

TELLING BELLS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

You shall make the Robe of the Ephod entirely of turquoise wool. Its head-opening shall be folded over within. It shall have a woven lip around its opening... it may not be torn. On its hem you shall make pomegranates of turquoise, purple, and scarlet wool, on its hem all around. Between them, there shall be gold bells all around... It must be on Aaron when he ministers; so that its sound is heard when he enters the Holy before Hashem. (28:31-35)

Each of the Kohein Gadol's (High Priest's) eight holy garments, says the Talmud (Er'chin 16a), were a means of atonement for a different sin. The Me'il ha-Ephod (Robe of the Ephod) brought forgiveness for sins-of-the- tongue. "Let the sound of the Robe bring forgiveness for sins associated with the sound (of speech)." If the function of the Me'il is to correct our misuse of speech, its design must contain allusions to how to avoid forbidden speech.

The Alshich writes that it's peculiar that the Torah describes each bell as being surrounded by two pomegranates. There were seventy-two bells and seventy-two pomegranates hanging from the meil's bottom seam, so in fact one could just as easily have said that each pomegranate should be surrounded by two bells.

Ostensibly, the idea that "its sound shall be heard when Aaron enters the Holy," was to 'announce' the Kohein's arrival in the Sanctuary. To whom was he announcing it? Hashem, as it were, does not need to be told that Aaron is on his way. (See Ramban who cites a Midrash that implies it was to warn the angels that even they must leave the Holy of Holies when Aaron entered on Yom Kippur).

The bell surrounded by pomegranates, writes the Alshich, symbolizes the tongue—surrounded by the jaw and its cheeks. Just like the soft material of the pomegranates dampened the harsh sound of the bells, we too must guard our tongues with our teeth and jaws, ensuring only the pleasantest speech emerges there-from.

Why did Hashem give us two eyes—but only one mouth? To remind us, he says, that only half of what you see you should relate. Much of what we see and know is better kept to ourselves. This is why the Torah describes one bell surrounded by two pomegranates, although the opposite was also true; to remind us that the way to avoid sins of the tongue, and receive the atonement associated with the Me'il, is by limiting what emerges from our mouths in the first place.

The Gemara (Megillah 18a) says, "A word for a sela (coin)—silence for two." Rashi explains: "If one were to buy a word for one coin, it would be worth it to pay two coins for silence." Perhaps the

Gemara alludes to the speak-half-as-much-as-you-know rule that the Alshich finds in the double pomegranates and the two-eyes-one-mouth; for every word you speak, make sure it is accompanied by two measures of silence.

The Bobover Rebbe zt"l notes that the Gemara uses an unusual term for silence—mishtuka, instead of the more common sh'tika. He explains that the Gemara is praising a very specific silence; the silence when we give pause to consider what we're about to say before the words leave our mouths. Both the one sela, and the two, he says, refer to someone speaking. "If a word spoken is worth one sela, then one spoken mishtuka/from silence is worth two!"

Perhaps the two pomegranates surround the bell allude to a period of silence and forethought before we speak, and to another one after we have spoken. Sometimes in the heat of a discussion, despite our best intentions, we fall pray to foul speech, and unwittingly hurt others, are over-aggressive, exaggerate, etc. Part of shmiras ha-lashon (working towards proper speech) is not only to consider what we are about to say, but also to objectively examine what we already said, in order to ensure that we are 'keeping to our words.'

Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman tells a childhood story that still haunts him when he thinks about it. One time on the bus ride home, the boys' conversation wandered to a certain wealthy and prominent member of their community. As is often the case, being in the public eye sometimes means having one's quirks and idiosyncrasies on constant display, and having to deal with the ridicule of those who make it their business to make fun of people whose success rubs them the wrong way.

The boys on the bus began discussing this man; it didn't take long for the conversation to go awry. One of his classmates, whose skills of imitation were of some renown, regaled the assembly with his near-perfect take off of the man's 'penguin-like' walk and posture, and his 'frog-like' voice. Others took their turns discussing critical issues such as 'how little he gives to charity considering how rich he is,' 'how overdone that last chasuna he made was,' and 'how cool he thinks he is in his new car.' They were having a grand-old time. Little did they realize the man's son was sitting (cowering?) in the seat just in front of them, hearing everything they said.

When the bus stopped at the son's stop and he got up to leave, some of the boys began to realize what had just happened. Were those tears in his eyes? As he turned to leave, he left no doubt. His face was red with crying, and he bitterly called out, "I hate you—you're so mean," just as the bus doors slammed behind him.

There are no words to describe the shocked silence of the boys left sitting on the bus. There was nothing to say that could right their wrong. They just sat there, each of them considering how he must have felt listening to them the whole time.

"Afterwards I thought to myself," says Rabbi Wachsman, "what if one of us had been fast enough to jump off the bus together with the boy? What if he started chasing him down the street. The boy was in no condition to speak to anyone—he was devastated.

"Go away—I'm not mocheil you—ever! Don't bother asking for mechilah (forgiveness). Just leave me alone!"

"Please stop—stop running, just for one minute. I want to talk to you."

"Stop chasing me—I told you I'm not mocheil—go away!"

"Eventually, he manages to catch up with the boy. 'Please, just give me one minute... I heard your father has a big factory, and that he pays well— do you think he'd give me a summer job?'"

What could possibly be more insensitive? He's just spent his entire bus ride ridiculing his father to his son's great shame, and now he thinks he can run down the same son in the street and ask his father to do him a favour? It's beyond absurd.

Yet how many times do we commit the identical crime? Avinu she- ba'Shamayim, our Father in Heaven, is also the loving Father of the people we choose to slander, ridicule, and degrade with our derogatory speech. How does it feel, so to speak, for a Father to have to endure hearing His beloved son spoken of in such terms? How much pain does He feel? How great is His anger?

Hours, and sometimes minutes later, the time for tefilah (prayer) inevitably comes—it could be shacharis, mincha, or ma'ariv. And there we are, siddur in hand, supplicating our Father to grant us all our needs. "Oy Tatte—give us health, give us wealth, give us nachas!" Under such circumstances, do our prayers stand a chance of gaining favour in His eyes?

A pomegranate and a bell, a pomegranate and a bell... and his voice will be heard when he approaches the Holy. When the great Kohein approaches our Heavenly Father on the holiest of days, and beseeches him to grant Israel its needs and wishes, it's the bell surrounded on each side by the pomegranate, reminding us to minimize our speech, control our chatter, and think before we say what we shouldn't, that ensures his voice will be heard on High.

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