



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Tetzaveh 5770

By Guy Izhak Austrian

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If the neighbors invited us over to view slides of their recent vacation to India, we might cringe to see goofy photos of them in traditional Indian clothes, posing with “the natives,” or to hear guffawing imitations of the hotel concierge’s accent. Even if our neighbors were more sophisticated, we might still be uncomfortable hearing about the “exotic customs” or the “famous hospitality” of the common people.

These are caricatures, of course. But they point to a serious question about how those of us who travel from affluent countries to developing countries talk about the places we visited, once we have returned home. We want to convey our wonder, delight and sorrow—and also to share what we’ve learned. But sometimes we end up using language that condescends or perpetuates stereotypes. How can we communicate about our travels in a way that both respects our hosts and informs our listeners?

In *Parshat Tetzaveh*, Aaron receives instructions on how to visit the ultimate destination spot: God’s own house, the holy sanctuary in the Tabernacle, which the Israelites are about to build in the desert. A cryptic but crucial passage focuses on one of Aaron’s priestly garments, the robe of the High Priest, which is designed to enable his entry into the sanctuary and—just as important—his successful return:

On its hem, 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. Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die.¹

The Rabbis associated the sounding of the golden bells with the prohibition against entering a person’s home without proper warning.² The 12th-century French commentator Joseph Bechor Shor elaborates that the bells teach that,

It is decent behavior that one should not enter one’s fellow’s house suddenly, lest the home’s resident do or say something that ought to remain private; for if the intruder hears it, the resident will thereafter avoid the intruder (*yastir mipanav*).³

The Bechor Shor lays out some very high stakes! The respect due to a person in his or her home is like that due to God in the Tabernacle. And if we fail to show the proper deference, God will hide God’s face from us—a loss of relationship that implies utter catastrophe.

The rabbis also taught that the bells enabled the High Priest to atone for the people’s sins of *lashon hara*—improper speech—which, they suggested, cannot be atoned for in any other way.⁴ Why not? As the famous Hasidic parable

¹ Exodus 28:33-35.

² Babylonian Talmud Niddah 16b, Pesachim 112a and Leviticus Rabbah 21:7.

³ Bechor Shor on Exodus 28:35. “*Yastir mipanav*,” literally, “will hide from his face,” alludes to *hester panim*, the concept that bad things happen when God hides God’s face from us.

⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 10:6.

has it, *lashon hara* is like the feathers of a torn pillow: once cast into the winds, it can never be called back. Another commentator compares the sound of the bells to the smoke of the incense burnt in the Tabernacle.⁵ Therefore, the tinkling of the bells, ringing through the air like sacred smoke, symbolically cleanses the air from our words.

But why then do the Rabbis link entering (and exiting) a person's home respectfully with using the power of speech constructively? It seems that the first is the precondition for the second. In our travels, if we fail to approach other peoples' homelands with humility, and if we fail to see the people we meet there as reflections of God's divine image, then it will be impossible to speak about them later in a way that honors their full dignity. We will inevitably fall into *lashon hara*.

Yet even if we approach others' homelands with respect, how can we guarantee that our words upon return will not do harm? In parallel, how could the High Priest have ensured that the golden bells would have the desired effect as their sound rang out in the Tabernacle? The key may be the pomegranates, a symbol of beauty, fertility, wisdom and good deeds.⁶

The bells and pomegranates had to go together. According to Ramban, the pomegranates were hollow sheaths of yarn that actually housed the bells *inside* them.⁷ We can learn from this that in order for the bells to atone for *lashon hara*, they had to be encased in these symbols of wisdom and teaching. So too, only wise words, carefully chosen to illuminate and educate, to spread Torah and Divinity in the world, can avert the dangers of *lashon hara*.

Only by approaching our travels to developing countries the way Aaron did when he visited God's house can we ensure that our words spoken back home will honor the people we met and spread wisdom among our listeners. If we succeed, our travels will bear the fruit of increased understanding and justice in the relationships among the diverse peoples of the world.



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⁵ Don Isaac Abravanel (Portuguese, 15th c.) on Tetzaveh ch. 29.

⁶ See Numbers 13:23 and Song of Songs 4:3, 4:13. Song of Songs Rabbah 6:11 likens the seeds to students of Torah sitting in rows. BT Brachot 57a compares the seeds filling a pomegranate to the good deeds filling a Jew. By implication, opening the fruit will spread learning and good works in the world.

⁷ Ramban (Spanish, 13th c.) on Exodus 28:31 ff.

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