

Gold, Inside and Out

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The instruction makes perfect sense to us: The Ark of the Covenant must be overlaid with gold, inside and out. We picture the Holy Ark upright, like ours, facing the congregation. Naturally, one would want both the exterior and the interior to be beautiful, so that the community could bask in its radiance when the Ark is both open and closed.

However, that shape is not at all what the ancients envisioned. Instead, the original Ark of the Covenant was a box, with its opening at the top. The tablets of the commandments were to be placed inside the box from the open top. Nobody would ever see the inside, except perhaps the High Priest, as he would be the only human being permitted to enter close proximity with the Holy of Holies. *Eitz Chayim*, the Torah Commentary of Conservative Judaism, observes: “Even if no mortal ever sees the inside of the Ark, it must nevertheless be pure.”

The ancient and medieval rabbis struggled with the description. They particularly wondered why gold plating would be commanded, rather than a solid gold Ark. Isn't plating, well, cheap? Wouldn't we want the Holiest Ark to be the real deal? Moreover, the specification is for “pure gold,” which gold plating wouldn't seem to be.

The rabbis have a theory – and with it, an explanation. A solid gold Ark would be too heavy. After all, the Ark described in Exodus is to be carried on gold-plated wooden poles, inserted into gold rings soldered onto the Ark's four corners. The Israelites are in the wilderness when this commandment is issued. Though they don't yet know that they will be wandering for forty years, they do have a long way to go. Therefore, the rabbis imagined the Ark to be in three pieces – an outer box of a thin sheet of pure gold, a thicker box of wood, and then a smaller, internal box, also of pure gold. Problem solved: No gold plating, but pure gold, on the inside and outside of the Ark, the structure of which would be composed of the specified acacia wood.

A question remains: Why bother having pure gold on the inside, which nobody would ever see? The rabbis of the Talmud suggest that the Ark provides a hint about what is required of human beings, specifically themselves. They write:

“Any scholar who is not the same kind of person in private as in public is not a true scholar.” We human beings, who take such care to adorn ourselves externally, and who are often overly concerned about how we appear to others, must be equally scrupulous in our private behavior.

The lesson is one which religious leaders must particularly take to heart. We know all too well about scandals in the Roman Catholic Church. A notorious collection of popular pastors proved to be pedophiles, gilded on the outside, both in their priestly vestments and in their magnetic preaching and personalities. On the inside, they were rotten to the core. The external goodness of these priests obscured the evil. The “father” who took such care to minister to neglected and disadvantaged children could not possibly be the pedophile who abused those very same young innocents. Or could he?

The Church was slow to respond to credible accusations of abuse. Bishops moved priests from one parish to another, perhaps imagining that the pastor would learn his lesson after losing his pulpit. Of course, all the Bishop had done was to burden a new neighborhood and additional children and families with a predator priest.

Why didn't Bishops report the abusers to the police? Why was dogged activism by the press required to expose the criminals and their ecclesiastical protectors? The answer may be found in this week's lesson from Torah and Talmud. Church leadership feared that exposing the depravity of those pedophile priests would cast aspersions upon the entire sacred enterprise. In vain, they sought to protect the gold plating of the Church's physical magnificence, awesome size, and inestimable good service, by denying that a relatively small percentage of priests was rotten to the core.

We should not be smug. Not long ago, the *Forward*, the leading national Jewish weekly newspaper, exposed the depravity of one of my erstwhile colleagues, Eric Siroka, who doesn't befit the title he once earned, which is “rabbi.” Siroka is a snappy dresser and a gifted teacher and musician. Allegations spread over much more than a decade, though, reveal that Siroka is also a sexual predator. Siroka is not a pedophile; his victims are women – some of them young, but not children. Clear evidence indicates that he hid behind his considerable talents to find his way into the beds of numerous vulnerable women.

The Talmud tells the story of a student who is caught hiding under his rabbi's bed. When confronted, the student explains: "This too is Torah, and I must learn it." The student grossly violates his teacher's privacy, of course. Still, the point is clear: How we behave behind closed doors is a critical indicator of our righteousness, no matter how praiseworthy our public appearance, words, and deeds.

The lesson is true for everyone, not merely for priests and rabbis.

The successful business executive who is honored at countless charitable benefits but cheats on her taxes is gilded on the outside but tarnished inside.

The gifted university professor, who is the most wonderful teacher, but whose fabulously popular book is based on fabricated research, has sacrificed true goodness on the altar of a golden veneer.

The talented physician whose surgical skill attracts countless grateful and adoring patients, but who is abusive in his treatment of operating room staff while those same patients are under anesthesia, may be golden on the outside but is tarnished at the core.

The brilliant A student, whose teachers are dazzled by his intelligence, but who plagiarizes his papers off the internet, may be compared to gold plated wood rot.

About four years ago, Toni and I were beginning to plan Robert's Bar Mitzvah. For twelve years, while officiating at B'nai Mitzvah, I had fantasized about the day that Robert, and then Daniel, would be called to the Torah. I had given less thought to the celebrations involved and to their cost. However, once the big day was a year away, I asked a trusted friend how much Toni and I might expect to spend if we wished to host a lovely but not ostentatious Bar Mitzvah weekend like my friend and her husband had provided for their son. The number she gave me blew me off my feet. And then she added: "That doesn't even count the clothes." Naively, I asked in amazement, "How much can a Bar Mitzvah suit cost?" "Not Robert's clothes, silly rabbi. Toni's!"

Oh, right. Toni's clothes did cost more than Robert's – and, for that matter, so did mine, none of which is the point. All those trappings – not only the attire, but the food and décor and entertainment – none of that would have mattered if Robert and then Daniel hadn't been prepared to approach the Torah with

integrity and with a sense of awe about the meaning of the day. No matter how fine or weighty the gold that any Bar or Bat Mitzvah parent devotes to adorning the occasion, the celebration is only sacred if its deepest meaning exceeds the sparkling veneer.

On this Shabbat, we read of an ancient Ark, coated on the inside with gold that nobody would ever see. Let us learn from its lessons. Let us ever seek religious leaders whose integrity and private behavior are at least as worthy as their skill and prowess. Let us strive to be individuals whose souls radiate beauty, whatever our appearance. Then, may we be called good – good as gold, even – inside and out.

Amen.