

Yitro 5778

Noise and Silence

The account of the Revelation at Sinai that we read this morning is full of noise. The Torah vividly describes the sound of thunder, the clamoring of the people, Moses' instructions that we can imagine being yelled over the panic, God's instructions to Moses and of course the Revelation itself, beginning with the great announcement *I am the Lord your God*.

However, there is a Midrash that imagines that moment very differently:

Rabbi Abahu taught in Rabbi Yohanan's name: When the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the ofanim angels flapped their wings. The seraph angels stopped singing kadosh, kadosh, kadosh. The sea did not roar. No creature uttered any sound at all. Rather, the world fell absolutely silent - and then came the Voice, I am the Lord your God. [Shemot Rabba 29:9]

There are other Midrashim in this 'family of silence' that suggest that Revelation constituted a single letter - the *aleph*, which is silent - that was transmitted directly into the consciousness of each individual standing at the foot of the mountain - including Moses himself.

We Jews don't really do well with silence, do we? Even the Amidah, which we like to think of as 'the silent prayer' often isn't - not because of external noise in the room but because of the incessant chatter and distraction that goes on in our minds. Perhaps that's why the Rabbis instituted the repetition of the Amidah in the first place - so that the prayer leader can take on themselves the task of saying every word of it with intention, just like we ourselves didn't.

And Judaism is a noisy tradition. Open the pages of just about any traditional Jewish text and the commentaries on either side will busily be disagreeing with each other, in ways that are polite or less polite. Arguments and dissent spill out of the mouths of teachers whose words have outlived them by millenia. Enter any traditional Jewish learning environment and at the very least you are hit by the frenzied hum of couples investigating the meaning of what they are learning - more likely, there might even be stomping and yelling. Engaging with our tradition is not a silent business.

And to be in silence doesn't sit well with the kind of lives we live today. Much like the chaos of Revelation itself, we are constantly being bombarded by noise. Our colleagues, our friends, our TV sets, our computer screens, our phones our phones our phones - all of them conspire to fill our ears every waking moment, and as we lie down and try to sleep there is the sound of the heating or the aircon or the traffic outside, all covering up the sounds of nature that underlie them. But our lives are never silent.

Yet from very early on our tradition teaches us that silence is valuable:

- סִיג - מְסִרָת, לְעֵרְוָה הָאָדָם אֶת מְרִגְלִין רֹאשׁ וְקִלּוֹת שְׁחוּק: אֹמֵר עֲקִיבָא רַבִּי" לְתוֹרָה,
(יג ג אבות משנה) "שְׂתִיקָה - לְחֻכְמָה סִיג, לְפְרִישׁוֹת סִיג - נְדָרִים, לְעֵשֶׂר סִיג - מַעֲשָׂרוֹת

Rabbi Akiva [who by the way was not known for his long periods of silence!] taught: *Trivial laughter and joking around accustom us to getting things wrong. Tradition contains Torah; tithes limit riches; vows put a boundary on licentiousness; and wisdom is protected by silence.* [Mishnah Avot 3:13]

It turns out that Rabbi Akiva was right. There have been multiple scientific studies on silence which show that it relieves stress, replenishes our mental resources and allows us to think more deeply and creatively. There's even a study from 2013 that suggests it can help generate new brain cells.¹

But we probably don't need scientific studies to tell us that silence has benefits. I am sure that each of us can think of a time when something suddenly 'came' to us, something that we had been wrestling with fell into place. How many of us were silent in that moment - perhaps walking, perhaps driving, perhaps even sleeping?...And yet, we emerged different.

I think there are a few ways to understand how silence 'protects' our wisdom.

First, silence sensitizes us. We simply become more aware. We notice what might otherwise have passed us by. Whether we sit still or take silent walk in nature - it has just been Tu Bishvat - when we clear the noise out of the way we quite literally see things we might have missed, and they touch our hearts in a different kind of way. Hebrew has a beautiful expression for this - *vayinafash*, used first of God's resting on Shabbat. It means 're-ensouling.' And in this sense, silence is profoundly healing.

Second, silence is a path to freedom. Language is by definition limited. I've spoken about this before in reference to G. As soon as we choose a metaphor, we have limited the other options and narrowed down G's scope. And I have also spoken about the stories we tell ourselves, how we link information together - as soon as we have chosen one interpretation, it excludes the others. But silence is expansive. Rambam taught: *teach your tongue to say 'I do not know' and you will become wise*. In that not-knowing, other interpretations become possible and - as I suggested a couple of weeks ago - we can free ourselves from the burden of expected outcomes.

¹ www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/silence-brain-benefits_us_56d83967e4b0000de4037004

And thirdly, I believe that silence has the capacity to alter our perceptions in an even deeper way. The paying of deep attention, the experience of listening, then focusing, then opening, allows us to perceive a different kind of reality. My havruta, Rabbi Yael Saidoff, teaches that in this state we can begin to explore beyond our usual limitations. 'What question I am not asking?' 'What dimension am I not seeing?' We might think of this experience as the sort of snap that happens with an optical illusion. Normally we see the two profiles, but perhaps we can get a flash of the candlestick. Silence becomes the gateway to this wider perspective.

And so it turns out that silence - even though it is wordless - is indeed a form of revelation. It protects our wisdom by sensitizing us, by freeing us, by allowing us to explore other dimensions and perspectives. We might even imagine that if we create enough silence, we will still be able to open ourselves to that *aleph* and to the potential it contains.

So in conclusion, let's come back to the Amidah, the 'silent' prayer. We probably know that the hatzi kaddish begins on page 428, so let's turn there now. And then let's take just a few minutes really to quieten down, really to try to be still, so that the rest of our prayers today can truly renew our souls and make us ready for whatever revelations still lie in wait for us.