

D'VAR TORAH



Hearing Bells and Drinking Juice

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Parashah

Two weeks ago, we read about Moses receiving the instructions for making the Tabernacle and the clothing of the kohanim. This week, those instructions are followed as the Tabernacle and the clothing are made. One of the most peculiar features of the clothes of the kohen gadol is what lines the hem of his robe - golden bells and pomegranates.

The golden bells seem to have a purpose beyond their visual appeal. Bells make noise. Two weeks ago, we learned that this noise was the purpose of the bells. We read, “A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, on the hem of the robe all around. And [the robe] shall be upon Aaron when he serves, so that its sound be heard when he comes into the sanctum before the LORD and when he goes out, that he shall not die.” We do not find a restatement of this purpose in our parashah, simply the fulfillment of the instructions to make the bells and the pomegranates. In our parashah, the verse reads, “A bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate on the hem of the robe all around, to serve.” When push comes to shove with the making of the clothing, the thing that is stressed is that these are the clothes that Aaron will wear while serving. When God relayed the instructions to Moses, God spoke of sound and death, of ways of keeping Aaron, brother of Moses, safe. Perhaps it was only Moses who needed to hear this part of the instructions.

It is an unresolved question, however, of who needs to hear the sound of the bells. The verse reads “so that its sound be heard” without specifying who should do the hearing. Ramban and Vayikra Rabbah explain that God needs to hear the sound of the bells. They equate it with knocking or announcing one’s presence before entering the presence of the king. It would be terribly rude to barge into anyone’s home, nevermind God’s home. The bells on Aaron’s robe allow Aaron to alert God to his presence. This reading turns the high priest into a doorbell that we, the people, ring on Yom Kippur. Rather than putting a door knocker on the Mishkan, we have a living being serve that function. This limits the accessibility of the doorbell. We can only disturb God at home on the preordained times when Aaron dons his robe and chooses to approach.

Ralbag reads the bells very differently. According to him, the purpose of the bells is to serve as a constant reminder for the high priest of his role, allowing him to direct his thoughts appropriately. Aaron is the one who needs to hear the bells. Aaron is wearing all sorts of visual reminders of his role. But he can’t actually see his own clothing. The visual reminders are for us. However, Aaron can hear the sound produced by the bells. With every step he takes, every motion of his, he is called back by the bells to the role he serves.

In the darkest of the interpretations, Abarbanel reads us as the ones to hear the bells. He imagines us sitting outside the Holy of Holies, worried that Aaron would die. We could not see Aaron anymore than we could see God. But we could hear the bells coming from inside the Holy of Holies and know that all was well. After our debacle with the Golden Calf when we lost our heads because we could not see Moses for a time and thought we had lost him, God has learned to give us auditory reassurance that Aaron will return to us.

We can understand the bells - for God, for Aaron, for us. They seem to serve a concrete purpose. The pomegranates made of yarn are another story. They are spaced out between the bells, perhaps preventing the bells from ringing continuously, giving Aaron a measure of control of when the bells ring. But why pomegranates? It is one of the foods we miss during our years of wilderness wanderings. And it will be one of the seven species of the land of Israel, representing the plenty of the land. When we sin, we lose this plenty, as we read in the Book of Joel of withering pomegranates. But the most conspicuous references to pomegranates are in the Song of Songs, where they are mentioned six times in verses such as "I would give you to drink... from the juice of my pomegranate." In Song of Songs, pomegranates describe pleasure concealed, hidden abundance revealed only when the moment is right. Perhaps, Aaron's pomegranates of yarn are similar. They are literally made of cloth - they conceal nothing. But they point us toward the same union of Israel with God that happens when Aaron goes into the Holy of Holies. Together, the bells and the pomegranates warn us of the dangers of approaching God and the reasons for bothering to do so in the first place.