

TRUER THAN TRUE

I teach Talmud and Rabbinics to the middle school students at our local Jewish day school, the Hebrew Academy. Standing out among all of them, my sixth-grade students are an especially bright and engaged group. At times, they humble me with their sophistication and thoughtfulness, especially when they reverse the order of things, and I become the student while they become the teachers.

Recently, one day in class, we were reviewing the rabbinic concept of kal va-homer, argument from a minor to a major premise. This is a common tool of reasoning in Talmudic literature, which posits that if X is the case, logically speaking, Y is even more the case. One good example of this form of argument, in fact, is found in the Bible, when Moses argues with God: "If the Israelites won't listen to me, certainly Pharaoh won't listen to me." Recognizing the shakiness of his leadership influence with his own enslaved people, Moses argues that it is only logical that Pharaoh, his sworn enemy, would not listen to his appeals on their behalf.

The principle of kal va-homer is not very hard to understand, and we all likely use such reasoning in our everyday lives. What makes it hard to comprehend is a lack of precise language to explain it. That morning, I explained to the class that the principle works in the following way:

"If X is true, then how much more so is Y true."

The words were hardly out of my mouth when I caught one of my students fidgeting in her seat.

"What's the matters? Don't you understand this idea?" I asked her.

"Rabbi Dan, the idea doesn't make sense," she responded with a slight grimace.

"Why not," I nervously retorted.

"Well," she replied, the wheels of her sharp, young mind clearly spinning at warp speed, "Once something is true, it can't be more true. If something is true it's just...true; otherwise it's not true."

Now I began to fidget, as I tried