

Sound and Silence

By Lazer Gurkow

What does sound mean to you? Sound plays many roles. It is a vehicle for communication, music, and even distraction. But at its root, sound is the simple indicator of life.

In the office, it's the constant hum of the computer. In the supermarket, it's the steady buzz of conversation. At home, it's the little sounds of children at play. These sounds are woven into the very fabric of my life, and they assure me that its operation is smoothly at work. Even as life's incessant clanging drives me desperate at times, even as I crave a moment's peace, I know that I find these sounds reassuring. Should the little noises ever stop purring, I know I would crave these most elementary indicators of life.

Even in serenity there is mild activity, even in relaxation there is slight movement, even in peace there is muted sound. When I imagine relaxation I conjure up images of playing children, whispering breezes and gentle waves. I think of floating yachts, flying seagulls and the shimmering rays of the sun. These may be tranquil activities, placid movements, relaxing voices, but they are movement and sound nonetheless.

Beyond life spans a vast stillness. When all is achieved and activity has ceased, when there is nothing left to strive for and nothing left to attain, then we can afford silence.

But until we arrive at that ultimate destination, sound denotes activity, activity denotes movement, and movement denotes a discrepancy between where we are and where we want to be. Life is a time for momentum, for forward movement, for growth and expansion.

The Jingling Bells

This affinity for sound may help to explain why the high priest was instructed to have bells on the bottom of his tunic. The bells softly jingled as he walked, and announced his entrance ahead of him (Exodus 28:33).

At first glance, this seems a curious intrusion. Is the house of G-d not best served by the dignity of quiet decorum? Do these sounds not draw undue attention to the high priest, detracting from the emphasis on G-d?

These bells reflected the essence of life. They represented the give and take, the hustle and bustle, of movement and growth. The high priest did not live in a vacuum of spiritual seclusion. He lived in a world where ordinary people struggled to forge an extraordinary relationship with G-d.

In this struggle, ordinary people were left wanting. Despite their efforts, they knew they could do better, and they always desired more. They found themselves on a growth curve, caught up in a momentum of upward mobility. This movement was reflected in the jingling of the high priest's bells.

The high priest raised ordinary Jews aloft by acting as their inspiration to climb ever higher. Their escape from the mundane, their movement from below to above, their perpetual spiritual energy, were reflected in the call of the priestly bells as he advanced through the Temple's sacred chambers.

A Holy Silence

There was, however, one day in the year when the high priest shed his tunic and its jangling bells. This was Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when he entered the holiest room in the Temple. When he entered G-d's room, he was silent. No bells marked his advance. No sounds announced his entry.

The question begs itself. Why not? Is utter silence not the mark of death? Can anything be more alive than G-d Himself? Should not our presence before Him be marked by the sounds of life?

The answer lies in the nature of the room. This was not the priest's room. This was G-d's room. In this room the high priest did not think of himself, where he was and where he would like to be. He did not think of other Jews, where they were and where they would like to be. This room was not about people. It was about G-d. Here, mortals are silent. This is the silence not of a vacuum, but of utter selflessness. It is the silence of a surrendering ego and a complete merging with G-d.

Once our egos are surrendered, and we are merged with G-d, we have no further need to ascend. Our scale of spiritual growth notwithstanding, we have touched G-d. This is the pinnacle, and scaling another peak cannot draw us higher. G-d is here just as He is there, lower just as He is higher. We have discovered G-d, and G-d is everywhere.

On Yom Kippur we arrive at the essence. There are no further goals to reach. There is no need for movement, activity or sound. There is only silence. The concept of sound has been not suspended, but transcended.¹

FOOTNOTES

1. This essay is largely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Likkutei Sichot, vol. 16, p. 336.

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