Dear Shalhevet Community,

Happy Rosh Chodesh Adar Alef!

Over the last two weeks, the Boiling Point article on women and tefillin has helped generate an international debate in Jewish newspapers, blogs and emails from various rabbinic leaders. To say that I am proud of the role that the Boiling Point played would be an understatement. The Boiling Point’s website received over 22,000 hits last week alone, and every single story mentioned the coverage in glowing terms. The Jewish world is finally appreciating the journalistic gem in Shalhevet’s crown, and we owe that to Joelle Keene and her incredible student staff.

Instead of rehashing the extensive debate in this forum, I encourage you to do some of your own “Googling” on the topic. That being said, I do feel compelled (by the sound of my own voice..?) to share some concluding thoughts:

1. Stand Firm – Because Public Opinion Most Assuredly Will Not

On a strictly personal level, I find it jarring to have seemingly transformed from “liberal firebrand” to “fundamentalist zealot” in the short span of a week. The one constant of public opinion is its own fickleness, and the shifting context of any decision heavily affects perception. Any worthwhile opinion on matters of import will generate resistance – a reality which only redoubles our responsibility to stand firm in our beliefs. That’s never easy, but doing so models for our kids the extent to which we value living and speaking authentically. This week’s parsha demonstrates this message as God instructs Moshe to adorn both the outside and the inside of the Holy Ark with gold – our outside persona and inner thoughts must align.

1. The Importance of Open and Civil Dialogue

Too often, individuals and groups rush to demonize an opposing viewpoint without truly considering it fully. Open and civil discourse stems from a genuine acknowledgment of “other”, not as a matter of manners or semantics but as a true effort to engage and understand. Recognizing another viewpoint does not require relinquishing one’s own opinion. To paraphrase YU President Richard Joel, pluralism – as opposed to relativism – means respecting someone else’s right to be wrong.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously suggested that just as you would not get upset with someone else for looking differently than you, so too you should not be upset with someone for thinking differently than you. Regardless of where the proverbial chips fall in our respective opinions, merely the act of honest engagement signifies a true success in creating connections between people. In that sense, the debate on this issue, in my opinion, was a resounding triumph for Modern Orthodoxy.

1. Bringing it Back Home – What This Means for Shalhevet

If your kids have allowed you to “friend” them on Facebook (a true testament to them and you!) you may have noticed an ardent interchange between YULA and Shalhevet students on this topic. To my mind, that represents a beautifully encouraging breakthrough for the Los Angeles community. Just pause to consider – our students are utilizing their precious social media real estate to populate their walls with meaningful Jewish debate. What more could we ask for? Beyond that, rabbis from many of our synagogues and schools have delivered shiurim on this topic, as the wider community engages with these ideas as well.

This should be a welcomed sight in our community. Further, this is precisely our model and our message at Shalhevet. Every question must remain open for debate. No discussion can be deemed off-limits. To be clear – we do not question merely for the sake of questioning; we do so because it strengthens our identity and leaves us more invigorated in the adherence to faith and practice.

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Too frequently, people feel the need to frame debates in terms of winning and losing. Rabbis and leaders give classes and send letters to “win the debate.” I humbly believe that this approach fails to recognize the most salient point. That there is a civilized national debate on the issue means that everyone is a winner (as cliché as that sounds, I believe it is true). Raising a potentially polarizing issue and allowing all sides to weigh in; allowing young and old alike to consider the issue on its merits and take an informed position, turns out to be unifying and empowering. I do not believe there is a single person out there who engaged in considering and discussing this issue who has not been strengthened by the process.

I return to my newsletter of a few weeks ago. If we expect our young people (and even middle-aged folks like us) to own their story, it is CRITICAL that we allow them to ask why and not just tell them what to do and how we want them to do it. We cannot simply hope for our children to regurgitate their heritage - we must give them the tools and the space to take part in a dynamic process of making it their own. That sense of ownership rescues *halacha* and tradition from a place of obsolescence to one of unparalleled beauty and relevance. Questions and discussion are the sacred doorways to that refreshingly genuine Jewish experience; as a community, let us use this latest debate as inspiration to creating those doorways and unabashedly walking through them.

Chodesh Tov, Shabbat Shalom and Good Shabbos!