

רבי אליעזר אומר, יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשלך, . . . והוי מתחמם כנגד אורן של חכמים . . . :

חברי הטוב, קיימת מה שכתוב במשנתך.

We read in Mishna Avot, “Rabbi Eliezer taught: Make your friend’s honor as beloved as your own, ... and warm yourself at the hearth of sages.”

I came to JTS, to Teaneck, and to Beth Sholom seventeen years ago, and as neighbors, fellow daveners, like-minded allies on the JTS faculty, Eliezer and I became close friends. I always found that **our** רבי אליעזר lived up to the demands of the Mishna’s רבי אליעזר. I lack the extraordinary בקיאות in classical Jewish sources that Eliezer had already as a young man, a בקיאות that continued growing throughout his lifetime, during which he was always learning, studying לשמה, outside his prep for teaching and his research. Often in the academic world, and not infrequently in the Jewish world, learning can be wielded as a weapon. But Eliezer regarded me, other colleagues, and students with concern for our כבוד, our honor and comfort. And so it was easy to be Eliezer’s friend, and was easy learn from Eliezer, because he was unusually generous and kind with his knowledge. Coming to JTS from Northwestern University, I had no way of knowing how much I would come to dislike the George Washington Bridge—except on the days that Eliezer and I carpooled together. I learned so much torah, and so much about friendship, that the commute was actually rewarding, and bad traffic just meant I would be even better off when we finally got out of the car.

That same generosity marked Eliezer’s teaching. Even in his last years at JTS, he continued creating new courses and prepping for them intensively. In part, I think this was because he loved learning something new. At the same time, he put this effort in because of his deep **commitment** to teaching. Eliezer was among the most beloved teachers at JTS, and in the RA, because even when he left the world of the yeshiva to become a professor, he remained a רב. He was most devoted not to the professorate but to the Jewish people, to a Jewish future, to the congregants his students would serve, and, above all, to God. Eliezer’s אמונה was an אמונה פשוטה, a simple and direct faith, most tangible in the joy in his sweet voice leading tefillot or singing zemirot.

Eliezer came from a very Orthodox family and learned at yeshivot when he was young, but he chose to study at JTS, to join the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, and to be a professor at JTS. Of course, this journey is one that many JTS professors and many Conservative rabbis made back in the day, starting already in the nineteenth century when what was then called "the historical school" first emerged. Towards the end of that century, Solomon Schechter wrote a famous essay describing that's schools approach with eloquence and great persuasive power. But towards the end of that famous essay, Schechter admits to some doubt, some discomfort with his choices. He writes:

Being brought up in the old ... Synagogue, . . . the old Adam still asserts itself in me, and in unguarded moments makes me rebel against this new rival of revelation in the shape of history. . . Nor can I quite reconcile myself to this alliance of religion with history, which seems to me both unworthy and unnatural.

It's perhaps surprising that after nineteen pages of eloquent and powerful advocacy for the historical school, Schechter admits that he harbors these doubts. What was true of מוריני ורבינו אליעזר was also true of מוריני ורבינו שניאור זלמן. Eliezer was not dogmatic, he kept an open mind, he was constantly self-critical. Precisely for theses reason Eliezer was not always 100% sure that he had chosen the right path. To his credit, but also to his own psychological detriment, he didn't allow himself to be positive that the historical school, as Schechter called it, truly cleaved to a תורת אמת, a Torah of truth. And because Eliezer took God so seriously, he didn't shy away from thinking in terms of a תורת אמת. To be sure, Eliezer loved learning Talmud, and for that reason among others he valued his journey to JTS. He told me that at the *haredish* yeshiva he attended up until he was about 18 or 19, he learned a great deal about אחרונים; at Yeshiva University, where he received his B.A. and his סמיכה, he learned a great deal about ראשונים; but only upon coming to JTS for his doctorate did he finally begin to learn תלמוד. At the same time, however, Eliezer was too honest to pretend that the school he followed Schechter in joining had all the answers or always provided the best solutions to the problems of modern Judaism. He worried, as Schechter did, about how tenable the position of Conservative Judaism will turn out to be. At times the insults that came his way from the world he left—and

come they did, because that world was angry about losing a תלמיד חכם —at times those insults caused real pain. It saddened me to see that pain, though, thank God, he had Shelly, who did so much, so selflessly, so consistently, to take his pain away. But I have to admire the deep humility and honesty, the conscious **choice** to be vulnerable, that prevented Eliezer from being sure he was right. וְלִפְנֵי קְבוּדָּהּ — Sefer Mishlei teaches us that true piety requires the discipline that wisdom affords, and humility is more important than honor. Our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Humility and contrition [are] ... the beginning and end of religious thinking, the secret test of faith.

Our teacher and our friend רבי אליעזר lived what, for Heschel, is the truly religious life, a life of modesty and vulnerability. He embraced the wisdom of wondering rather than knowing. This is why, I think, his impact on students was so deep; he taught not only this or that sugya; he taught what it means to be a religious human being. As his friend, as his colleague and as his תלמיד, I'm amazed and inspired by the honesty, the integrity, the richness of his religious life.

תודה, אליעזר ידידי, על כל מה שנתת לי. נתראה שוב בעולם של אמת.