

## The Sound of Silence – Parashat Trumah

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*And in the naked light I saw  
Ten thousand people, maybe more  
People talking without speaking  
People hearing without listening  
People writing songs that voices never share  
And no one dared  
Disturb the sound of silence.*

Paul Simon claims to have just written these words in the bathroom one day. But in January 1966, Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" rose to number one on the Billboard 100. It's telling that number two was the Beatles' "We Can Work it Out." Sometimes we are drawn to the bombast, the noise, the attention-grabbing flair of the Beatles; and sometimes the quiet, unassuming, everyday sounds of Simon and Garfunkel can be just as penetrating.

There is a certain disappointment when our Torah cycle reaches Parashat Trumah. For months we've been reading the exciting stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, the patriarchs and matriarchs, slavery and redemption from Egypt, the Revelation at Sinai. And now we shift to ... the tabernacle. Gold, silver, copper, tapestries, altars, tables, rods, loops, and endless detail. We are more sophisticated than that. We know God is everywhere, so what is the purpose, what is the lesson, what is the point of the traveling sanctuary?

Rashi, the greatest of the medieval scholars, says it's about the gold, and not in a positive way. In his opening comment on the portion, he writes "*ein mukdam um'uchar ba-torah*, The Torah is not written in chronological order." Because the commandment to construct the Tabernacle does not belong here. It belongs, he says, after the golden calf. In Rashi's estimation, it was only after God saw how the people lusted for gold that God decided they needed the physical sanctuary and all its vessels. The sanctuary is loud, and we don't worship that way anymore.

But another famous medieval rabbi, Nachmanides/Ramban, disagrees. Nachmanides says that the section about the Tabernacle belongs here because the Tabernacle is not constructed in response to the Golden Calf. The Tabernacle is constructed in response to Sinai. The description of the space parallels Sinai. On Sinai, the people stood at the foot of the mountain, the priests and Levites were permitted to stand on its slope, and only Moses was allowed at the top. In the Tabernacle, there was an outer courtyard where Israelites were invited to congregate, a holy inner space where priests and Levites

performed their ritual work, and a Holy of Holies where only the High Priest was allowed to enter (and only on Yom Kippur).

The Tabernacle was constructed because Sinai was a one-time event. The people saw lighting and smoke; heard thunder and the shofar; felt the mountain shake and understood that this was God. It was incredibly public and loud; but you can't have that every day. "The mystery behind the Tabernacle," writes Nachmanides, "is that God's presence which dwelt publicly on Mount Sinai would now dwell discretely in the sacred space." The key feature of the Tabernacle was not the precious beauty; it was not intended to be loud at all. The Tabernacle was to be silent; because God is present, God dwells in that silent place every day. We can experience the divine presence if we are willing to let it in.

It's not known for its philosophical profundities, but during the pandemic, I've been binge watching the show "Schitt's Creek" with my family. There is this scene in season 2 where the character Alexis expresses frustration with her boyfriend Mutt. Alexis is one of those people who can't stand silence – and maybe it's significant that she is decidedly a Jewish character. She talks and talks, while Mutt is more cerebral; he strives for quiet intimacy. And Alexis proposes a change. "I'm not saying there's a problem," she tells her boyfriend while sitting in a booth at the local eatery. "I'm just saying there are definitely a few things between us that need to be adjusted in order for us to make this work for us. Like maybe I need to talk less and listen more. And maybe you need to talk more and listen less."

Mutt stares silently into Alexis's eyes and asks, "Are you willing to make the adjustments?" The cake they had been waiting on is served, and what follows is a minute and 6 seconds of uncomfortable silence. That's an eternity when you consider that the entire episode is only 21 minutes. When the scene ends, the two are holding hands; and the audience understands they have just broken up. It's the deepest conversation those two ever have. The "sound of silence" is very powerful.

I think about the power of silence in my rabbinate because it's an area where I strive for growth. I visit someone I don't know well in the hospital and I say "hello." And what comes next? Do I need to speak? Do I need to entertain? Do I need to come armed with discussion topics and jokes? Does a silent pause mean it is time to leave? No. The silence can be poignant. Just be present. Because God is in the silence, not just in my words or prayers. It's a little arrogant to think otherwise. God doesn't need my noise to be present. God doesn't need Sinai. The tradition is that the *shekhina*, God's presence is hovering over the patient's head.

In the synagogue also. What should I do when I don't know the words, when I don't know how to pray? Do I talk to the person sitting next to me? There is a time for that. And there is a role for the rabbi and cantor to create meaning with music and insights. But there is also spiritual meaning in silence. Just sit. Listen. Reflect. The sanctuary is designed to help us sense the divine presence. It's a little harder at home, but still entirely possible. God is here ... if I can stop talking long enough, if I can remove myself or my ego. God is in this place as long as we make room, as long as we don't push God out.

In the classroom. In meetings. In the political discourse. We don't always have to be the first to answer every question. As leaders and facilitators, we need to wait a little longer. So often, it is the one who speaks last, the one you thought wasn't listening, the one you had to call on and practically beg to

speaker who offers the most compelling or insightful thought for the day. We need to take more time to reflect; don't assume we already know; let the answers come to us. There is a reason we are created with two ears and one mouth. God is not only found in the noise.

About 400 years after the experience at Sinai, the Bible describes how the prophet Elijah got into trouble with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He runs away to the wilderness in Sinai, and he experiences a divine revelation. But it is very different from the one Moses experienced in that same spot. "And lo, the Lord passed by," we read in the book of Kings. "There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind – an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire – a still, small voice (*kol d'mama daka*). When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave" because he understood that God was in that space, in the wilderness, in the silence.

That's the meaning of the tabernacle. The key verse in Parashat Trumah is "*v'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tokham*, They shall make for Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." The Hasidic masters point out that the text does not say, "They shall make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell within it." God does not dwell in a single space. God does not "need" the sanctuary because God dwells among *us*, within *us*. The space is merely a medium to draw that out. The space is a place for us to find God in the silence, and to translate that to all the other places where God is present in the everyday, wherever we are willing to let God in. What was the purpose of the Tabernacle? It was to give our ancestors a project so they could practice a dictum the great sage Shamai would formulate more than a thousand years later: "*emor m'at va-aseh harbeh*, say little and do much." Shabbat shalom.