



Bells and Whistles

Parashat Tetzaveh 5779 – February 15, 2019

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Shabbat Shalom. *I want to start by expressing appreciation for my East Coast colleague, Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, who is the senior rabbi of Temple Shaaray Tefila in Manhattan. Through the blessed technology of google docs and cell phones, we connected earlier today and this sermon was crafted in true rabbinic-partnership style, albeit through platforms our ancestors could not possibly have imagined.*

In this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, we find detailed instructions as to how the ancient Israelite priests must dress: belts and aprons, robes and hats, jewels and engraved letters. An elaborate construction of materials and design.

In between the descriptions of woven yarn and golden chains, we get a glimpse of sartorial spirituality - for what higher purpose are these garments made? 2 stones, for example, are sewn into the High Priest's shoulder pads, engraved with the names of the Israelite tribes. The Torah tells us: *this is done as a remembrance for Aaron, and also God.*

The High Priest's breastplate, adorned with 12 precious gems (one for each tribe) is designed, according to the Torah, so that Aaron carries the names of the Children of Israel over his heart when he enters the sanctuary, *so that he and God remember and look favorably upon them.*

And then there are the bells. In Exodus 28:33-35, we read:

וַעֲשִׂיתָ עַל־שׁוּלְיוֹ רִמְוֵי תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי עַל־שׁוּלְיוֹ סָבִיב וּפְעֻמֹּנֵי זָהָב בְּתוֹכָם סָבִיב: פְּעֻמֹּן זָהָב וְרִמְוֵן בְּפְעֻמֹּן זָהָב וְרִמְוֵן עַל־שׁוּלְיֵי הַמְּעִיל סָבִיב:

On its hem (meaning, the robe of the High Priest) make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with BELLS of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe.

And the reason for this elaborate decoration?

וְהָיָה עַל־אֹזְנֹתָיו לְשָׁרֵת וְנִשְׁמַע קוֹלוֹ בְּבָאוֹ אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וּבְצֵאתוֹ וְלֹא יָמוּת:

Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the SOUND of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before Adonai and when he goes out, *v'lo yamoot*, **that he may not die.**

Now, that's interesting.

The sacral vestments, known as *bigdei kodesh* - holy clothing - are initially described by the Torah as *l'chavod ul't'faret* -having the purpose of providing dignity and adornment.

But verse 35 reveals a different motivation: Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the SOUND of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before Adonai and when he goes out — **that he may not die.**

The purpose of the bells is to help keep the priests alive.

This is not dress-up or child's play. This is the work of standing close to the fire without being consumed. This is the work of approaching the Divine, for which there is no Hazard Pay.

Interestingly, rabbinic commentators tend to focus on the sound of the bells LESS as a life insurance policy and MORE as a universal wake-up call. i.e. Pay attention! Important things are happening. *And still, perhaps in quiet acknowledgment, the threat of death is ever-present.*

Rashbam interprets the jingling as a reminder for the junior priests to vacate the premises on Yom Kippur, since the High Priest was the only one allowed inside on that day. *Any violation of the rules could result in their death.*

Bekhor Shor and Ramban, who imagine God as a Human King, remind us that Royalty do not like surprises: "Just as you would not appear abruptly and unceremoniously before royalty, so the delicate sounds of the bells signal one's presence and intention." *In other words, an angry, insulted or startled God does not bode well for a neophyte Priest.*

Some say, the bells were meant to alert the Israelites that the High Priest was doing the required sacrificial work. As he jingled along behind the curtains, the average Israelite passing by knew the High Priest was busy... *You also knew he was still alive.* This was dangerous work.

"And of course, the High Priest is himself reminded by the sound of the bells on his robe that he is to attune his heart and mind to his solemn duties..."¹ *As Aaron's 2 sons, Nadav and Abihu, would later learn, to be distracted is to be dead.*

¹ JPS Commentary on Exodus, p. 183

The bells signal to everyone: Pay attention. Don't be caught off guard. Protect yourself. Be vigilant...and you might stay alive.

Of course, today, we no longer have priests or sacrifices. The clergy do not wear costumes and there are no jingly bells to wake us up. Today, we are more likely to respond to the chime of our iPhones announcing the newest threat to our city, state or nation. Today, instead of priests, politicians and pundits are ringing the bells. And they tell us: the danger is real, even when it can't be seen. The danger is present, even in our most familiar and accustomed space.

This week, Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar of Minnesota tweeted that the American government's support of Israel is "all about the Benjamins." In so doing, she either knowingly or unwittingly utilized a medieval anti-Semitic trope: that Jews control the economic system, and that we are determined to use it in a nefarious way to undermine society.²

And while she did apologize, and used language that should comfort us, "Anti-Semitism is real (she said) and I am grateful for Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes," many of us are still uneasy.

The bells are ringing: Don't get too comfortable in this time and space you thought you knew so well. Anti-Semitism must be called out. Condemned. Censured. Punished.

Interestingly, House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, one of Rep. Omar's leading critics, seemed to use similar language to rally his base during the midterms. In a tweet from October 2018, which he later deleted but never apologized for, Rep. McCarthy wrote: "We cannot allow Soros, Steyer, and Bloomberg to BUY this election!" (All 3 are wealthy Jewish businessmen involved in politics.)

The bells are ringing: Anti-Semitism is everywhere.

For every country club and university that has opened its doors to Jews, there are countless individuals who still believe the Elders of Zion, the blood libel, and the narrative of Dual Loyalty. These tropes have threatened the lives of Jews for countless generations, and they are likely to threaten us again. Any politician with a seat of power and an audience, must take responsibility for the language they use and the lives they put in danger.³

I imagine the priests understood, from the very beginning, the hazards of their job. The heaviness of the work. The responsibilities they carried, literally, upon their shoulders. And yet, until the Second Temple was destroyed, and the entire profession was put out of business, there are no records of a priest ever having said, "That's it. I'm out."

² Thanks to Rabbi Joel Mosbacher for the wording of this paragraph.

³ Ironically, this kind of irresponsible "posting" was also practiced by King Achashverous in Megillat Esther. Without close attention to the details of Haman's decree, the King sends out an edict to kill all the Jews in Persia, not realizing what he's done or said.

Even after Aaron's 2 sons were killed for bringing God *strange fire*, he didn't quit. He kept his *bigdei kodesh*. He returned to work, to the sacrificial table, to live in the midst of ongoing danger and uncertainty, and to use the tools he was given.

In many ways, we are like Aaron. We are asked to live as Jews in the midst of great uncertainty and potential danger. We are asked to use the tools *we are given* to serve the needs of our community.

We look to the LEFT. We look to the RIGHT.

Alarm Bells and Dog Whistles.

And one side cannot, or does not, want to hear what is so clearly and painfully obvious to the other. And that terrifies us.

How could you not see the danger I see? How can we, a small minority of Jews, not share the same understanding of our enemy? How can we not agree on who poses the greatest threat to our way of life?

But, of course, this is the way it has always been.

The author Amy Krause Rosenthal z"l has a children's book called Duck! Rabbit! On every page is a drawing of an animal that could either be seen as a Duck or a Rabbit. And, so goes the book...It's a duck. No, it's a rabbit.

In May of 2018: "Yanny or Laurel" took the internet by storm after a Reddit user posted the short clip of a word being read out loud, asking fellow Reddit users a simple question: What do you hear?⁴ People were entertained for days, perhaps even weeks, trying to figure it out.

Duck or Rabbit? Low vs. High frequencies. We see and hear what makes sense to us, shaped by genetics (of course) and, in larger part, by our experiences.

What have we already seen to be true?

What do we already think is right?

This is the root of confirmation bias. This is what leads to cherry picking and selective outrage.

We may not hear the high-pitched frequency of a dog whistle, but, make no mistake, we are just as susceptible to tuning into frequencies that match our pre-existing and deeply cherished beliefs and values. We hear that which we have been trained to hear. That which we are already attuned to hear.

So, perhaps, on this Shabbat, we return and reclaim the ancient, Priestly bells.

⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/yanny-or-laurel-what-do-you-hear-audio-clip-debate/>

We reclaim the bells as a tool to wake up and to notice what is around us. Not just what we already see, but what is actually there. To attune our heart and mind as the High Priest was expected to do and to really notice what lies before us.

We reclaim the bells as a challenge to listen to that which may be silent to us, but is what others clearly hear, and genuinely fear. To be curious. To be open. To explore. To learn.

We need to reclaim the bells on our hemlines to help us stay alert, not just to the threats, but also to the opportunities. To the learnings. To the partnerships. To the possibilities that a community could learn to repent, to repair, to renew, and to rebuild. Together.

We have built the Tabernacle to welcome God in, and in so doing, we have created a life for ourselves that is fraught with danger but also replete with blessing. May we learn from our ancestors how to live in these spaces with greater attunement to them both.