

Against Certainty

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

We are surrounded by certainty. After a lifetime of finding out how wrong I can be about things I used to be sure of — including myself — I am amazed by the tub-thumping certainty of people around me. From politicians to pundits to preachers to — well, everyone — people seem incapable of entertaining the possibility they may be wrong. No wonder the Talmud tells us “teach your tongue to say ‘I don’t know.’”

The wisest among us have absorbed this lesson. In the midst of the constitutional debates, Ben Franklin said: “I confess there are several parts of this Constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure that I shall ever approve them. For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise.”

People change their minds and are afraid to say so because others will pounce on the shift as a weakness, calling it fault not flexibility. So let us remember the example of Mordecai Kaplan who supervised the writing of his student’s senior sermon, only to criticize it when it was delivered. When the astonished student reproached him, Kaplan answered, “Young man, since then I’ve grown.”