

## Rosh Hashanah Day Two

So I've had friends over the years who have gone away on what is called a Jewish "silent retreat." Have you ever heard of this? A silent retreat is an experience where you go to some location, some retreat center, and for the few days you are there, you don't talk, at all. There's maybe meditation and minyan, but it's all silent. There's one coming up at the Adamah / Isabella Freedman Jewish retreat center up in Falls Village, Dec. 22 - 27 this year, if you're interested.

Sometimes people remark – silence! That doesn't seem very Jewish! And I know what they are getting at – Jews are pretty verbal, and our tradition is full of words. But silence, shetikah, is actually deeply Jewish. And it is something that we need to learn to embrace as a Jewish value.

Let's return to the paradoxes we spoke of yesterday.

Ben Zoma said:

Who is wise? One who learns from all people.

Who is strong? One who overcomes their anger.

Who is rich? One who is satisfied with what they have.

Who is honored? One who honors others.

Strength is shown in restraint. Wealth in contentment. Knowledge in humble curiosity. Honor in respect of others.

Silence is another paradoxical virtue. I give you the Mark Twain version: it's better to

be silent and be thought a fool, than to talk and remove all doubt. Maybe I'd phrase it like this. Sometimes, we think wisdom or expression is about saying as much as possible as often as possible. But actually, wisdom and expression are about the deployment of silence and wise restraint.

This is a sermon about October 7, but it is also not a sermon about October 7. We have many opinions here about the past year, and I don't have any answers – but what I do have is access to the Jewish tradition, and today I want to discuss silence as a way for encountering this social/political moment. But I also am going to talk about relating to silence as an interpersonal and relational value, relations between both humans and each other and humans and God.

Silence gets a bad reputation in our world. It often seems avoidant, or passive, or head-in-the-sand. People sometimes say, "Silence is violence."

Talmud Shabbat 54b says: "Anyone who is able to effectively protest against the sins of his household and did not protest, he is caught up in their punishment. Likewise with one's town, likewise, with the whole world."

Talmud Yevamot 87b puts it more succinctly: "Silence is equivalent to consent."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in a 1963 speech on segregation interpreted these texts as follows: "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Although there is certainly wisdom in this approach, I feel like this approach has dominated our lives too much in recent years. Some of this is the legacy of World

War II, the Holocaust, and totalitarianism, where political power enforced silence.

Most of us grew up in a world where speaking out was the holiest and most important thing a person could do – but this has ill-equipped us for the contemporary world, a frothing vortex of speaking out and calling out.

I do not think this is serving us well. And I want to add – I have heard people on opposite ends of the political spectrum, Zionists and anti-Zionists, citing the above texts approvingly. They can be embraced in a debate on both sides. That in itself should serve as evidence that those texts are not doing what people hope they will do. We need another way to relate to each other. The excess in speech is not helping.

So let me take you, for a minute, on a tour of some texts about silence.

Proverbs 17:27-28:

A wise person is sparing with their words, and a person of understanding is reticent.

Rabbi Shimon in Pirke Avot 1:17:

In my many days growing up around our great sages, I have found that there is nothing better for a person than silence. Excess in speech leads to sin.

Rabbi Akiva in Pirke Avot 3:13:

A fence to wisdom is silence.

Psalm 65:2:

To you, God, silence is praise.

Talmud Megillah 18a:

Rabbi Yehuda of Kfar Gibboraya taught: What is the meaning of, "To you, silence is praise?" The cure for everything is silence. When Rav Dimi came from Eretz Israel to Bavel, he said: in the West, in Eretz Yisrael, they say: Milah b'selah, meshutka batrin – a word is worth one coin, but silence is worth two.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Hilchot Deot 2:4:

A person should increase their silence and speak only a matter of wisdom or about things necessary for their physical wellbeing. They said of Rav, student of our holy teacher, that he never spoke empty chatter his entire life. And empty chatter – this is what most people do most of the time. (Even when talking about their physical needs, they should not speak too much.) About this our rabbis said: "excess in speech leads to sin" and "there is nothing better for a person than silence." Even in matters of Torah and wisdom a person's words should be sparing but the wisdom should be large, as it says in the Talmud, "A person should teach their students concisely." For when the words are abundant but the wisdom is lacking, this is foolishness, as it says in Ecclesiastes: A dream comes about through wise matters, but the voice of a fool comes with many words." (Eccl 5:3).

What do we see in this?

Silence plays an absolutely crucial role in the tradition of Jewish wisdom. The thrust of the tradition is that wisdom comes from listening, not speaking, and that silence is

actually a deeply holy and important way of relating to the world.

All this doesn't mean that it is never a time for speech. Judaism is a dialectical tradition, and there is sometimes a need for speaking and for protesting. But as Ecclesiastes tells us, there is a time for speaking, and a time for silence.

But I fear that in our society, we at some point decided, that it was always the time for speaking, and never the time for silence.

Let me give an example.

Every time some horrible event happens, I receive dozens of emails from all sorts of organizations condemning it. It is endless.

I can also count on seeing dozens of Facebook posts from other rabbis - my Facebook feed is like all rabbis, so I'm sure it's not just rabbis - farming for "likes" in posting a response to whatever the horror is. Or mollifying their congregants who expect a reaction.

I can go on Twitter and see this same challenge monetized - everyone is there to opportunistically condemn the horror or because someone will yell at them if they don't - or maybe they are a troll, and will opportunistically cheer on the horror - but it's all the same.

And I feel this pull as a rabbi to say - "Should I send a synagogue email about this?"

About this disaster, or this offense, or this affront, or this betrayal? Some of it comes from outside - I don't want people to say, Rabbi, why didn't you write about this, and

some of it comes from inside, "how can I not write about this?"

I have basically stopped sending those emails. Maybe you've noticed, maybe you haven't. I have decided that I only send congregational emails on Fridays - it's a conscious choice to be less reactive to the maelstrom, to not feed the frothing vortex of doom that is our social media world. And I have even tried to do less of that.

Because I realized that when I do - when I send out an email condemning the latest horror - my introspection has led me to realize that I also send these out because I get a dopamine hit when someone says, "great email, Rabbi, you really told 'em!" The flipside of this is - if I send out an email like this, please do tell me, "great email, Rabbi!", because for some reason that day I feel like I need the dopamine hit. And by the way, this is not a hard tension for me to exist in, because I don't have the New York Times breathing down my neck, but the need to respond to everything has basically caused chaos in the world of higher education and led to the firing of multiple college presidents. Colleges seem to be saying, "We no longer respond to anything that is not totally mission-centric." It feels like there's a loss there, but I get it, because this frothing vortex devours both right and left. As David says when he betrays Uriah, the sword devours this way and that.

We all have to do our part to diminish the vortex, to lessen the maelstrom. Please, do not feed it. Fight the urge to react. Because these are not making the world better. They are not bringing wisdom. They are not furthering the cause of any side - no one

is winning.

I am not asking you to never speak about this or that cause or topic that is important to you: I am asking you to, sometimes, don't. Sometimes, holding back is more powerful. We might think that always talking shares the message – build awareness, the buzzword goes – but messages are heard so much more powerfully from people who are not always speaking. How many of us listen to Sean Penn anymore?

I know that many of us are living with stress and fear day to day – we have children who are in Israel or we are students in college or we feel deeply drawn to an ethical or moral aspect – but what I want to draw from the above texts is that according to the Jewish wisdom tradition, silence is not avoidance. Silence is not complicity.

Silence is a Jewish way of expressing wisdom and connection.

Often times, what looks like "speaking out," is actually just adding more shouting to the world. It's not helping anything. The feelings of moral immediacy and urgency are very powerful, and they can prompt us to want to act to ameliorate them immediately by shouting, but just like an itch on your skin, scratching only makes it itch worse.

Responding with silence, though, can be holy and important.

To understand this paradox, let's go back to the text from Psalms: To you, God, silence is praise. What does that mean? One text in the Talmud, Berakhot 6b, says that it describes a shiva house – when you visit a mourner, Rav Pappa said, you are doing

something holy by being silent.

What's that about? It can be our tendency, when we encounter a mourner, to start telling our stories of mourning. Instead of listening to them, and because we are made uncomfortable by their loss, we fill the space with talking. People do this around illness, too – oh, you're sick, let me tell you the story of *my* illness.

Rav Pappa is saying: you want to praise God in a shiva house? Do so by being quiet. You want to be present for your friend who is in mourning? Stop talking. Be present with silence.

Interpersonally, we often fear silence. In conversations, we sometimes feel discomfort when there is a lull. Now, that's one thing when it's just a superficial conversation, but sometimes it's a deep conversation, and a person shares with you a challenge or a problem. It's actually okay to just respond with silence. Because you don't have an answer, and talking doesn't make it better. Silence, on the other hand, connotes that you are present with the person regardless of the content you each are sharing.

Have you ever found yourself talking to another person, and instead of actually listening to them, you're just in your own head, formulating your response while they talk? Partially this is an ego thing, partially this is a desire to respond immediately so you don't look like you're thinking or processing – as if that's a bad thing – but we can all see it's not good. And we all do it. Try not to.



There is an emotional reality to our interactions that is actually more important than the verbal reality we paste on top of it. Sometimes words can help, but sometimes they cover and obscure and even erase.

Consider the sound of the shofar. It's not quiet – but it's not wordy, either. It's an emotion, or a call – it is definitely not a retweet or a rant. The sound of the shofar is a sound of silence – it's a sound of presence and connection and care that is not about verbiage. The sound of the shofar says so much without saying very much at all.

The Baal Shem Tov, a great hasidic teacher, wrote this about silence (Tzeva'at HaRivash 133):

"Excess in speech leads to sin." [The term sin] denotes deficiency. Even when speaking with others words of the wisdom of the Torah, silence is much more preferable. For in silence one can think of the greatness of [God], blessed be He, and join oneself unto Him, blessed be He, more so than the joining by means of speech. Sometimes one can be lying in bed, and to others it appears that he is sleeping, but at that very time he is actually in solitude with the Creator, blessed be He."

Let's play out some examples. Sometimes a person responds to a tragedy with a quiet resolve and silent presence, and far from being avoidant, she is deeply engaged.

Sometimes a person visits a sad friend and is present to sit, and do nothing else, and that person is not asleep – they are more present than ever.

Sometimes a person encounters mistakes they have made or people they have hurt, and instead of spinning their wheels and trying to fix it, they actually respond in the most holy way: by offering their presence and connection through silence.

Perhaps the greatest exemplar of this is Abraham, who we read about today, commanded by God to sacrifice his son. Abraham does not spend Genesis chapter 22 talking about the various values involved in being asked to sacrifice his son – he does not discourse on it or comment. He simply stands in a one-to-one relationship to God, being present as himself as a single individual.

There's a faith in that which we can emulate. Abraham is famous as our great knight of faith, our great champion of faith, but his faith is expressed in his relationship as an individual with God, not in his conjuring up himself as some emissary of the universal, not engaging in a long story. Instead, he goes up to the mountain, and at the end of the experience, he sees a ram, caught in a thicket, by its horn – by its shofar. Which is to say: he doesn't need to name all of the dynamics playing out, but he can be there for the deeper emotional layer.

And the next layer of this is to say: that deeper emotional layer is also not the bottom, is not the ground floor of things: there is a deeper spiritual layer, too, that we can get to only if we engage in silence. There's a reason the hasidic masters always

promoted hitbodedut, meditation.

Think about Jewish prayer. Yes, there is a lot that we sing and say. But there are also intentional moments of silence. Those are there to help us be in touch with something deeper than the reactive layer of existence. To something more true and more important.

This year, I want you to try to embrace this model of silence. I promise it is not avoidant. I promise that the noise we otherwise make will not be missed. It will make our world better. And I think it will bring you to a better place – a place where you can be more deeply in touch with the world, with the layers of all that is happening, through silence.

Feel it, listen to it, connect to it. It is a lost art in our world – but something we can pick up again.

Shanah Tovah.