The Use of the Self in the Classroom

By Phillip I. Ackerman-Lieberman, Program in Jewish Studies, Vanderbilt University

One of my graduate mentors, Hossein Modarressi, writes the following on his webpage in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton:

> "I had two completely different courses of education. I first attended the Islamic seminary at Qum (Iran) where I received a complete traditional Islamic education in Arabic language and literature, Qur'an and hadith, Islamic philosophy, theology, and law. I then pursued my secular education which ended with a Ph.D. in Islamic law from Oxford University."

Despite his bearing the title, I would never have thought to call Professor Modarressi "Ayatulla." My extensive study of Islamic Commercial Law with Professor Modarressi had a distinctly traditional form, flavor and structure, which were certainly shaped by his training. Nevertheless, it was always crystal clear that our relationship was that of student to professor. Professor Modarressi's own religious commitments were never the subject of discussion inside or even outside class, which allowed the focus of our time to rightly be his encyclopedic knowledge of Islamic legal sources, the secondary literature in the field, and our shared experience of studying Islamic Law together, as graduate student and professor.

Professor Modarressi's characterization of his own life story has long resonated with me as I have worked to define my persona in the classroom. The last two phases of my own graduate education—rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the PhD at Princeton—were not as different from one another as Professor Modarressi's educational experiences at Qum and Oxford. Although JTS is indisputably a seminary, it also sustains a graduate school. Indeed, many of its faculty teach both rabbinical and graduate school students, often even in the same courses. Without the training I received as a rabbinical student at JTS, I would never have been able to pursue my subsequent graduate work; and my experience at the Seminary has certainly left its impress on who I am as a person.

As a scholar and a traditionally-committed rabbi, I am always vulnerable to the possibility that realms that I endeavor to keep distinct might influence each other. In my scholarly guise, I am more than capable of keeping these realms distinct. Undergraduates often enter our classrooms though when they are just learning to differentiate between ichthyologist and fish. In fact, we shouldn't blame our students for this—university hiring committees have been known to blur the

very same distinction! This explains the occasional email I receive respectfully addressed to "Rabbi Lieberman," which nonetheless grates because it reflects that the student relates to me as "rabbi" rather than as professor.

As a professor, my modus operandi is to encourage students to foster their own personal connection to the materials we study together. However, their desire to know my own personal connection to the same materials—while perhaps perfectly natural—is outside the scope of our course. At times, I have students from Vanderbilt's Divinity School in my classes, some of whom are pursuing ministry and as such will serve professionally as conduits of their respective religious traditions. These students may also serve as representative foils in carefully orchestrated and appropriate discussions about how traditionally-minded individuals might personally integrate scholarship into their religious worldview.

Since the vast majority of Vanderbilt students do not come from traditional Jewish backgrounds, they find my approach quite welcoming. When students realize that my own personal religious commitments lay firmly outside the bounds of the course, they feel more at ease, coming from their various different backgrounds. On occasion, a student will ask me a question in class that engages me directly, and I'll foreground my response with, "My own beliefs are outside the scope of this course, but…" and then much of the time I will proceed to answer. Students who arrive in my course with a more traditional background—"heritage students"—will find themselves exposed to the world of critical scholarship with all its complexities, assumptions, and problems. When I teach "Introduction to Jewish Studies," I make clear at the outset that "Introduction to Judaism" is a different course, one they may pursue in the Department of Religion—whereas my course is an introduction to the methodologies employed in the critical study of Judaism.

Outside the classroom, during office hours, I am a little more willing to allow other aspects of my persona to emerge. In these more informal moments, I welcome the opportunity to process material that can seem religiously earth-shaking with students and even to share my personal approach. As faculty members, all of us strive to serve as mentors, guiding students on their own personal odysseys. Yet each of their journeys is different. There will be moments where it is not only appropriate but even helpful for us to serve as guide on our students' intellectual journeys by shedding some light on our own personal ones. But since not every student will personally struggle in our classes, to my mind the personal element is better left out of the classroom.