

Silence

A dream: It's Erev Yom Kippur. I am standing in this sanctuary, about to deliver my Kol Nidrei sermon. I step up to the lectern and say just one word: "Silence." Then I just stop. I close my mouth. I stand without saying anything for a minute. Then two. Then three. After ten minutes have passed in complete silence, I look out at the congregation and notice that almost everyone has left the sanctuary. The last few stragglers are just making their way up the aisles and out the doors into the lobby. Not knowing what to do, I follow them. When I enter the lobby, I suddenly realize what has happened. I see everyone who had been in the sanctuary, the whole congregation, sitting in the lobby. Every single person is complete silent. Some have their eyes closed. Some are looking calmly ahead or at me. I look back at them in disbelief. Either I've lost my mind or I've just delivered the most successful one-word sermon in history. Still wondering, I wake up.

A true story: Sometime during the year that has just past, I arrive at the synagogue to lead a healing service in this sanctuary. Ten chairs are set in a circle on the floor in the front, facing a small table, with a prayer book on each seat. All is ready. But no one is here. It's so quiet. So I think to myself, okay, I'll just sit for a few minutes and meditate while I wait for people to come. I close my eyes and focus on my breath going in and out of my lungs. After five minutes, I open my eyes. Still no one here. I close them again. Five more minutes of silence and breathing. I open my eyes. Still, no one has arrived. So I think, you know, how often do I have a half hour in my life just to sit in silence? I close my eyes again and focus on my breath for another 20 minutes. When those minutes are up, I'm not surprised to open my eyes and find that no one is in the sanctuary but me. But I am surprised that I find myself wishing that I could continue to sit quietly here forever. What has happened to me?

No one who knows me even a little bit would ever say that silence is my preferred mode of being. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I'm kind of... loud. I like conversation and the hubbub of people. When I was a graduate student living alone in Center City, I used to have the radio on pretty much all the time. Sound – talk shows, music, news – all of it kept me company. In rabbinical school I was introduced to silent meditation and I have to say, we didn't really hit it off too well. I thought of sitting silently as a subtle but effective form of torture. So much to say! So many words rattling around in my brain! How can I not let them out?! I was always relieved when the silent period mercifully ended. How could that have been only three minutes?! It felt like an eternity. When I would hear about my friends going on silent retreats for a weekend, or a week at a time, I was, privately, discreetly, horrified. Who would voluntarily give up their power of speech for an extended period of time?! What a waste. When I was in college I saw kids selling a shirt that read: "You can catch up on

your sleep the first week you're dead." I thought that was about when I would get around to getting my fill of being silent.

And yet, sitting in the sanctuary that night, I could feel the pull of silence tugging on my soul, not letting me get off so easily. So I started to think about all of the ways that silence could be my teacher, all the ways it could help me learn things that I had refused to stop talking long enough to hear. And I want to share those with you tonight.

We live in a world of incessant noise. Sounds, voices, music, and just plain unfiltered noise constantly surround us. And the momentum currently driving our culture pushes us to talk louder, post more often, and use extreme language in a vain attempt to be heard. Even when we talk to other people, it sometimes seems those others are just waiting for us to be finished talking so that they can talk, rather than actually listening to what we are saying and then reacting to it. It's a loud, loud, loud, loud, loud, loud, loud world. What could possibly be the place of silence within it?

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that of course, silence can be taken to extremes and become an excuse for inaction and passivity. I am old enough to remember the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and the posters reading "SILENCE = DEATH." And as many have reminded us, good people standing silently and doing nothing is a perfect recipe for the triumph of evil.¹ I am not talking about a silence that allows us to be controlled by others, or a silence that lets injustice occur without protest, or a silence that muffles valuable critique. Instead, I want to explore the silence that can allow us to hear and to learn from what we mostly drown out with our own noise.

So let's begin:

לך דמיה תהלה
L'cha dumiyah t'hilah
"For You silence is praise"²

The person whom the ancient rabbis take as their model of personal prayer never speaks a word. As we read in the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah,

¹ The exact quotation, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," has often been attributed to the 18th century statesman Edmund Burke, but it has not been found in his writings. For an interesting discussion of its origins, see <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/12/04/good-men-do/>

² Psalm 65:2. This verse is often mistranslated as "Praise befits You" (see for example the JPS Tanakh), but there are both grammatical and contextual reasons why the above is a better translation.

“Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard.”³ Hannah’s prayer was so sincere that it came from the depths of her being, but it was silent, and the rabbis affirm that silence as the ideal kind of prayer.⁴ This is surprising because the ancient rabbis are the originators of the prayers that we use today, the same prayers that fill the pages of the *maḥzor* and make our services so very – you should excuse the expression – long. As the rabbis of the Talmud would say, “*La kashya*” – “it’s not a contradiction.” The fixed words of prayers are necessary to guide our minds in the themes and pathways that can lead us to deep connection. But we know that no prayer, no praise, no words of thanks could ever truly capture all that we owe, all that have, and all that we aspire to. We have to bring the inarticulate yearnings of our hearts to the table in order to truly connect to God. That’s where Hannah excels – going beyond words to let the silent cry of her soul out into the universe.

It’s not a surprise, then, that silent prayer is a huge part of the Jewish prayer service, and never more than on the High Holidays. On Yom Kippur alone, as I mentioned earlier, we have five opportunities to stand silently before God. Each of these periods of silence is ten to fifteen minutes long, time that we stand shoulder to shoulder with other people but each engage in our own, individual, silent attempt to unlock our hearts so that we can truly cry out. Sadly, we often approach these periods of silent prayer as if they are a test of our ability to skim through the words in the prayer book as quickly as possible, either in Hebrew or in English. In silent prayer, completeness is not a virtue or even a goal; all of the words will be said aloud later, so we don’t have to worry that some will be missed. Instead, we can use these periods of silent meditation to delve down into ourselves and get to the heart of what’s going on inside. Maybe some silent words will come out, as they did for Hannah, words only God can hear. Maybe all we will find is an inarticulate yearning. These authentic expressions of our souls are what silent prayer is intended to unleash.

In the realm of prayer, silence can teach us to cut to the chase, to open those parts of ourselves that we hide from the rest of the world, and to transcend the words that sometimes get in our way. Silence is an important counterweight to the wordiness of Jewish tradition. It allows us precious, rare space to hear our own thoughts and come to grips with our own fears about the world and about ourselves. And when we feel we have nothing else to offer, silence is the praise we can offer up to whatever force formed us and put us here on the earth to draw one breath after another. Just to exist is a miracle. Just to stand in silence is to offer praise.

³ I Samuel 1:13.

⁴ See Babylonian Talmud B’rachot 31a: “I might say that a person should let their voice be heard in praying? But it has already been clearly stated by Hannah, as it is said, ‘But her voice could not be heard.’”

וַיִּדָם אַהֲרֹן

Va-yidom Aharon

“And Aaron was silent”⁵

Aaron has just seen two of his sons die in front of his eyes, burned by holy fire for reasons that are beyond understanding. His brother, Moses, speaks, seeming to try to explain why this has happened, why God has taken Aaron’s sons from him in this inexplicable way. But Aaron does not speak. Maybe he can’t. His grief and shock may have rendered him mute. Or maybe he doesn’t speak because he has no words to say. No words of explanation or understanding. No words of comfort or healing. No words of question or challenge. Not even words of grief or pain. Where he has gone, thrust suddenly into the strange land of mourning, no words can follow him. “Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar taught: ...Do not attempt to comfort someone when their dead lie before them.” Words of comfort or explanation or even sympathy are often lost on those in grief. Silence is their response and their refuge.

Even after a funeral and a burial, grief often doesn’t take the form of words, and those who come to comfort the bereaved don’t need to bring words with them. There really are no words that can assuage the pain, heal the hurt, or cover over the trauma of death. And sometimes, words can do more harm than good. It is taught that the traditional meal upon returning from the cemetery involves foods like lentils and eggs because those foods resemble a closed mouth. The journey of mourning has many peaks and troughs, many different levels and experiences, but often the best that we can offer to those in mourning is our silent presence. Simply to be with them, to accompany them wherever grief takes them, can be the greatest comfort.

In the realm of mourning, silence can teach us patience. There is no shortcut through the pain and no way to avoid the anguished question of why – why this? why him? why her? why now? Silence is a response that allows us to experience the pain fully as we walk slowly, very slowly, toward the path of healing. And silence – our silent presence, sitting with those who are grappling with loss – can be a gift. Where there are no words, silence can be a soothing balm for shattered hearts. And where there are no explanations and no answers, silence can help us come to grips with the difficult task of remaking ourselves around a deep absence, finding ways to live in this world full of beauty and tragedy, step by step and day by day.

⁵ Leviticus 10:3.

ולא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה

V'lo matzati la-guf tov ele sh'tikah

“There is nothing more becoming a person than silence”⁶

Even if I just told you that this was a statement found in the collection of ancient rabbinic wisdom known as Pirkei Avot, that on its own would make it surprising. What?! The ancient rabbis, the ones who filled volumes upon volumes of Mishnah and Talmud with their conversations, saying that the best thing for a person is silence?! Unbelievable. Now let's talk about the full context. This is a statement made by Shimon, the son of Rabban Gamliel. Rabban Gamliel was the head of the rabbinic court and thus the leading scholar in a group famous for scholarship, and most especially famous for extended scholarly disagreements, with their discussions, as we read in the Passover Haggadah, sometimes lasting all night long. Here is more of Shimon's statement:

Throughout my life, I was raised among the scholars, and I discovered that there is nothing more becoming a person than silence...; excess in speech leads to sin.

So Shimon is saying that the very method through which the ancient rabbis argue out the truth of things – speech – has a fatal flaw at its core. Instead of clarifying and leading to greater truth, it can lead to exactly what it's trying to avoid: sin.

Again, this is not necessarily a contradiction, and Shimon is not necessarily just rebelling against his father's authority. Although the rabbis were very attached to argument and speech as the way to truth, they also acknowledged that at its beginnings, the project of understanding Torah was rooted in silence. When they imagined the moment at which God began to speak the words of Torah at Mt. Sinai, the rabbis emphasized the absence of sound that preceded the revelation of God's voice:

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When God revealed the Torah, no sparrow chirped, no bird flew, no ox lowed; the heavenly wheels of God's chariot did not move; the heavenly creatures did not chant “Holy, Holy;” the sea did not roar; no creature uttered a sound; instead the world was completely silent. Then God's voice resounded, “I am the Lord your God.”⁷

For truth to resound, there must first be silence; for us to learn anything, we must first be silent. Only then can wisdom enter into us. The rabbis asked why the Torah was given in the wilderness, an “empty” place. They answered that in order to learn Torah,

⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:17.

⁷ Midrash Exodus Rabbah 29:9.

we must make ourselves as “empty” as the wilderness.⁸ If we are completely filled up with all that we think we know, if we are full of our own words and the sound of our own voices, we can never make room for learning something that might change our minds and change our lives. Only if we can make ourselves empty and silent do we have a chance at learning that brings us closer to our own truth and to the truth at the heart of the world.

In the realm of learning, silence can teach us how to open ourselves to what we don’t know and to the others who can be our teachers. We are a community of seekers of knowledge and we have so much to learn from each other. Silence teaches us to place the possibility of new knowledge coming from someone else’s words above the certainty of what we already know. It guides us into a place of curiosity and receptivity that can allow knowledge to enter deep into us rather than just skimming lightly over our surface. It allows us to remake ourselves by recognizing the potential in others’ words – words spoken thousands of years ago and words spoken just now. Silence can make listeners and learners of us all.

אמור מעט ועשה הרבה
Emor m’at va’aseh harbeh
“Say little and [then] do much”⁹

The ancient rabbis are agreed that to live a virtuous life, action is primary. But in this verse, also from Pirkei Avot, the sage Shammai connects silence with action. Why? Action is good, but action without direction is worse than useless. To act, we must first have a moment of silence, a moment in which we listen and reflect on what we should do. It is no accident that the preeminent Jewish prayer is the Sh’ma, a cry from us to ourselves to listen, above all else. Listening and reflecting before acting is modeled all over the Torah. God listens for and then hears the cry of the Israelites in Egypt; only then does God act to set them free. In the story of Hagar and Ishmael that we read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the angel listens for and then hears the cry of the child Ishmael; only then does God cause Hagar’s eyes to be open so that she sees the well of water with which she can save the life of her son. If even God and the angels listen in silent reflection before acting, how much more so should we, whose knowledge is so much more limited, make sure that we take the time to listen and reflect in silence before running to act.

Here, too, the teachings of Torah run up against the momentum of our culture. Rare is the leader who, upon faced with a difficult moment, says, “Let me reflect on that for a few minutes – or an hour, or a day – before I decide how I’m going to react.” We

⁸ Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7.

⁹ Pirkei Avot 1:15.

are always fighting the expectation that action and reaction must be immediate, that following our first instinct is the best, and that if we were really competent, we would always know what to do in the blink of an eye. Yet we know deep down, and of course psychological research confirms, that from a parent dealing with a toddler tantrum to world leader confronting a crisis, taking time for silent reflection tends to lead to a better course of action and a better outcome for everyone. Even taking the proverbial time to count to ten before acting calms our panic, relaxes our bodies, and gives us a little space to allow new information to come to the fore or new possibilities for action to come to the mind. Silence – reflection – action. This could be a new mantra for the world.

In the realm of action, silence can teach us to slow down. With reflection, we can consider what the goal of our action should be and what effects it is likely to cause. By listening to the cues in the world around us, we can gain information that can help us fine-tune our action to make it more likely to achieve our goals for ourselves, for those around us, and for the world.

ואיש און מחשבתי

V'ish aven mahsh'votav

“Let the sinful [turn away from] their thoughts”¹⁰

Finally we come to the subject of this holiday, this Day of Atonement, a day for thinking about turning – *t'shuvah* – both turning away from what we want to distance ourselves from and turning toward what we seek, pointing ourselves in a new direction in the New Year. As we've already seen tonight, the liturgy of Yom Kippur focuses heavily on confessing our sins out loud and in chorus, sometimes singing them out in our eagerness to demonstrate that we can, in fact, change. But Maimonides, the medieval source for much Jewish thinking about repentance, points to this verse from the prophet Isaiah to argue that the indispensable starting point for turning is silent and internal.¹¹ Repentance begins with the quiet process of sifting through not only our memories of the past year but also our thoughts, treasuring the good and flagging any that clash with Torah and with our highest values. Rediscovering moments of goodness helps us shift our view of ourselves, seeing the best of what we can be. And finding moments of disjuncture between who we want to be and who we have been creates a shock of recognition – we suddenly realize how far we may have travelled from the path we know we should be taking. For Maimonides, speaking the words of public confessionals without having gone through the silent process of taking stock of ourselves is like going to the mikveh while carrying a pig – it just isn't going to work.¹²

¹⁰ Isaiah 55:7.

¹¹ Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2.

¹² Hilchot Teshuvah 2:3.

To really move toward repentance, we have to silence our words and even silence our internal monologues so that we can listen to what our hearts are telling us. Our hearts know both our inner, painful, secret failings and our loftiest acts and aspirations, but we often cover up the heart's murmurings with an avalanche of words. The heart, like God at Mt. Sinai, needs silence in order to speak. Jews have been teaching for centuries that God is both the cosmic Creator of all and the still, small, hard-to-hear voice within us. Too often we willfully refuse to hear that voice, refuse to give it any air time in our inner lives. It, too, needs silence to be heard. Moving out from ourselves, we need to go into silence in order to hear the voices of those we may have wronged or neglected during the past year, as well as the voices of those we may have loved and helped. By silencing ourselves, we can displace our own egos from the center of our concerns as we hear, faintly at first, the sounds of others needs and cares, their gratitude and their love.

In the realm of repentance, silence can teach us where we have done right and where we have gone wrong, and it can give us the humility to be able to hear the other voices that strain to reach our ears: the voice of our hearts, the voices of those around us, and the voice of God within us. Silence can give us empathy for others and even sympathy for ourselves and for our failings, both when we allow ourselves to hear how our thoughts and our deeds may have left painful traces on our lives and on others', and when we open ourselves to the goodness we may have brought into the world. Silence can allow us to take the first steps toward turning and returning, turning away from destructive paths, turning toward the good, returning to others, and returning to ourselves. It all begins with the silence that allows us to hear the truth that dwells within us.

דומיה
Dumiyah
Silence

I began with a dream and a true story. I want to leave you with a vision. In this vision, unlike the true story or the dream, you are all here with me, filling this sanctuary, and when I say "Silence," you don't leave. Instead, you all sink into silence with me. Some of you close your eyes. Some of you just unfocus your gaze and keep your eyes open. The silence fills the room, and it fills up each of us, leaving us open, awake, and listening. It opens our souls to prayer. It opens our hearts to grief and to comfort and healing. It opens our minds to learning. It opens our bodies to action. And it opens our whole selves to repentance. We breathe it in and out. No sound disturbs us. So we sit. Together. In silence. In peace. And the silence spreads out of this room and around the building and into the streets. It moves out in waves into the city and through the country and around the world. It fills every space and every soul. It leaves everyone

open, awake, and listening. We all sit. The whole world. Together. Breathing. In silence. In peace.

Ken y'hi ratzon – so may this be God's will.