

Parshat Tetzaveh:
Why so many things? Can't I just talk to God?
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Class of 2019

This week's parsha, Tetzaveh, is the next in the installment of *incredibly* detailed instructions for the traveling Mishkan that the Israelites carried with them in their journey from Mitzrayim to Eretz Yisrael.

This week we move from a focus on the dimensions and materials of the Mishkan itself to a description of the priestly garments, preparation and service. The instructions this week are no less exact than last week the cubic measurements of the altar, the type of cloth for each garment, and even the order in which Aaron should get dressed.

There's an irony in the nature of these descriptions our goal in serving God is to connect to something that is not physical. To find a spiritual space that is beyond the material concerns and physicality of this world. And yet, God spends two and a half parshiot telling us, the way to do this is to build an incredibly ornate and expensive building, to clothe our priests in the most lavish materials, to sacrifice animals an incredibly physical means of service.

What lesson are we to learn from this near-obsession with the physical trappings of our *spiritual* service to God?

An example. We are instructed in the exact detail of the robe Aaron is to wear during his priestly service. All around the bottom of this robe there are to be golden bells and they will ring as Aaron walks, so that as he comes in and out of the temple he will hear (וּנְשָׁמַע) and, here's the interesting part: וְלֹא יָמוּת – in hearing the bells he will not die. What does that mean he hears the bells and he doesn't die?

In reading this line, the medieval commentator Rabbeinu Asher says that not only are these clothes a critical part of the priestly service, they are actually the means by which priesthood is conveyed upon Aaron and his sons. “כל זמן שבגדיהם עליהם כהונתם עליהם” Anytime they wore these clothes, the priesthood was on them. And, conversely, if they were not wearing the clothes, in that moment they were not priests at all.

It is clear from this line that the physicality of Aaron's clothing is not just an important detail of his service of God. It's not like forgetting a tie or jewelry in the morning yes, that's not great, you feel a little naked without them, but you're still you. Without any one of his garments, Aaron is not a priest and what he is doing is not service, so much so that his actions are punishable by death.

My question is why? What is it about the bells, or the tunics or the breastplate, that is so important?

Today, we do not have robes of gold or a mishkan, we do not have sacrificial services. If I want to serve God, I stand in shul, or even in my own home, and I pray. Yes, we have the Ark and the Torah, we have beautiful synagogues and special Shabbos clothes. But for the most part, we have simplified our service. We have let go of the physicality and narrowed in on the internal, spiritual experience. There is beauty in this. I can be anywhere in the world, wearing my normal weekday clothes, and just by standing in prayer, I can be in the presence of God.

So why here are there so many physical things that must exist as a prerequisite for this connection with God?

I think the answer lies in what Aaron does with the bells. He hears them. He uses the external reminder to shape his internal experience. He not only hears but he sees he sees the beautiful detail in every piece of the mishkan, he makes sure each sash and gem is in the proper place. So that by the time he begins the actual service, every bit of him has been attuned to what it means to be in the presence of God. It is such a weighty task that each time he walks into the mishkan, his life is literally on the line.

How many of us felt this level of focus or gravitas when we walked into shul tonight? Anyone? It's a nearly impossible place to get to mentally.

What does this mean for us? Without the ornate surroundings of the mishkan. Without the jingling of bells at the bottom of our robes, how can we remind ourselves of the weight of what it means to serve God?

Our challenge, just like Aaron, is to hear the bells. In coming in and out of the presence of God, how do we hear so that we do not die? Or, put another way, how do we *hear* so that we are sure our prayer is a true service of God and not just an echo of it? It could be a physical reminder, a meditation, a sign we tape to our mirror. I'm not sure, and it may be different for each person. I have a hunch that it is. But we need to ask ourselves how do we as a community create a space in which each day of service holds the importance and level of focus that was required of the priests?



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