

Bonnier Chair Inauguration

29 October 2018 / 20 Marcheshvan 5779

Thank you, Dr. Elledge, for that kind introduction.

Before I formally begin, let me say a couple of words about two sad events between which this joyous afternoon is bookended.

First, the senseless and depraved murder of eleven men and women at prayer this past Saturday morning at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. *Baruch Dayan Haemet*, blessed is the true judge, we say. We have no reasons, only trust, that something must make the story of humanity worth the pain that it so often seems to become.

Let me, as a tragic footnote of our age, simply note the following: November 5, 2017, twenty-six people murdered at the First Baptist Church in Southerland Spring, Texas. September 24, 2017, a woman murdered at Burnett Chapel Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee. August 13, 2016, two worshippers murdered outside their mosque in New York City. August 9, 2016, one murdered at a church in Jersey City, New Jersey. June 17, 2015, nine worshippers murdered while at study in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. April 13, 2014, three murdered outside Jewish community buildings in Overland Park, Kansas. (None were Jews, by the way.) August 5, 2012, the murder of six members of the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The list continues.

We also note, a week from this Friday evening, the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, when, in the heart of Europe, in the middle of the twentieth century, over 90 Jews were murdered; 267 synagogues were destroyed (most never to be rebuilt); 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses were looted or burned; tens of thousands of Jewish prayer books, bibles, and Torah scrolls were destroyed; and 30,000 Jewish men were imprisoned in concentration camps.

Kristallnacht is generally understood by historians as the most significant prelude to the attempted destruction of the entire Jewish people in the Second World War. What begins with Jews will never, ever end with them.

Zekher tzaddik livracha, may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing. The imperative is all the greater that we live our lives as continuations of the values, honesty, and decent goodness of those who are taken from us all too soon.

Now, *l'chaim*, let me turn back to matters of the living, and to the future.

Thank you, President Bergman, Provost Kelly, and Dean Maatman for inviting me to join this College, for making my transition seamless, and for so staunchly supporting the teaching and study of religion—in all its variety—at this institution.

Thank you, colleagues in the Department of Religion for extending to me the offer of this position, and for being immensely encouraging, as newfound friends, mentors, passionate teachers, intellectuals, and, in the Greek sense of the word, *philosophos*—lovers of wisdom.

Let me add an additional special thanks to Dr. Gaebler and Mr. Tom Young, who organized this event this afternoon.

And finally, thank you, Reverend Åke and Ms. Kristina Bonnier, for the immensity of your gift to Gustavus Adolphus College. We are here today, more than for any other reason, to recognize your generosity, on so many levels, to this wonderful place. We are standing in a room that exists purely because of your kindness. Each day of the semester this room is host to the vibrancy of human life: to students experimenting with ideas and beliefs, to staff and faculty returning in body and mind to those things which are most essential, to conversation, laughter, heartbreak, anguish, questioning, and joy. As the psalmist says, “Happy are those who dwell in your house, they shall continue to praise you.” We live in a stunted world, one with short tempers and shorter memories. But spaces like this add expanse, on planes seen and unseen. And for that, let me be one amongst a great many to thank you.

It would also be what is called a *chillul hashem*, a public shame, if I did not acknowledge the reason I am standing before you all this afternoon. I am the deeply grateful and humble first holder of the Åke and Kristina Bonnier Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies here at the College, which is the first permanent position at Gustavus dedicated to teaching about Jewish religion, history, and culture, as well as to creating a space for Jewish life on campus.

It is with these goals of the Chair in mind—teaching about Judaism and creating space for Jewish life—that I want to take my time here today to share some brief words of Torah that, I think, can deepen how we understand our role as professors and mentors.

A *sugya*, a discussion, is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukka, a work redacted sometime in the late sixth or seventh centuries in Mesopotamia. It read thus:

Rabbi Zeira said, and some say it was Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa who said: Come and see that the *midat*, the essential character, of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is unlike the *midat*, the essential character, of flesh and blood (that is, of humans). The essential character of flesh and blood is similar to how an empty vessel holds that which is newly placed within it, while a full vessel does not hold it. However, the essential character of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is like a full vessel that holds and holds and holds.

The rabbis teach us: we can become like the Holy One, Blessed be He, as we learn from a verse in Deuteronomy, “And it shall come to pass, if you will hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord your God...” What does this mean? If you hearken to the old—that is, if you review what you have already learned—you will hearken to the new as well—that is, you will continue to build upon what you already know—and become like a full vessel that yet takes in ever more.

What is this brief Talmudic parable describing for us? Why, nothing other than the essential nature of what it means to be a teacher, as well as a guiding principle with which we must approach each and every student.

It is too often the case that students enter a course thinking of themselves as empty vessels and leave it thinking they are filled. Without a doubt, there is much that we pour into them: history and geography, languages and customs, philosophies and arguments and ideas. But, warns the Talmud, it

is the way of flesh and blood, of mere mortals, to see one's self as an empty vessel, able only to be filled until it is full.

Instead, we must assume the qualities of God, an act of pure *imitatio dei*, becoming as full vessels who are never filled up. And how do we do this? The rabbis provide their classic response: study, study, study. If you review what you have learned it will be like something full that can always take in more.

A brief mishna in the fifth chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, a second-century text from the Land of Israel, completes this thought:

There are four *midot*, essential characters, of students: One who learns quickly and forgets quickly—his gain is cancelled by his loss. One who learns slowly and forgets slowly—his loss is cancelled by his gain. One who learns quickly and forgets slowly—his is a happy lot. One who learns slowly and forgets quickly—his is a sad lot.

Notice the overlapping language: *midot*, essential characters. The same word as used in the Talmud. And read not *ba'talmidim*, of students, but *be'talmidim*, in students: "There are four *midot* in every student." Each student has a little of each *mida*, of each essential character. If we teach too quickly, the vessels will run over and the loss will be outstripped by the gain. If we teach too slowly, we will not have time to complete the lessons and little will have been added to a vessel not yet full. The happy lot, literally the *chelek tov*, the good portion, is when we teach at the right pace and it is absorbed at the right pace, so that a full vessel stays perpetually full.

The miracle—rather, the divinity—is in the balance. It is what we owe to our students, passed on from one generation to the next. Said Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua:

Let your student's honor be as precious to you as your own. Let your colleague's honor be like the reverence due to your teacher. And let the reverence you have for your teacher be like the reverence due to heaven.

There is one final teaching I would like to bring, this one from the great code of Jewish law and ethics, the *Mishna Torah*, written by Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, called Rambam or Maimonides, in twelfth-century Egypt. In a chapter on the laws of *teshuvah*, sometimes translated as repentance but in this context perhaps better understood as return, he describes the essential nature of humans and their relationship to good and evil. He writes:

Forbid yourself to think that which is said by fools, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, decrees, at the very beginning of the life of every individual, whether he or she should be righteous or wicked. It is not so. Rather, every person is capable of being as righteous as Moses our Teacher or as wicked as Jeroboam, as wise or as foolish, as merciful or as cruel, as generous or as miserly, and so in all tendencies [*ha'de'ot*—note the root connection with *midot*].

And this matter is the very quintessence, the very pillar of the Torah and its commandments, as it says in Deuteronomy, “See, this day I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity,” and it says also, “See, this day I have set before you blessing and curse.” This is as

if to say, the power is in your hands, and whatever activity a person may be inclined to carry on, he or she has the free will to elect good or evil.

The Rambam's words must ring in the ear of every teacher. What great and awesome power we humans possess. What important decisions we have to make. It is the teacher's responsibility to help our students find their *midot*, their essential qualities, their special traits and characteristics, and to treat them with the honor we cherish in our own gifts and talents.

Yet sometimes a teacher must prompt a student to find *teshuvah*, a way of return, for it is not impossible that life can go astray, poor decisions can be made, and one can find one's self confronted with a road ahead that seems dark and full of terrors. For such is the condition of flesh and blood: choose between life and prosperity, death and adversity, with a freedom dreamed up by an almighty God but given—imposed? inflicted?—upon mere humanity, little lower than the angels, perhaps, but still—lower.

Such is the task of the teacher. To fill an endless vessel and to nurture a soul that is entirely unique in this world, yet not always at home in it. The classical sources can teach us a language by which to understand our role. But as Rabbi Tarfon said, "Though it is not for you to complete the task, neither are you free to stand aside from it."

It is with immense gratitude and thanksgiving that I take up my first year in this new Chair. To learn is to be made humble. To teach is to be made wise. Thank you, Reverend Åke and Ms. Kristina Bonnier, the Department of Religion, Gustavus Adolphus College, and all of you gathered here

today, new friends and acquaintances, fellow teachers and students, for the opportunity to stand before you and learn together, today and in the months and years to come.

Shalom u'veracha. May we find wisdom and good health together.

It is now my distinct honor to welcome Reverend Åke Bonnier to give some remarks.