

Noise, Quiet and Our Inner Music: Thoughts on Parashat Shelah Lekha

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By

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My wife and I recently went out with friends to a new kosher restaurant in New York City. Although the food we ate was not memorable, the noise level in the restaurant still has my ears ringing! Aside from the ongoing talking of the many customers, the restaurant featured loud music blasting in the background. It was difficult for us to carry on a conversation at our table, since we could hardly hear each other in the midst of the din.

When we looked around, though, it was evident that the other customers—mostly on the young side—were having a great time! The louder the background music played, the louder the people raised their voices. No problem. Noise is good, noise is fun. Right?

According to the Deafness Research Foundation, about one in three cases of hearing loss in the United States is not about aging—but purely about noise! And much of the noise is self-inflicted. We literally are making ourselves deaf! The noise levels in our society have increased dramatically in the areas of leisure and recreation: movies, discos, restaurants, wedding receptions etc. Noise can cause permanent damage to our ears when it reaches about 85 decibels. A typical rock concert is around 120 decibels. With the ubiquitous use of iPods, often played at loud levels directly into peoples' ears, we can expect a growing number who will suffer serious loss of hearing.

If noise is so unhealthy, why do so many people enjoy environments where they are barraged by intense loud noise for protracted periods of time? Why are they oblivious to the permanent damage they cause to themselves?

Here is a possible answer.

Loud noise enables people to tune out from their own minds. It crowds out any thoughts or worries they may have. They become lost in the noise so that they literally can't think straight...or can't think at all. And for many people, that is fun...not to have to think, not to have to remember, not to have to worry. It is

worth it to them to damage their eardrums in exchange for the satisfaction of escaping from their own selves.

The problem with loud noise, aside from its danger to our hearing, is that it does not provide a permanent framework for the serenity that people seek. It is a temporary escape into a pretend dream-world...but then we necessarily return to the thoughts, worries and problems of the humdrum reality in which we live.

There is a healthier and wiser way to overcome our anxieties—not by escaping into a noisy situation that crushes our inner selves, but by contemplating a serene framework that gives us to ourselves and strengthens ourselves. We don't need to be afraid to think, we don't need to create artificial ways of temporarily hiding from our thoughts and our concerns. Noise isn't the answer: quiet is!

This week's Torah portion concludes with a description of the mitzvah of tsitsith. It states that when we look at the blue thread of the tsitsith (a mitzvah we can now observe again with the rediscovery of real "tekhelet") we will be reminded of all the commandments of the Lord. The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Meir, commented that the blue thread reminds us of the sea, and the sea reminds us of the sky, and the sky reminds us of the Throne of Glory of the Almighty (Sifri on Bemidbar 15:39).

I think that Rabbi Meir is teaching that if we wish to gain a deeper, wiser approach to life, we need to engage in quiet contemplation. We gaze out at the ocean; we raise our eyes to the sky; we are lifted into a different zone of thinking. We view life more calmly, we put our lives in context with the Throne of Glory of the Almighty. We ponder the fleeting nature of our lives in comparison with the vastness of the sea and eternity of the sky. By "escaping" into quiet, we actually can find ourselves.

The great kabbalists emphasized the importance of periodic "hitbodedut"—seclusion, separating our minds from mundane realities. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan understood "hitbodedut" to mean meditation. If we can devote even a few minutes a day to quiet contemplation, we will be doing ourselves far more good than if we were to spend hours at a noisy restaurant, movie or party.

When we go out to a restaurant or social event, let us seek those environments that allow us to think and to converse without having to be overwhelmed by noise. Let's keep the iPods turned low so as to preserve our hearing as well as our inner peace.

When we phase out the external blaring music that damages our ears and our clarity of mind, we phase up the internal quiet music that satisfies our souls.

Angel for Shabbat