



In the Footsteps of our Fathers - Pirkei Avos 6:3

IN THE SHADOW OF NOISE

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

I have an interesting hobby - I collect words and phrases. I guess it's an occupational hazard.

Recently I came across one that really got me thinking. The expression "acoustical shadow" has a certain intriguing ring to it, and its meaning and derivation just add to this mystique.

During the American Civil War, it was noticed that however loud the noise of the battlefield would be, there were always pockets of silence very close to the actual fighting. All the furies of battle could be seen - the flashes of the gunfire, the explosions of the great cannons - yet those in the thick of it did not pick up the sounds of these thunderous events. Just a few yards away the ears of those present would ache from the tumult, yet those caught up in these pockets could not discern the apparent deluge of noise. Thus was coined the label "acoustical shadow."

We live in times where the racket of society grows every day. Almost every new product comes with its own little noisemaker. Some beep, some trill. Somehow, each one makes itself known. Just listen the next time you go out - something will start fiving and everyone will begin searching their pockets.

A few days ago I was sitting in my office looking into a sefer, and every few minutes I thought I could detect a faraway beep. I looked about with concern. What electronic miracle was beckoning for my attention? Was it my imagination? No, there it goes again.

I got up and started a full-scale investigation. It wasn't the clock. I shook the radio. Nothing wrong there. Was I going insane? Again there was the beep. I got down to crawl on my hands and knees, looking under chairs and sofas. Every few minutes the beep sounded.

I was close to despair. I had visions of some major mishap occurring all because I had missed the warning beep. I put on my coat, preparing to dash to safety if need be. Putting my hand into my coat pocket to retrieve my car keys, I found my mobile phone. I

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pulled it out, and with a sigh of relief, I found the source of the miscreant beeping. My poor telephone was suffering from malnutrition. It needed recharging and was calling out for help!

With all this racket as part of our daily environment, no one can be blamed for seeking refuge in an acoustical shadow. However, doing so only leads to a false sense of security. The war rages on, even in those silent pockets. Not hearing the noise doesn't cut back on the devastation (or recharge my phone's batteries).

In spiritual terms, too, there are acoustical shadows - areas where we don't hear or, more accurately, where we choose not to hear. These are the areas where we figure we know as much as we need to know. We go to a shiur, but somehow we don't engage its lesson in our hearts. We attend fine drashos that we don't really feel are meant for us on a personal level. So many times our attitude is This should be someone else listening. I'm okay.

Our constant companion, Mr. Yetzer Hara, acts as our acoustical shadow-maker, not allowing anything to enter our core. The sign of someone whose heart is encrusted with the calcium of boredom is when that person stops hearing and learning at every level. There is an old and wise saying: "A person studies the mistakes of others as an astute scholar, but cannot study his own even as a pitiful fool." We create a spiritual acoustical shadow that allows us to go blissfully along without challenging ourselves.

In the sixth chapter of Avos, the third mishna tells us, "He who learns one chapter, one law, one verse, one statement, or even one letter from his fellow man must honor him. So we find in the case of David, king of Israel, who learned only two things from Achitophel, yet he called him his master, his companion and his friend...."

Achitophel was one of the singular few of whom the Gemara tells us will not merit a place in the World to Come, yet David Hamelech called him his master. This could mean that David was constantly working within himself, so his humility allowed him to hear anything that was possibly beneficial for his further growth.

The Baal Shem Tov pointed out that the mishna equates the "two things" Achitophel taught with another person's "even one letter." Obviously Achitophel's words were stagnant. They didn't have the vibrancy of words taught by a true ben Torah, where even one letter from a "fellow man" can make a sefer Torah kosher. However, one who truly seeks to grow can gain from anyone.

A respected colleague of mine recently overheard one of his laymen saying how difficult it must be for a Rav who works in a community that is not all that frum. He sidled over to him and whispered, "Trust me, I learn more from my flock than they do from me, and if that ever changes, I'll know that I no longer deserve such a position of trust."

Rav Yisrael Miller quotes a beautiful gemara in relation to this idea. "Rabbi Yochanan used to rise to honor even aged gentiles. He said, 'How many travails [harpatka'i] they have experienced' " (Kiddushin 33). Rashi explains harpatka'i as meaning "many happenings and troubles, and they have seen many miracles and signs of Hashem's Presence."

Here we have an elderly chap who has never learned any Torah; in fact, he isn't even a Yid. Yet his age guarantees that he has had many problems and therefore seen many miracles. And if he has seen miracles, he has seen signs and demonstrations of the Presence of Hashem.

Rabbi Yochanan saw something in what that old man must have lived through, even if the fellow himself didn't. If this applies to an elderly gentile, and if none less than a Sage like Rabbi Yochanan gave up honor for him, how much more can we gain from Yidden who have lived lives that are focused on Hashem's Presence!

Life offers us so many lessons, but we have to be able to hear them. This can happen only when we have

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respect for others, and such respect starts with true humility.

A chassid once asked the Maggid of Mezritch how he could aspire to the spiritual fervor so tangibly obvious among the Maggid's talmidim.

"If you are looking for hot coals," the Maggid answered, "look among the ashes."

These words speak to the hidden spark in one's soul. You want to be alive in your Yiddishkeit? Then find the burning embers of Hashem's light that are hidden in the lowliness of what the world may perceive as spent ashes.

Over 60 years ago (I know, I am edging on being ancient and risk boring others with my stories of yesteryear, so be it) I learned the lesson of this mishna. I was a young yeshiva bachur who had to attend a family simcha somewhere out of town. There were no questions concerning kashrus or any other observance of halacha involved. It just felt like an imposition to my young mind to have to shlep out to some distant cousin's wedding when I could be safely ensconced in yeshiva.

The dreaded day arrived. I got to the shul where the wedding was being held dressed in my best long-coated suit, determined to have as miserable a time as possible. The room was filled with seldom-seen and never-met relatives, and as the chuppa went on, I was getting more and more filled with self-inflicted boredom. At the seuda, I sat with the glazed expression of "I don't want to be here" written on my face in large letters.

Then, between the fish and the soup, a very unique guest appeared at my side. It was my cousin Morty. The exact genealogy of this cousinship was totally lost to me. Somewhere in the mists of time this fellow's father and my grandmother were somehow related. In those days of post-churban Jewishness, you took cousins wherever you could find them.

The fact is, I don't think I had met Morty more than once before, and he certainly wasn't from my cheder. You see, Morty was a colonel in the American Army. That's right - we're talking about a West Point graduate who went on to serve as a high-ranking officer twice in Vietnam. This was not quite the average job for a nice Jewish boy, even in the good old tolerant United States of America.

"Hi! Long time, no see. How are you doing?" he belted out in full military force. I sprang to attention, not knowing what to say.

"Young man," he continued, "I have learned one important thing in the army. Whenever you are given an order, you have two choices. No matter what, you are going to have to follow it. The first choice is to follow orders with a smile on your face and find something positive from the experience. Others will feel good about you, and you, will too. The other choice is to be miserable. You will still have to do as you are told, but everyone will hate you and you will hate yourself as well."

Well, how about that, my dear reader? A mussar shmuess from the cream of the American Army. What was it that we said? One chapter, one law, one statement?

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