt a *halacha* in our congregation, which is a bit more closely aligned to the Orthodox forms of worship. We don’t minimize Yeshua at all. In fact, we point out where He is specifically referred to in the Orthodox liturgy.

¹⁷ “Shul” is a Yiddish term for synagogue.

I wish for Jews to find a comfortable place among us where the only offense is Yeshua, and for the people in our congregation to be properly equipped to go into the world of the Jew with sufficient familiarity so that they can make those Jews jealous for their levels of good observance.¹⁸

Even Christian theologians with upper-level degrees find themselves at a loss when trying to converse with observant Jews about the things of faith. One rather striking example of this is the story of Ray Vander Laan.

As the story was related to me, Ray had multiple seminary degrees, but he wished to become more knowledgeable regarding Jewish culture and Scriptural knowledge. He lived many years in Israel to learn the culture and the language. Then he wished to attend a Yeshiva. He was only permitted to join a lower class, of the sophomore level in High School. He was offended, and asked the schoolmaster why his multiple seminary degrees didn't place him at a higher level. The response was, "You don't know enough." On the first day of class, as the story goes, he discovered that the schoolmaster was right. The first day in class, Ray was unable to quote the first few lines of Genesis in Hebrew from memory. He was stymied when asked by the Rabbi a simple question: from whence did your Rabbi Yeshua derive His *semicha*?¹⁹

¹⁸ Romans 11:11

¹⁹ Yeshua is another Rabbi who received His *semicha* directly from G-d.

The point I wish to make is that there are too many in the Messianic movement who are unable (or unwilling) to fully be grafted-in to the rich root of the cultivated Olive Tree that is Israel, in obedience to the directive found in Romans 11. More sadly, many of those resistant to being grafted-in are actually the leaders of Messianic congregations.

This completes my short excursion into the woods, and we can return to the teaching on *semicha*.

I think you can now see clearly that *semicha*, the granting of authority to set halacha and to render judgments of law, is *conferred*. It is not conferred lightly, and is not to be imparted to a “baby believer” of whatever chronological age, since he is not mature in the faith.²⁰ It can be conferred in regular order, by the decision of a *beit din*²¹ (one of whose judges holds the *semicha* of that level himself). It can be conferred upon graduates by decision of the head of a yeshiva. Or it can be conferred upon a person by a declaration by G-d Himself.

There is no place in Scripture supporting the all too common concept of “taking authority” as I find it spoken in the Christian church.

²⁰ No person may be given authority as even an elder if he is not fully mature. See 1 Timothy 3:6.

²¹ Beit Din is, “house of judgment”, and refers to a court of Law in G-d’s justice system. It is comprised of two or three judges, each of whom is qualified to sit as a judge by appropriate *semicha*.

We see in today's parasha a declaration to Moses by G-d Himself that Moses is to have authority to issue commands. But we also see a very similar declaration by G-d when Yeshua was given His *semicha*.

John 1:29-34

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' 31 "And I did not recognize Him, but in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." 32 And John bore witness saying, "I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. 33 "And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' 34 "And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

John's words are indicating divine *semicha*. And not only a divine *semicha*... the *highest* divine *semicha*. That concept of divine *semicha* was repeated, later.

Matt 17:1-8

17 And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, except Jesus Himself alone.

There can be no more clear expression of divine *semicha* than this. But those in authority later saw Yeshua teaching (doing the Rabbi thing), and they questioned by what authority he taught. In other words, “where did you get your *semicha*?”

Matt 21:23-27

23 And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" 24 And Jesus answered and said to them, "I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 "The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?"²² And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' 26 "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet." 27 And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

These leaders had to know of G-d's specific language of *semicha*, since the proclamations of a voice from heaven generally gets a *lot of attention* among Jews as the word of that momentous event spreads.

²² John had already been questioned as to what *semicha* permitted him to be calling people to repent and go to the mikveh. He had also left those questioners without a clear answer, although they had to know the truth. See John 1:19-28.

So, how do we carry-out the concept of rabbinic authority in these days, in our congregations?

In the interest of brevity, I am not going to discuss the various types of governance models used by Christian churches and Messianic synagogues. Some, I believe, are more scriptural, and others less so. That discussion is for another time. Suffice it to say that at Roeh Israel Abilene, we follow the pattern which was established by G-d with Moses in today's parasha, and which was followed by the early Messianic believers in Jerusalem. Yacov (also called "James") heard the discussion of the Elders, and then settled the matter with his decree – exercising his rabbinic authority as head of the congregation.²³ I, as the Rabbi who received *semicha* in the Orthodox lineage, am vested with the authority to set *halacha*, make judgments on matters of law, and teach in this congregation. I am in the middle. I serve G-d and I also serve my people.

That responsibility has consequences. I first wish to discuss those consequences for me, personally. Under Jewish law, if I teach error, or engage in other sinful conduct, the *beit din* which granted my *semicha* is empowered to revoke it. Also, since I am in the position to teach and set

²³ See Acts 15:6-21.

halacha, I am held to a higher degree of responsibility than any other person in the congregation.

James 3:1-2

3 Let not many of you become teachers [Rabbis], my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

This leads me into the next point regarding rabbinic authority. And that point involves you, personally. The Rabbis in Yeshua's time were the Scribes and the Parushim. They knew Torah, and taught Torah. Yeshua told the believers in His day to follow their teachings, but not their actions.

Matt 23:1-4

23 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses²⁴; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.

²⁴ This Hebrew idiom refers directly to our portion for this week, where Moses is given *semicha* to give commands and to judge. These teachers are now sitting in the authority of Moses.

Yeshua did not rebuke their good teachings on *halacha*, but He did rebuke their hypocrisy. Thus, if you are a member of a synagogue, you are bound to follow the *halacha* of that synagogue as determined by the Rabbi.

But there is a great advantage in being submitted to the rabbinic authority over you in the shul. It is this: If I teach an erroneous thing, or make *halacha* that is wrong before G-d, and you reasonably rely upon that, then I will be held to account for your actions before the throne in judgment. This is the same kind of covering that the husband of the home provides for the wife and his children. The husband stands before the throne.

But there is another side to that coin. Regardless of whether I teach a correctly, and regardless of whether the *halacha* that I set for this congregation is right, if you reject rabbinic authority in that matter, and you follow after what you personally believe is right, *you personally* will stand before the throne for those choices.

The Scriptures are replete with admonitions against following what is right “in your own eyes” and not submitting to G-d’s commands²⁵, and to those with authority.

Prov 30:11

²⁵ Numbers 15:39. This passage is recited in the liturgy of the Shacharit service daily.

12 There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness.

Paul, in his letter to the congregation at Rome, spoke regarding the rabbinic authority in that congregation.

Rom 13:1-7

13 Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities²⁶. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.²⁷ 5 Wherefore it is

²⁶ Paul has instructed elsewhere in other writings how to be subject to civil governing authorities. Here he is addressing the governing authority in the congregation, and he recognizes that this authority has been established by G-d.

²⁷ This speaks of the rabbinic authority of a *beit din*, which can judge conduct, and mete out punishment for sin.

necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes²⁸, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.²⁹

Yeshua made clear that the line of rabbinic authority established first in Moses is still in effect. It has been passed down through the process of *semicha*.

Right now, earthly Rabbis who have been given proper and legitimate *semicha* hold that office³⁰. But one day, hopefully soon, each of the redeemed Rabbis will cast their crowns at the feet of Yeshua, bowing before Him in submission, acknowledging the highest *semicha* of all – that of the Son of G-d.

²⁸ In context, this refers to contributions to the congregation for the support of the leadership. Civil rulers are not “servants of G-d” but servants of government.

²⁹ See 1 Timothy 5:17, where the elders who rule well should receive “double honor” which also means additional compensation from the contributions which have come into the congregation for support of leadership.

³⁰ There are some who call themselves “Rabbi” but do not have a legitimate *semicha*. They have acted presumptuously and will stand before the throne for that prideful act.