

“Piety at the University?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The Midrash teaches: “If there are no small children there will be no disciples; if there are no disciples there will be no sages; if there are no sages there will be no Torah; if there is no Torah there will be no synagogues and academies; if there are no synagogues and academies, the Holy One, blessed be He, will no longer allow the shechina, the Divine presence, to dwell in the world.”

Without academies there will be no Divine presence. God is found not in ignorance but in striving, growing, learning. It is true that academies often traduce this mission, but the ideal endures.

Jewish academies are as old as Joshua ben Gamla, the Talmudic sage and educational innovator. Modern universities grew out of religious impulses in the Middle Ages and early modern era. At times the conflict is apparent between the university’s origins and its prevailing ideology. The story is told that the Philosophy Department at Harvard voted for a motto to be carved above the door: “Man is the measure of all things.” But while on vacation pious workmen replaced it with the motto actually engraved on Emerson Hall: “What is man that You are mindful of him (Psalm 8)?”

Humility and piety are not at odds with a questing mind. Those qualities may indeed be the dividing line between Professor and Sage.