

Dear Almost Graduates,

Once upon a time, there was a great king with a vast and beautiful palace. His throne room was the envy of all who visited. To ensure that it remained a sight to behold, the king commissioned four world-renowned artists to compete in designing one wall each in the great hall. He chose the artists for their creativity, innovative technique, attention to detail and extraordinary reputation. The artists traveled from the four corners of the kingdom to create their original designs. Each carried an array of brushes and tools, palettes and tubes filled with the most exquisite and exotic colors. But before applying even one brushstroke, three of the artists measured, sketched and drew, erased, revised, and planned and replanned every aspect of their masterpieces. And what did the fourth artist do? The fourth artist sat on a chair in the corner of the room and watched. The fourth artist observed every start and stop, every line and every detail. Finally, the painting began. Three of the artists draped drop cloths, mixed pigments, primed the walls, dipped their brushes, and gingerly shaded and colored their designs. And the fourth artist sat and watched. The three artists added layers of tint upon tint and gilded their art with pure gold and encrusted it with gems. And the fourth artist sat and watched. After several

weeks of round-the-clock work, the three artists finished their magnificent art installations. It was only at this point that finally, the fourth artist rose and began work on the final wall. Carefully, the artist affixed mirrors of all sizes on the wall, each glistening and brilliant. When the king entered the throne room to admire the creations, he immediately declared the fourth artist the winner of the competition because the fourth wall reflected the splendor and majesty of the other three.

I read this rabbinic parable over Shavuot and thought of you. Each of you, graduates, is like that fourth artist. You have been surrounded by sculptors and painters, glaziers and illustrators. Each added a unique and personal touch to the environment that surrounds you. Your family has masterfully created one wall and your friends have fashioned another. And the third wall exhibits the work of Akiba-- the learning that you engaged in, the relationships that molded you, the role models and teachers who shaped you, the Jewish texts and thoughts that formed your foundations, the Torah that strengthens your beliefs and ideas, and the knowledge of history and science, art and literature and math that have challenged you and have awakened your curiosity and drive. You reflect all this artistry and

craftsmanship and you gleam with these splashes of color and intensity. You have hung the mirrors and carry them with you now as you leave Akiba.

But--you are not only a mirror reflecting the hard work and passion of others. While a mirror reflects, it can also create anew. If you have ever looked through a kaleidoscope, you know that with a subtle twist or shift, the mirrors inside generate a new landscape. You do the same thing. With your tremendous talents, skills, and interests, you reflect the environments in which you have grown and will bring your own distinctive flair to your next opportunities.

For mirrors, and kaleidoscopes for that matter, to be the most brilliant and to cast those original reflections light must shine on the mirrors. This week's parashah reminds us of the source of such light. To light the menorah that stood in the center of the tabernacle and later the Temple, the kohen would ascend several steps and use pure olive oil to kindle the seven flames. The sacred menorah, mentioned more often in the Torah than any other holy vessel, burned continuously, tended to by the kohanim

on a daily basis. Its centrality reminds us that not only did it serve a  
functionary role to illuminate the tabernacle, but the menorah also  
symbolized for the Israelites--and for us their descendants--that God led  
them in the desert; that God was and is in our midst. Hashem 's presence  
in our lives remains constant, and we must tend to it every day, just as the  
menorah was kindled every day. It is our sacred responsibility to fuel that  
flame of God and partner with hashem in shedding light in new, productive,  
creative and meaningful ways in the world.

May you carry your mirrors with pride and grace and purpose. May you  
shine the light of Torah and creativity and your heritage--and  
yourselves--on the many paths you now embark upon.

Mazal Tov!