

Forty years ago, almost to the day, I sat where you're sitting—not at Wise Temple in LA, but alongside my classmates waiting to receive ordination as a rabbi. Little could I imagine back then that my career would lead me to teaching at Hebrew Union College, or to the opportunity to address a group of new rabbis. It was such a pleasure to study Talmud and Codes with you, and an honor beyond measure to speak to you today.

I want to begin twenty-some years ago, when a young man on the staff of the organization where I was working took me to lunch to discuss his interest in applying to rabbinical school. He asked a question no one had put to me quite so directly: What quality do you admire in a rabbi? You won't be surprised to hear that I thought of a phrase from the Talmud. I told him that I look for a quality the Talmud calls in Hebrew ותכו כבר *tokho ke-varo*—a person who is the same on the inside as on the outside. In short, I said then, what I most appreciate is sincerity: a Jewish leader whose character is no different than what they present to the public. Not someone with an impressive persona hiding less admirable qualities, but a rabbi who does not pretend to be more or less than they actually are.

The description of a Torah scholar as ותכו כבר *tokho ke-varo* originates in a *midrash* on the construction of the ark in the book of Exodus. In Exodus 25:11, Moses receives the order to build an ark and “Overlay it with gold—overlay *זו ומחו* *זו ומחו*, meaning, “inside and out”. The Babylonian Amora Rava comments that the gold “inside and out” of the ark teaches us this: כל תלמיד חכם שאין תוכו כברו אינו תלמיד חכם: “Any Torah scholar whose inside is not the same as their outside is not truly a Torah scholar.” Just like the ancient ark, scholars of Torah, those who claim to speak for Jewish tradition, must be the same inside and out.

We can take the metaphor a step further. Just as the gold overlay covered both the inside and the outside of the ark, the intensive Torah study we rabbis engage in should affect us both

inside and out. On the outside, Torah must guide our work and our relations with the people we serve. It should permeate everything we say and do. At the same time, Torah should be present inside us. Our learning should infuse our inner lives. As you have discovered during the years of study leading to this milestone, immersion in Torah changes a person—ideally in ways that make us better able to serve our God and the Jewish people.

From here I would like to develop these ideas about both the “inside” and the “outside,” and suggest how rabbis might keep our insides and our outsides in sync.

To explore the outside, we turn to another Talmud passage that refers to the need for Torah scholars to be *תוכו כבירו tokho ke-varo*. It’s part of a long story in Berakhot 28a involving Rabban Gamliel, the Nasi or head of the Sanhedrin and founder of a respected rabbinic dynasty.

The story begins with an unnamed student who, apparently looking to stir up trouble, asks the respected Tanna Rabbi Yehoshua if Arvit, the evening service, is mandatory. R. Yehoshua responds that it’s optional. Knowing that Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, disagrees, the student disingenuously asks him the same question. When Rabban Gamliel answers that Arvit is mandatory, the student, feigning innocence, says, “Oh, but R. Yehoshua told me it’s optional.” Rabban Gamliel—who does not like being contradicted, and who has had other run-ins with his colleague Yehoshua, instructs the student to ask the question again when everyone assembles in the beit midrash. Rabbi Yehoshua tries to reverse his position, but Rabban Gamliel insists that he knows Yehoshua disagrees. Gamliel forces R. Yehoshua to remain standing while he continues teaching.

As time passes, everyone present in the beit midrash grows angry at the public embarrassment of R. Yehoshua. They recall several other occasions when Rabban Gamliel gave R. Yehoshua a hard time and compelled him to publicly acknowledge Gamliel’s authority as

Nasi, the leader of the supreme rabbinic court. The group forced Rabban Gamliel out of office, replacing him with Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah.

Let's pause here. Part of us may wonder what's wrong with these rabbis. Did they really get so exercised over that question? Even for Jews who take daily prayer seriously, the legal status of one of the three daily services hardly seems like a higher-order issue, let alone one worth a schism and the removal of a long-time, accomplished leader.

But there's also something familiar about this part of the story. How many times in synagogues and other organizations do we see small disagreements blow up into unending crises? Haven't we seen groups break away from their years-long affiliations over what seem to outsiders insignificant matters? I've never forgotten the "controversy" in one of the synagogues where I served on the rabbinic staff over the tuna salad served after Shabbat services. Every Shabbat without fail, the board president heard earnest complaints that the tuna had too much mayo, too little mayo, or whatever shortcoming someone decided it had. This president was a kind man and a good leader, but in two years the poor guy could never solve that one. At least they never threw him out of office over it. Thirty years later it seems funny, but it was no fun at the time.

The takeaway for rabbis: Be mindful of the small things. If a minor kerfuffle blows up, take steps to resolve it early on, before something small turns into the most important thing in the world. You may even want to let go of some of your preferred ideas for this purpose. Rabban Gamliel's rigidity—his insistence that everyone acknowledge that he was always right—became a main cause of his removal from office.

The next part of the story in Berakhot conveys another valuable lesson today's rabbis can use. When they removed Rabban Gamliel as Nasi, they also removed the guard he had set at the

door of the beit midrash. Rabban Gamliel had limited entry to the beit midrash. The Talmud reports that when they opened the study hall doors to all comers, they had to add hundreds of benches. It turned out that large numbers of Jews—in that context, Jewish men—wanted to engage in Torah study.

We may well wonder: Why would Rabban Gamliel limit access to Torah study? Did he not agree that the Torah belongs to all Jews, “the heritage of the congregation of Jacob,” as Deuteronomy puts it? In explaining the presence of guards at the entrance to the beit midrash, the Talmud tells us, “Rabban Gamliel used to say: ‘כל תלמיד חכם שאין תוכו כברו’—Any Torah scholar whose inside is not the same as his outside לא יכנס לבית המדרש will not enter the beit midrash.” You recognize the phrase we encountered earlier from the mouth of a different scholar. Rabban Gamliel apparently applied the criterion we learned from Rava to every potential student. He wanted to teach only those whose insides already matched their outsides.

What followed the removal of the guard seems to me to spotlight Rabban Gamliel’s mistake. Setting a high standard to enter a place of Torah limits participation. It reduces the number of Jews who encounter the beauties of Jewish tradition. I want to stress to the ordination class the implicit lesson. Whatever teaching you offer, whatever program you plan, don’t put up barriers to entry. Always open the doors of your metaphorical beit midrash to everyone who wants to enter. Have lots of benches—actual or metaphorical—ready to make your Torah available as widely as possible.

The Talmud continues to narrate the day of Rabban Gamliel’s removal from office. It adds that on that day, the Mishnah tractate Eduyot was taught. That tractate discusses an unusually diverse set of topics. It settles many disputes among the early rabbis, giving final rulings in favor of one side or the other. Indeed, our Talmud passage in Berakhot reports that,

“לא היתה הלכה שהיתה תלויה בבית המדרש שלא פירשה”—There was no legal controversy in the beit midrash that they did not resolve that day.”

What stands out about this accomplishment is the context in which it occurs. Only after the scholars opened the doors of the beit midrash to include as many Torah students as possible did they find answers to unsettled questions. This teaches us that we find answers we otherwise would not notice when more minds participate in thinking about the questions. Adding more perspectives to the debate—especially those that haven’t been heard before—leads to new insights. This, to me, is the definition of the pluralism we seek in Jewish communities. When we adapt the words from the Passover seder and say, “Let all who are interested come and learn; let all with ideas come and debate,” we open the door to Jewish renewal. That is what the Talmud expresses when it says that no question was left unresolved once the doors of the beit midrash were opened to all comers.

It’s our responsibility as rabbis to open the doors of any place we teach Torah wide enough to welcome all who want to participate. Those who may have been excluded turn out to be precisely the voices we need to hear. As in the time of the Talmud, ideas from those who are not part of a self-appointed “elite” will show the way out of many difficulties that perplex us.

This Talmudic narrative, then, offers three messages for our rabbinic work: Not to let small things blow up into big things; not to imagine ourselves as always right and the only legitimate source of authority; and to offer our Torah to as wide an audience as possible. But the idea of *תוכו כבחו*, making our inside and outside the same, also holds lessons for us as individuals who ourselves participate in the covenant of the people Israel and serve the God of Israel.

Recall that Rava in tractate Yoma took the image of the mythical Ark overlaid with gold both inside and out as a metaphor of a *talmid hakham*, a Torah scholar. In our terms, a rabbi. The

golden covering reminds rabbis, who represent the Torah, that we need Torah to affect our “inside” as well as our “outside.” There’s a story of a student in a European yeshivah who asks his teacher to ordain him, bragging that he’s gone through the Talmud three times. “Yes,” the teacher answers, “but how many times has the Talmud gone through you?”

The point is that the Torah we learn should penetrate us; it should change us and improve us. The Talmudic sage Abbaye, a contemporary of Rava’s, says that the whole point is to make us into people others admire. He relates it to the verse we know from the Shema, “You shall love Adonai your God.” This means, Abbaye claims, make the divine name beloved to other people. When they see a Torah scholar living out Torah values and treating other people well, they will say, “How wonderful for that person and their teachers; wouldn’t it be great if more people studied Torah!” Indeed, we need not only to go through the studies required to earn the title of rabbi. More than that, we need to internalize the values embedded in the Torah of our people. Those positive values must become part of our *תוך tokh*, our inner selves. Then our outward behaviors will reflect those values. A Torah scholar whose inside and outside are the same is just the kind of leader who will draw people to them and show them how to learn and internalize Jewish living for themselves.

One further message drawn from the idea that one’s inside should be the same as one’s outside. A Polish rabbi from the late 16th and early 17th century named Shmuel Eidels wrote a widely-studied commentary on the Talmud. Eidels explains Rava’s statement that “Any Torah scholar whose inside is not the same as his outside is not truly a Torah scholar.” Eidels says the statement means this: *שעוסק בתורה ואין בו יראת שמים*: a student who immerses in Torah study without having fear of Heaven.

What is *yir'at shamayim*, 'fear of Heaven'? It's interesting that the same Torah that commands us to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our might also commands us to fear that same God. Perhaps a better translation of the Hebrew word is "reverence." It denotes a deep respect, tinged with feelings of awe. Some thinkers consider *yir'at shamayim* a mitzvah that we can fulfill every moment of the day. Everything we do as we go about our lives can flow from awareness of God's presence and God's awe-inspiring greatness. If so, then a true Torah scholar serves God not only outwardly, but always preserves the inward feeling of being in the presence of the divine. *Tokho ke-varo*: the inside and the outside are the same.

At bottom, we become rabbis to serve a purpose greater than ourselves. However understood, that purpose is the divine at work in the human world. As you begin your service in the rabbinate, everything you do must follow from that sense of purpose. You will keep your insides and outsides in alignment by asking if what you want to do serves heaven. When the answer is affirmative, you will know you can move forward; and you will have the best possible chance of success.

I know from the time we spent together studying formally and talking informally that each of you ordinands will live out the Torah you take with you from HUC. Every one of you possesses qualities unique to yourself burnished like shining gold by the Torah you absorbed. Your inner virtues will find expression out in the world. Every one of you has within you a form of *yir'at shamayim*, a sense of awe at the important purpose you are privileged to serve in the Jewish community.

As your *yir'at shamayim* finds expression in your rabbinic work, you will bring to fruition the lessons we surveyed this morning. Both by the work you do and through the honesty and sincerity of your personalities, you will inspire many people to rich, uplifting Jewish lives,

lives filled with Torah learning, with service of Heaven, and with kindness to all human beings. I know everyone present joins me in praying that you will be granted many years of vigor to do this valuable work. May you grow from strength to strength; may the Holy One bless the work of your hands. (Amen)