

SACRED SILENCE

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Vayidom Aharon. And Aaron was silent.

One of Torah's most enigmatic narratives is the story of *Nadav* and *Avihu*. Aaron's two oldest sons. Priests in training. On the day of their ordination. You know what it's like. Finally, after all those classes, all the time spent in preparation, it's graduation day. A time for celebration. A time to rejoice. A time for a little release. In other words, it's party-time. Except that these two boys were not simply graduates. They were now priests. They were the ones now responsible to mediate the relationship between Israel and its God. Anyone else you could forgive for what they did that day. But not for priests. They were held to a higher standard. God's glory depended on them. And they blew it. They offered up an *aysh zarah*, a strange fire, one they were "not commanded" to do. Maybe they were sloppy. Maybe they got creative. Torah hints they might even have been drunk. No matter. They were priests. And for their sin they had to die. Leviticus. Chapter 10. "A fire came out from before the Eternal and consumed them." Right then and there.

It was at this point that Moses approached their father, his brother, Aaron. There was no attempt to be compassionate. No comforting or condolences. Moses knew the gravity of the situation. Moses knew what he had to say. It only took him one sentence. "This is what the Eternal meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me I show Myself Holy and gain glory before all the people.'"

You could have forgiven Aaron if he had turned and walked away. You could have forgiven Aaron if he had said something I can't repeat from the *bimah* back to Moses. You could have forgiven Aaron if he had smacked his brother across the face. But he said nothing. *Vayidom Aharon.* And Aaron was silent.

It is, for me, among the most powerful and compelling words in all of Torah. Four letters. Painfully short. Dramatically onomatopoeic. *Vayidom*. Three syllables ending with a slamming shut of your lips. Almost as if an action suggestive of the forcing of silence upon oneself. *Vayidom*.

There are, of course, times when silence is a sin. To remain silent in the face of evil is surely a sin. Well we know this truth. Even in less grave circumstances silence can be (at best) awkward and (at worst) inappropriate. There are times when it is *mitzvah* to speak up. To speak out. But there are also times when silence is more than golden. There are times when silence is sacred.

We Jews don't talk too much about silence. It's not our strong suit. I remember years ago, when I was a newly ordained rabbi and I was invited up to a convent in northern Wisconsin to speak about something Jewish. My hosts could not have been more gracious. They welcomed me in as an honored guest. They fed me a kosher meal. They all sat respectfully while I spoke. They listened attentively. And at the end of my presentation, they showed me to my room and bade me "Good-night". I will never forget that night. No television. No radio. This was before the invention of the personal computer (let alone the Internet). Just me and my thoughts. Complete, absolute silence. I thought I would go mad. "Jews are noisy," it occurred to me. We thrive on dialogue and argument. We schmooze and bicker. Being silence is not our thing.

But the more I have come to understand Judaism, the less I am certain about my observation that night in Wisconsin. On the contrary, I have come to appreciate that there is a holiness to silence that reverberates louder than any sound we know.

Midrash Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer. Chapter 34.

There are six whose voice travels from one end of the universe to the other and their voice is never heard: When a fruit-bearing tree is cut down; when the snake sloughs off its skin; when a woman divorces her husband; when a woman loses her virginity; when a child leaves its mother's womb; and when the soul leaves its body. For each of these things a voice travels from one end of the universe to the other and is never heard.

Talk about enigmatic texts. What does it mean for a sound to reverberate throughout the universe and yet not be hearable? How is it that something can have the effect of universal loudness and yet not make a sound? And what do each of these things – cutting down a fruit tree, a snake shedding its skin, the ending of a marriage, the loss of virginity, birth and death – all have in common. Is this simply a random list? Or is there something about each of these that merits an inaudible sound?

In a brilliant essay on this *midrash*, Rachel Adelman, a Jewish educator currently at Harvard Divinity School, teaches that these six moments are each reflective of the Garden of Eden story: the child emerging from its mother's womb is a reference to creation; the cutting down of the fruit-bearing tree is, of course, the Tree of Knowledge from which we were forbidden to eat; the snake losing its skin is the Serpent; the loss of virginity is Adam and Eve's loss of innocence; the soul departing the body is the consequence of mortality we all bear since the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree; and the ultimate banishment – *vayigaresh* – from the Garden (and, by implication, from God), is the same verb as to be divorced. Each of these experiences, therefore, are primal. They take us back to our very beginnings.

Now the reason this is significant is that at its core, the whole purpose of Judaism is to get us back into the Garden of Eden. It is not a coincidence that the primary metaphor used by the rabbis for *Shamayim* (Heaven) and *Olam Ha-Ba* (The World to Come) is, in fact, *Gan Eden* – the Garden of Eden. In other words, all that we do, our end-goal is to return. Driven out of our primordial home, the womb of our very being, we are – as humanity – instinctively driven to go home. Albeit Judaism posits history as linear – there was a Beginning, there will be an End – that "Ending" will ultimately take us back to where we began, *Gan Eden*. And maybe more than anything else, this is the real meaning of *Teshuvah*. Not repentance but Return. Return to God. Return to the Place where we and God were one.

But here's the rub. These six things, while each suggestive of the primal home of the Garden, also share a common aspect that makes return impossible. Adelman quotes Galit Hasan-Rokem of the Hebrew University as noting that these six phenomena "...are all irreversible, transformative changes involving loss..." In other words, you can never climb back into the womb, you can never repair a felled tree, once the skin is shed it is gone forever, so too with virginity, the banishment from marriage, and death. For these there is no return. There can be no *Teshuvah*. There can be no going back. All we are left with is the primal cry, a sound that can be heard from one end of the universe to the other. It is a cry that is so great, so deep and profound, that it extends beyond the range of audibility. It's not on the "natural" frequency. It is unhearable.

Alas, we all know this sound. At some point in each of our lives we have all known the moment of confronting an "irreversible, transformative...loss". Or we will. There is no escaping it. Be it death, or divorce, or failure, or loss. These are the painful realities of the human condition. And what makes them unbearable is that we understand, implicitly, that there is no going back. There is no return. *Teshuvah* is not possible. All we have is a pain, an anguish, a deafening cry within that no one else can hear.

Except God.

The sound that goes "from one end of the universe to the other" resounds within the realm of the sacred. We may not hear it. It might not make a sound that we can hear. But the *midrash* comes to teach us that that doesn't mean it goes undetected by God. "From one end of the universe to the other" is certainly the abode of God. *Olam* is the Place of the Holy One. And it is a world that is transcendent of sound. This is an unmistakable truth of Judaism.

Midrash Shemot Rabbah (5:9).

Rabbi Abbahu said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When God gave the Torah no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the Ophanim stirred a wing, the Seraphim did not say 'Holy, Holy', the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the voice went forth...

And what did God say? Was it the whole Torah? Was it just the Ten Commandments? Some say it was just the first commandment: "I am Adonai.." Others say it was just the first word, *Anochi* – I. Rabbi Mendl of Rymanov teaches that it was just the first letter of the first word, the *alef* of *Anochi*, the first letter of the *alef-bet*. The letter that has no sound.

The *midrash* continues. Quoting Deuteronomy:

"These words the Lord spoke unto all your assembly...with a great voice, and it went on no more" (Deuteronomy 5:19). Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish asks: What is the meaning of 'And it went on no more'? He answers his own question: When a man calls his friend, there is an echo to his voice, but there was no echo to the Voice that proceeded from God.

To wit, atop the same mountain, this time it's Elijah, and God brings forth shattering winds and earthquake and fire, but the text is clear, God was not in them. Then it goes on to say, and Elijah heard the sound of a *Kol D'mamah Daka*. A still small voice. But what is such a sound? What is a *Kol D'mamah Daka* – a still small voice? It is the sound of silence.

In our moments of need God responds to us in the very same manner that our souls call out to God – with the sound that reverberates throughout all creation yet is inaudible except within the universe of the soul. The sound of sacred silence.

Psalm 19.

The heavens declare the presence of God, just as the firmament proclaims God's doing. Day after day speaking gushes forth, just as night after night wisdom is whispered. But of course there can be no speaking, nor can there be any words, indeed the voices of the heavens and the firmament cannot even be heard. Still their voice reverberates throughout creation, their words to the ends of the earth.

George Elliott wrote:

"If we had a keen vision and feeling for all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow, the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

And Max Picard, author of the book "The World of Silence":

"Silence reveals itself in a thousand inexpressible forms: in the quiet of dawn, in the noiseless aspiration of trees towards the sky, in the stealthy descent of night, in the silent changing of the seasons, in the falling moonlight, trickling down into the night like a rain of silence, but above all in the silence of the inward soul."

There is a reason that the response to the *Shema – Barukh Shem Kavod Malkhuto Le-olam Va-ed* / Blessed is God's Glorious Name Forever and Ever – is supposed to be said silently. The Talmud teaches us that we must recite the *Shema* out loud, loud enough that it can be heard at least by our own ears. The *Shema* is for us. It reminds us to listen: "Hear, O Israel..." But the *Barukh Shem Kavod*, its recitation is for God, for the sacred within us, for the world of our *neshamah*, our soul.

Vayidom Aharon. And Aaron was silent. He understood. He knew this. And so must we.

I remember two years ago. During the summer. It was the first Shabbat service I had attended since I sent the letter to the congregation announcing my divorce. And I vividly remember the angst, the apprehension I was feeling in anticipation of walking into this building. How would people react? What would they say? Would I be able to deal with it? And yet, at the door I was greeted with a prayer-book and a smile. Walking to my seat, I felt a hand briefly grasp and hold my arm. As I sat down, a woman turned around and simply said, "*Shabbat Shalom*." But what she was really saying came silently from her eyes. It was among the most comforting and redemptive moments of my life.

There is this wonderful reading in the liturgy for the House of Mourning. No doubt many of you are familiar with it.

Out of affliction the Psalmist learned the law of God. And in truth, grief is a great teacher, when it sends us back to serve and bless the living. We learn how to counsel and comfort those who, like ourselves, are bowed with sorrow. We learn when to keep silence in their presence, and when a word will assure them of our love and concern.

It is so true. Especially the part about learning "when to keep silence in their presence." Because even though the prayer goes on to say "when a word will assure them of our love and concern," what word would that be? How often I have been asked by people, "I don't know what to say." And the thing is that there is nothing to say. There is nothing that can be said. There are no words. There is no insight. There is no wisdom. There is only the love that can be communicated in silence. The embrace. The grasping of a hand. The smile. The looking into the eyes of the other. It is the world of sacred connection. It is the world of silence.

Alas, most of us are so uncomfortable with silence. It makes us uneasy. Even fearful. Language is our medium. Think *The Tower of Babel*. Language is the ability to take control over our universe. To claim sovereignty. Maybe that is why God confused the generation that sought to build the tower? Not to render us mute but rather to put us in our place, to remind us that this is God's world. And to teach us that language should be employed only in the service of the other rather than at the expense of each other. William Burroughs once said "Language is a virus from outer space." My favorite, however, comes from Woody Allen: "God is silent. Now if only man would shut up." Indeed. If only we could understand that the real communication that binds one being to another is non-verbal. As our teacher Art Green reminds us:

"The traditions of Israel are filled with . . . sacred and mysterious silent acts of worship: the binding of tefillin, the waving of the lulav, the eating of matzot. All of these belong to the silent heart of the Jewish theological vocabulary. Each mitzvah . . . is a half-hidden way of pronouncing God's name."

In other words, we utter God's name through the performance of *mitzvot*. We don't speak. We do.

And that is how the story ends. Aaron was forbidden to mourn. Neither he nor his surviving sons were even allowed to touch *Nadav* and *Avihu*. They could not afford to render themselves ritually impure. They were priests. Instead the community did for Aaron and his family what they could not. Aaron's two cousins, *Mishael* and *Eltzaphan*, came forward and, with their tunics, carried out the bodies themselves. They came in and took over. And then Torah says that the entire Israelite community would cry out on their behalf. This is what Jews do. Especially today.

For all that we say this day, for all that we intone with the melodies of our souls, the most important words we offer are the ones recited in silence. In our personal *Amida*. In our private confessions. In the thoughts that fill our souls: of our loved ones whose presence follows us wherever we go, and the recollections of our failures, and in our desire to make our atonement a true at-one-ment, as we cry out from within on behalf of each other. *Al Chet She-Chatanu Lifanekha*. For the sin which we have committed against You.

And of this I am certain. *Im hegyon libeinu* – if the meditations of our hearts are truly from our hearts they will reverberate from one end of the universe to the other and, though they will make no sound, they will be heard. Of this I am certain. The truth be told, there is no return. We cannot go back. But hand in hand (both figuratively and literally) – in the silence that is sacred – we can emerge forth into the New Year with hope and renewed strength. It is a strength we give to each other. And it makes an echo that resounds throughout the Universe. Even though it is completely silent. Or so we think.