

The Jewelry of a Master Teacher

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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 narah*, an awesome priest-teacher. He explains שהם תלמידיו החקוקים על לבו וכתפיו, “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 decied 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.

A month from now, on Purim, we will read, in Megillat Esther, a tragicomic fantasy of royal power, expressed through objects, such as limitless food and drink, lavish tapestries, and couches made of solid gold; and through the objectification of women; all designed to satisfy the whims of an impulsive, powerful fool of a king. The Persian fantasy of royal garb shares some physical similarities with the ritual garb of the High Priest, detailed in Tetzavveh. But in Exodus, the Bible adapts royal extravagance when fashioning the religious leader’s symbolic clothing, retaining some of the dazzle, but carving responsibility into the glitter—adding *kavod* (dignity) to the *tiferet* (glory). The rabbinic tradition deepens the Bible’s understanding of what it means to be genuinely awe-inspiring, with comments such as those of Seforno.

Seforno’s insight about the awesome teacher invites emulation. We cannot all be the High Priest, but we can be wonderful teachers. We can ask two questions of ourselves, when we teach in a formal setting, or in our homes with our own children and grandchildren, or as mentors in our workplace. We can ask: When I take this person on as my student, am I genuinely carrying his or her name on my heart? Am I successfully carrying his or her name on my shoulders?

If we can answer “yes” to these questions consistently, then we have directed our energy diligently to the service of the

text *and* the student, and we have achieved deep integrity as teachers. Then we become *mamlekhet kohanim vegoy kadosh*, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And that is pure gold.

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