

Invocation in Honor of Rabbi Denise Eger
at her Installation as the President of the Board of Rabbis
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Happy Lag B'Omer. Thirty three years ago I began my rabbinic career as the Hillel director at USC. Just a few years later my president was a talented feisty activist named Denise Eger. Hillel rabbis dream of presidents like Denise --- she was smart, political, knew how to lead by example and to encourage others to be her partners. And she is a gifted prayer leader.

Now thirty-plus years later, Denise brings those skills, refined over the years, to her new position as President, now of the Board of Rabbis. The fact that her appointment is revolutionary might come a surprise to others but not to those of us who have worked with her over the years. She has diligently and thoughtfully built bridges and created partnerships with so many different people and groups; everyone recognizes her talent, her ability to work with people who have different points of view, and her skill at creating a sense of collaboration.

The roots Denise planted at Hillel years ago have grown into an *atz shatul al mayim*, a tree planted by the water: strong, supple and fruitful. And Lag B'omer is a time to think about trees. After all, one of the ways Lag B'Omer is celebrated in Israel is by planting trees, and the haftarah for this week speaks of a tree planted by the waters, sending forth its roots by a stream; with leaves that are fresh and fruit that it abundant.

So it is in this spirit that I offer a blessing for my friend Denise as she becomes the President of the Board of Rabbis.

The blessing comes from the story in the Talmud about a man wandering in the desert, tired, hungry and thirsty. Finally, he chances upon an oasis and discovers a beautiful tree filled with luscious ripe fruit planted by a flowing stream. He rested under the shade of the tree, drank the water and ate the fruit. When he was ready to continue his journey he turned to the tree and said: "O tree, how can I bless you. Should I say: 'You should have wonderful shade'? You already have wonderful shade. Shall I say: 'May your fruit be sweet'? It already is sweet. Shall I say: 'There should be a refreshing stream flowing beside you'? There already is a stream. Oh tree, how can I bless you? All I can say is: 'May all your saplings be like you.'"

So Denise, how can I bless you? Shall I say: 'You should create a congregation that makes a difference in people's lives'? You already have created that congregation. Should I say: "Your passion and commitment for equality and justice should be a force for change in our city, our state and indeed our nation'? It so clearly already has. Your leadership on the marriage equality issue is legendary. Shall we say you should have friends who love you, a marriage worthy of God's blessing—you already do. So Denise, how can we bless you? All we can say is: 'May all your saplings...not just Ben, but also your students and your congregants... May all your saplings be like you.'"

