Without using alchemy, the 16th-century Italian commentator Seforno (1470–1550) turned gems into gold. Writing a few short words about the gemstones that adorned the clothing of the High Priest, described in Parashat Tetzavveh, Seforno shares a truly fine insight about achieving greatness as an educator.

We read in Exodus 28:2, “And you shall make sacred garments for Aaron your brother, for honor and for glory.” On the word tiferet (glory), Seforno asserts that the High Priest will be a kohen-moreh norah, an awesome priest-teacher. He explains, שם התלמידים ותפיו על לבו, “for they are his students who are engraved on his heart and shoulders.”

This phrase refers to the names of the tribes of Israel, which were engraved on gemstones worn by the High Priest as part of his ritual garb: the High Priest wore avnei-shoham, which were probably lapis lazuli, in the form of an epaulet on each shoulder, each stone engraved with the names of six tribes of Israel, totaling twelve names. He also wore twelve different gems, arrayed in rows on the breastplate of judgment, set in gold. Each gem on the breastplate was individually engraved with the name of a tribe of Israel (Exod. 28:6–11, 15–21).

Why was the High Priest adorned with tribes’ names on his shoulders and his chest? We can speculate that wearing the names of his people was meant to keep the supreme religious leader humble, remembering who he represents before God. But Seforno’s comment directs us away from the topic of religious leadership, to the seemingly unrelated field of education.

Seforno borrows the phrase priest-teacher from II Chronicles 15:3, in which a troubled era of Israelite history is decried as being “bereft of a priest-teacher...”
and bereft of Torah.” He seizes on this brief biblical allusion to the priest functioning as a teacher to define what it takes to be a master educator.

For Seforno, as I understand him, a master teacher who carries her students’ names engraved on her shoulders takes responsibility for them, for what they learn. This is task-orientation. A master teacher who carries her students’ names engraved on her heart cares about her students. This is person-orientation. A master teacher practices both.

These two essential values in teaching, caring about the subject matter and caring about the student, can conflict. A teacher who is very focused on covering a substantial amount of course material by a set date might overlook how her student learns. As a result, the student might master the data superficially, never connecting imaginatively with material that requires imaginative engagement; or emotionally with material that demands emotional connection; or critically, with material that requires independent thought. Will this student ever love the subject enough to learn more on his own? This teacher’s focus on powering through the material may neglect whether it will become meaningful to her student.

A teacher who focuses too much on the person, on the other hand, may become overly concerned about the emotional comfort of her student, and might relax her demands that the student develop the discipline to learn complex material. This teacher risks not challenging her student enough, allowing the student to evade the hard work of mastering essential content or skills. This teacher’s focus on how the student feels can neglect what the student learns.

Extreme emphasis on either task-orientation or person-orientation is not desirable. The wise teacher works perennially in the creative tension between the two.

Fortunately, teachers can change: they can learn! A teacher can recognize her own teaching preference or bias, identifying whether she is naturally inclined toward task-oriented teaching or person-oriented teaching, and she can work to balance her instincts with what her students need. Such self-knowledge allows the “awesome” teacher to uphold educational standards and be sensitive to the ways different students’ minds and imaginations work. Steady expressions of interest in both—in the content and in the student—make for a stable and rich learning environment for the student.

Speaking of Text
A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

A Precious Hebrew Manuscript
The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

Knowing almost nothing about this beautiful manuscript, what would you guess it is? Finely decorated with gold leaf, Hebrew, small for easy carrying (these qualities are all obvious from the photo)—all of these characteristics suggest that it is a dear personal item, one that a wealthy Jew commissioned because of the importance of what it records. Knowing that it is a fifteenth-