

PARASHAS TETZAVEH

Knock Before You Enter

Few sights were more spectacular than the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, resplendent in full golden regalia, his vestments formed from the finest fabrics, precious metals and rare jewels. It was a vision of pure artistry and unimaginable beauty. And little wonder. What else would one expect from an ensemble designed down to its smallest detail by the Master of the Universe Himself? But the beauty of the priestly vestments went beyond simple esthetics. They glowed with inner spiritual incandescence, each intricate detail laden with secret mystical significance, each element essential to the efficacy of the Kohen Gadol as the perfect conduit between the Jewish people and Hashem.

What was the purpose of all the individual features of the vestments mentioned in this week's portion? The Torah only spells out the purpose of one of them. The Kohen Gadol wore a four-cornered robe of blue wool whose hem was adorned with alternating golden pomegranates and bells. Why bells? Because "its sound should be heard when he enters the Sanctuary before Hashem." Apparently this is a very important feature of the robe, because the Torah metes out a severe punishment for the omission of the bells. Our Sages understood that the bells are meant to teach us basic decency and decorum, that we must not invade the privacy of others by injecting ourselves into their presence without warning. Proper etiquette is to knock on the door before entering. Just as the bells announced the Kohen Gadol's arrival in the Sanctuary so must we announce ourselves wherever we go and not barge in unexpectedly.

Nonetheless, the questions remain. Surely, Hashem knows perfectly well when the Kohen Gadol is approaching, regardless of whether or not he is preceded by the tinkling of bells. Why then does the Torah choose to teach us this lesson in this particular setting? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to teach us this lesson in a more mundane setting involving ordinary people who can be caught unawares?

The commentators explain that the Torah is teaching us an additional lesson here, a lesson of critical importance. We might think that in the pursuit of high spiritual goals it is acceptable to bend the rules of simple decency a little bit. Not so, says the Torah. Even at the supernal moment when the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holiest, the closest point of contact between a mortal and the Master of the

Universe, he must still remember the rules of basic decency. He must wear bells upon the hem of his robe to announce his arrival.

A group of young scholars traveled to the distant academy of a great sage. They studied diligently before embarking on the journey and arrived with high hopes of being accepted as his disciples.

The sage welcomed each of them individually and spoke with him at length on a wide variety of topics. On the last day, all the young men were invited to join the sage at his table to share his bread and listen to his words of wisdom.

The young men entered the sage's house, hung up their coats and washed their hands before coming to the table. For several hours, they were transported to a world of transcendent wisdom and mysticism, and their hearts were set afire with the yearning to become part of this world.

The next day, the sage announced his decision. He accepted all the applicants, except for one. The rejected young man, who was quite a brilliant fellow, was devastated. With tears streaming down his face, he came to the sage and begged for an explanation.

"It is really quite simple," said the sage. "When you washed your hands before coming to my table you looked around for a towel but couldn't find one. Instead, you wiped your hands on a coat that belonged to one of your friends. Being in a hurry to hear words of wisdom does not exempt you from the rules of simple decency. If you were a true scholar, you would have understood this yourself. I'm very sorry, young man, but you have no place in my academy."

In our own lives, we often get caught up in our daily urgencies, and sometimes, this leads us to overlook the rules of simple decency and courtesy. If we are late for an appointment, we rationalize, then it is all right to elbow our way through a crowd or drive a little more aggressively than we normally would. Let us remember, therefore, that nothing was more important than the Kohen Gadol entering the Holy of Holies, and yet the rules of simple decency always took precedence.