Into the Heart of the Fire

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Rabba Dr Melanie Landau lives in Jerusalem, graduated from Yeshivat Maharat in June 2015 and works as the Director of Leadership Programming for Encounter, an educational organization dedicated to increasing the capacity of leaders of the US Jewish community to be agents of change in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She was a lecturer in Jewish Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia where she was born and raised. Based on her PhD, her book is titled "Tradition and Equality in Jewish Marriage: Beyond the Sanctification of Subordination". She also holds degrees is law, an MA is Psychoanalytic Studies, and training in the healing arts.

Over 20 years ago when I was the National President of the Australasian Union of Jewish Speakers we hosted Rabbi Avraham Infeld for a National Conference. Avraham was the first person to tell me that I should become a rabbi. “But Avraham” I said, “I don’t even know if I believe in God” and he responded to me, “But you love people”. That was before I started learning Torah and before Torah was the guiding light in my life. I was standing at the precipice of my spiritual journey that has opened out in different directions including through prayer, yoga, meditation, dream-work, inner child healing, relationship work, conflict transformation, spiritual direction, pastoral counseling & sexual healing.

I had the privilege of studying at and graduated from Yeshivat Maharat, Class of 2015. One of the things that I love about Yeshivat Maharat is the diversity of women students. I appreciate the clarity of the institutional goal of training orthodox women spiritual leaders- and also the plurality of women and of visions for the rabbinate that this shared goal brings together. A sense of the diversity of the contexts in which we operate is reflected in the different titles we hold. We have the titles of Maharat (acronym for Leader in Jewish Law, Spirituality and Torah) Rabba, Morateynu (Our Teacher) and even a Rabbi, each title being

mandated by its context.

I have been teaching and leading in Jewish life for many years. I love learning and I love halakha. As a law graduate, I have an appreciation for law generally as well. The rabbinic attention to detail involved in the halakhic process is a symbol of love, an act of love. As we learn the halakhic details and distinctions, we are invited into that love relationship of paying attention, of noticing, of caring - and of discernment and differentiation.

For me joining Yeshivat Maharat, was an important opportunity to be part of a cohort of women leaders who could act as mirrors for each other, mutually supporting each other's journey to be who we can possibly be as leaders, and as humans in this magnificent and broken world.

My intention for my ordination is to use the threshold and wearing of this formal mantle of leadership and responsibility, to more fully speak my voice and have it be heard. As I start living and embodying this intention I am confronted with so much resistance. It is so uncomfortable for me to continue to speak and put my voice into the public arena, even as I write this now. However, this discomfort is only matched and even overtaken by a huge discomfort of what I have been calling my passion, the feeling that I am on fire, a feeling that I have so much energy and desire to give that need to find channels. This passion is a consuming fire and it could consume me from the inside without adequate channels for expression.

I see my role as using the depth and sensitivity of my own experience as a resource that other people can use in service of their own process and self-understanding and acceptance. Each challenge has its dividends. Over the past 4 years my work in conflict transformation has taught me that conflict truly can be an opportunity for openness, healing and transformation. Instead of managing problems and trying to put out fires, appeasing people with big feelings and numbing ourselves to the pain of the real, we make the choice to jump into the fire, bring out the messiness and then in unraveling it we get to discover the magnificence of the world.

This is the intention with which I accepted my ordination at the Yeshivat Maharat Ordination Ceremony, Sunday June 14, Ramaz , NYC:

With this smicha I will..Love truth and pursue the Divine; Embrace and share the Living Torah; And empower myself and others to live full lives of passion and transformation- sustained and guided by the deep knowledge that all humanity is

created in God’s image.

I am blessed and sustained by the connection to you my colleagues, my hevrutot, women, spiritual leaders, in Torah, and I treasure how we are mirrors for each other. Each one holding inside her the seeds, sprouts, and fruition of her own calling- and the manifestation of her own unique voice and refraction of holy Torah.

I am deeply grateful to all those who have gone before us and in whose merit we are here, to the Board, donors, faculty and staff at Yeshivat Maharat- and all those teachers, family, friends and communities who have held me and brought me to this place. At a moment like this, I see all that I carry- and that I inherited- the light and the dark- the individual and the collective- as transmuted into a blessing.

May I be of service as a vessel of connection and an invitation to plumb the depths- Both accompanying people into the joy and fullness of their own solitariness, as well as into the celebration of community and togetherness.

May I step forward with the courage of speaking truth to power, and have the trust to fully manifest in this dear world the gifts you, God, have bestowed upon me- in ways I dream of and ways I have yet to dream - at home, with family, with friends, in and across communities. At every breath.