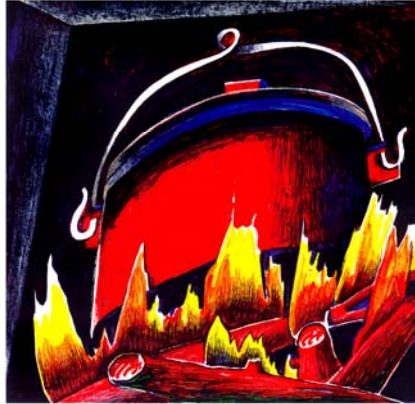


Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(38)

**The Thorns and the Logs**  
Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7: 6



**Background to the Fable “The Thorns and the Logs”**

**Ecclesiastes 7:6**

*“For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool”  
(Ecclesiastes 7:6).*

**?** In which way is the laughter of a fool similar to the crackling of thorns under a pot?

**Avot 1:17**

*Shimon his (Gamliel) son said: All my days have I grown up among the wise and I have not found anything better for a man than silence. Studying Torah is not the most important thing rather fulfilling it. Whoever multiplies words causes sin (Avot 1:17)*

**Avot 3:17**

*Rabbi Akiva said: Jestng and frivolity lead a man towards promiscuity. Tradition is a safeguarding fence around the Torah. Tithes are a fence to wealth. Vows a fence to abstinence. Silence is a fence to wisdom (Avot 3:17).*

**?** How do you think silence and wisdom are interrelated?

**?** How do you think verbosity and sin are interrelated?

**What is a Vow of Silence?**

A vow of silence is a personal pledge to refrain from speaking. There are numerous reasons to take a vow of silence, with many people associating this concept with expressions of religious faith. Christians and Buddhists often incorporate vows of silence into their religious practice, for example, although one need not necessarily be religious to take a vow of silence.

Vows of silence have been a part of religious practice for centuries. The precise details of the vow vary, depending on the person and the circumstances. Some people take permanent vows of silence, in which they pledge never to speak. Others pledge to refrain from speech for a set period of time, such as a year, while others vow to remain silent until something is achieved. A vow of silence may also specify silence at particular times of the day. Many monasteries and cloisters have vows of silence which discourage speaking except during set times, for example.

In some regions, cloistered people take vows of Greater and Lesser Silence. The Greater Silence usually stretches from the last prayers in the evening to the morning prayers, and people may not speak at all during this period. In the Lesser Silence, which lasts from morning to evening prayers, people may speak to pray, and sometimes to convey critical information, but unnecessary conversation is not welcomed.

When someone takes a vow of silence, it is often with the intent of promoting religious contemplation. Some people feel that by ceasing to speak, they force themselves to focus inward, to think about the nature of faith and their own personal beliefs. A vow of silence also strips away the distractions of speech, which is why some residential religious communities use vows of silence, with the goal of encouraging people to ponder spiritual matters.

Someone may also take a vow of silence as an act of penance. Many people value the ability to speak, and giving up one's voice can be a potent symbolic act of penance. Other people sacrifice their voices to religious faith, much as religious ascetics give up luxuries of the world or the possibility of marriage. Some may use the vow of silence as an act of protest, pledging not to speak until demands are met. This form of the vow of silence is often seen in the "silent treatment" used by young children to punish each other for perceived wrongdoings, or to convey extreme displeasure to parents and other authority figures

### **The Thorns and the Logs**

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7: 6

מדרש רבה קהלת פרשה ז סימן ו

**א [ו] כי כקול הסירים תחת הסיר, ר' לוי בריה דר' זעירא עבד לה נטילת רשות, כל העצים כשהן דולקין אין קולן הולך, ברם הלין סרייתא כד אינון דולקים קולן הולך מימר אוף אנן קיסין.**

When logs burn, we do not hear their voices, but when thorns are kindled, we hear their voices, as though to say, "We too are part of the tree."

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7: 6

## Comprehension Questions

**?** Why, according to our fable, when logs burn we do not hear their voices?

**?** Why, according to our fable, when thorns are kindled we do hear their voices?

## Note on “The Thorns and the Logs”

As in the previous fable, the thorns make noise as though they wanted to demonstrate that they too were part of the tree. This fable helps interpret the following verse: “For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool” (Ecclesiastes 7:6). The fool makes his voice heard constantly to make his presence known, while the sage knows how to be quiet.

## More Comprehension Questions

**?** Why does the fool make his presence known through constant talk and laughter?

## Analysis Questions

**?** What do you think would happen if the fool stops talking and laughing?

## Wrapping Up

This is not foolish advice... or how silence can help you to stop being a fool and to achieve wisdom!

## Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

Since this is so similar in meaning to the previous fable, I would use the same questions for the students, only varying the ones that apply to the actual fable and its characters. Offer the teachers the option of doing either this fable or the previous one.

## Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

### Post Reading Writing Strategy: Voice

Have students write something as the fool who makes his voice heard constantly to make his presence known, or write something as the sage who knows how to be quiet.