

Ki Tavo 5780 - Speech and Silence
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Silence holds an important place in Jewish tradition. There is value and incredible power in the opportunities we have for silent prayer - the opportunity to meditate or reflect or just enjoy a few moments of quiet in a world full of noise - particularly when surrounded by our community.

There is a recognition that silence, in the right settings, can lead us to holiness. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains,

When the prophet Elijah stood [in the desert] after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice, literally “the sound of a slender silence.” (1 Kings 19:9-12) [Rabbi Sacks] defines this as *the sound you can hear only if you are listening*.¹

Silence can also be dangerous, a way to perpetuate ignorance and injustice. Layla Saad, in her workbook, *Me and White Supremacy*, which many of us here at Beth Am are engaging with as part of our communal *cheshbon hanefesh* during this month of Elul, quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in her discussion of the danger of white silence when it comes to the mistreatment or violence against black, indigenous, and people of color: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

Judaism recognizes the limitations of silence and the power of speech and action. It was, in fact, through speech that God sparked the process Creation into being: “*Vayomer Elohim yehi or, vayehi or* - God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’”² Indeed, each subsequent action of Creation begins with God speaking it into being. This is the generative power of speech. It’s no coincidence that the Hebrew word for speech (or a word) - *daber* shares the same root as the word for a “thing” - *davar*. Even today, we humans have the ability to use our words to speak something into reality, but our words also have the power to destroy and break down.

We have just hit the mid-point in the month of Elul, a month in which Jewish tradition calls us to take account of our actions over the past year, and to engage in the work of *teshuvah*.

Maimonides, the prolific 12th century Jewish philosopher and commentator, understands the work of *teshuvah*, of moral return, as the process through which we recognize our mistakes, take ownership of them, then do work to learn from them and make amends. For Maimonides, the process begins with *cheshbon hanefesh* – literally “taking account” of the soul, in which we must do real soul searching and consider our various transgressions – big and small – of the past year.

Once we have taken account of our actions, we must admit that we have made a mistake or hurt someone or ignored our responsibilities. Next, we must verbalize these actions, and say,

¹ https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3328781/jewish/The-Sound-of-Silence.htm

² Genesis 1:3

out loud, “This is what I did.” For Maimonides, the verbalizing, the speaking-out, is a crucial element of *teshuvah*, because we explain the action that was done and articulate why it was wrong. Like the Divine, we speak our mistakes and mis-steps back into reality. These actions are no longer vague memories, they are brought back to life so that we can hold them up, turn them around, examine them. And when they are brought back into reality, we must also hold ourselves accountable and respond.

Having verbalized our actions, real *teshuvah*, a return to a more whole condition, occurs when we admit feeling a sense of regret for our actions. Maimonides contends that through this sense of regret, we should feel a true internal desire not to do what we have done again. Finally, the process is sealed by resolve. We must say, “I will stop.” This means that if faced with the same situation, we will have learned from our mistakes and act differently, having undergone a fundamental change in ourselves. There is also a recognition in this process that, if our words or actions have hurt another person, we must, after going through this internal process, approach them to offer sincere apology and try to make amends.

Maimonides’ understanding is that *teshuvah* is not a quick fix; it is time consuming, hard, and laborious work that is not easy. But it possesses an inherent depth and potential for real change – all stemming from a recognition that, as humans, we are not perfect, we have room for improvement.

This year, it is also important that we also confront our biases - those often subtle thoughts about people - particularly black, indigenous, and people of color - that might pop into our minds, that we almost overlook. When we begin the hard work of naming these assumptions and biases, we can then work to address them, confront them, and, hopefully, begin to work through them.

Last week marked the 57th anniversary of the famous “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” held on August 28, 1963. That march is probably best known for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he laid out his vision for an America that had overcome racial segregation and injustice, a vision of an America as it ought to be. Perhaps slightly lesser-known, is the speech that was delivered just before Dr. King’s, offered by Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1937, and was at the March in his capacity as the President of the American Jewish Congress:

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

This is the season for reflection, for turning. The season for speaking hard truths about ourselves. Throughout the month of Elul, we sound the shofar, a reminder that silence is not an option. That only through doing the hard work of *teshuvah* can we begin to make ourselves and our world better, one word, one deed at a time.