

# A TIME TO SPEAK UP

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"You shall make sanctified garments for Aaron your brother, for honor and splendor... these are the garments that they should make: a breastplate, an Ephod [a type of reversed apron, worn over the robe], a robe..." [28:2,4]*

The Talmud says in Tractate Erchin 16a that the robe was designed to aid repentance for the sin of Lashon Hara, gossip. The robe was designed with gold bells hanging from the bottom hem -- and G-d said, "let this vocal garment cleanse that [sin] done with the voice." There are also several other 'hints' in the design of the robe to aspects of L'shon Hora.

The Chofetz Chaim notes, however, that there were not only bells hanging from the hem -- there were also woven tassels shaped like pomegranates. These, of course, did not make any noise. There were noisy bells hanging from the hem, but there were silent adornments as well.

Psalm 58:2 reads "Is there silence when you should be speaking righteousness?..." In Tractate Chulin 89a, our Sages explain: "what is the task of a person in this world? To make himself mute. You might think that this applies to Torah discussion as well, but the Holy Writ says 'you should be speaking righteousness.'" There are times when we need to clamp down upon ourselves, and not say something -- and there are also times when a person must speak. This, says the Chofetz Chaim, is what the robe teaches us with its noisy and silent decorations. And the time to speak up is when studying or discussing Torah.

A true story: a new student came to the yeshiva. He wasn't sure how much he could learn, how much he could contribute.

He was going to a class on the weekly parsha, given by the Rosh Yeshiva [Dean] himself. They arrived at one of the six words in the Torah which, according to tradition, must each be written as the first word of the column in which they appear in the Torah scroll. There is an acronym for these six words, the first letter of which is 'beis.' "I don't recall right now what the 'beis' stands for," said the Rosh Yeshiva. The obvious candidate, the first word of the Torah itself, had slipped his mind.

The new student quietly asked: "B'reishis?" [In the beginning]

A warm smile lit up the face of the Rosh Yeshiva. "He's right. The bochur [student] is right!"

Silly? Obvious? Perhaps. But was the Rosh Yeshiva embarrassed, having this newcomer answer something which had slipped the mind of an accomplished scholar? Of course not! He wanted

everyone to participate. Everyone has a share -- that was the message. And since the student in question was Yaakov Menken, I can testify that this little comment is still fondly recalled today.

Adult beginners in Torah study often feel intimidated, realizing that a fine secular education doesn't translate to expertise in traditional texts. Initially, Torah looks like a "closed book." Perhaps this explains why some have tried to rewrite the story, projecting their own thinking and their own experiences onto people described in the Torah [Bill Moyer's Genesis, a series shown on PBS, was a good example of this phenomenon, and was criticized even by non-scholars for the way many speakers attempted to recast our forefathers in the mold of dysfunctional families, circa 1995 CE]. Once that was accomplished, those with no real expertise in Torah study, no understanding of the context in which our forefathers might have viewed themselves, could easily contribute -- the 1990's, we understand!

But projecting one's self onto Torah is not the same as learning Torah. Learning Torah is harder: it takes time to learn to think like someone else! It requires energy, devotion -- and a willingness to ask fearlessly of those who have already climbed further on that mountain. People say "there are no foolish questions, save those you don't ask." This is absolutely true when it comes to Torah. Speak, contribute -- you have more to add than you think!