

Sounds of Silence of Shemini

Hello Darkness My old friend

I've come to talk with you again

Growing up in the 60s, one of my favorite songs was The Sound of Silence, by Simon and Garfunkel. This song captured the mood of a turbulent generation: the assassination of JFK, the war in Vietnam, and the civil rights movement. It spoke of the political unrest of the day but also the emotional disconnect that characterizes human relations. Although Paul Simon was in his early twenties when the song was released, The Sound of Silence spoke to an entire generation, much as the prophets spoke to their contemporaries in the Biblical world. Sadly, the lyrics are still meaningful today; more than fifty years later, we can still sense the relevance of these words in the world in which we live:

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

*“Fools” said I “You do not know,
silence like a cancer grows*

Hear my words that I might teach you

Take my arms that I might reach you”

But my words like silent raindrops fell

And echoed, In the wells of silence

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel challenged an entire generation not to succumb to the sounds of silence. Rather, to protest; to raise their voices; to march in the streets for change.

A generation later, we still find ourselves ignoring the “sounds of silence”: pundits and media experts who talk without saying anything; a world all too indifferent to the signs of disaster; and a society in which people are more likely to pay attention to their cell phone than the warnings taking place around the world, whether they be for climate change or the Coronavirus pandemic. And now, we are experiencing a silence that none of us ever expected to see. Images of Times Square virtually empty, or the quiet of our streets as we follow the shelter in place order.

But, let me hasten to add that not every silence is misplaced. As the writer Ecclesiastes taught us: *Ait Lachashot, V'ait L'daber*, There is a time to be silent and a time to speak out.

It is this sound of silence that we would do well to talk about this morning. The form of silence that is the only meaningful response to tragedy. Tragically, one in 10 Americans now know someone who has died of Coronavirus and the number is continuing to grow, so unfortunately, this is an all too relevant discussion in the age of the Coronavirus. It is a lesson that is made abundantly clear in our Torah reading this morning, but not in the way that you might expect.

In the portion of Shemini we learn about Aaron's silence. *Parshat Sh'mini* opens on the eighth day of his inauguration into the priesthood. It is a moment of triumph for the entire nation. Aaron and his sons are to become Israel's religious leaders; they bring sacrifices and celebrate their newly appointed position. But something goes wrong. Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two older sons, bring an *Aish zara*, a "strange fire" before God. We are not told the nature of this offering; only that it was brought to God. Disaster strikes. "A fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord." In a single moment, joy turns to grief. Moses, not knowing what to do, responds with platitudes: "Then Moses said to Aaron: this is what the Lord meant when He said: 'Through those near me I show myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.'" And what does Aaron do? The Torah says: *Vayidom Aharon*, "And Aaron remained silent."

In this tragic and dark moment, when his brother was too busy telling him how he should feel about the greatest loss a parent could endure, what could he possibly say?

In years gone by, I have spoken about Aaron's silence more in theory than in practice. But now, we are living through a pandemic. How many people are experiencing Aaron's plight, a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a son or a daughter, a friend suddenly gone? How many of us are finding ourselves in the same position as Moses? We are standing before someone who has just experienced a horrible tragedy and we don't know what to say, because there is no right thing to say.

The first thing to consider before we speak is, what can I say that will bring comfort to the person standing before me and not what will make me feel better? In this regard, Moses offers us an excellent example of what *not* to say. The Torah records Moses saying to Aaron as his children lay dead before him, "This is what the Lord meant when God said, *Bekerovay ekdesh*, Through those near to me I will show my glory, *Veal Penay kal Ha-am ehkavayd*, and gain glory before all the people." Meaning that Aaron should take comfort in the fact that they died by coming into

contact with the holiness of God. I suspect Aaron heard Moses' words in the same way that people who are suffering hear platitudes like; "They are in a better place now, they are with the angels," or "At least they are not suffering." Worst of all, "You have to be strong for your family." All of those types of responses are designed to make the speaker feel better and not the listener.

And how many of us have been in the position of Aaron? We've just faced a terrible loss. We want to yell and scream. We want to cry. We want to accuse God – even deny God. Most of all, we want to lash out at the person who speaks such empty words. We are so filled with emotion, however, the person we want to express ourselves to has blunted our ability to respond. To my mind, this explains Aaron's silence. He must think, it just feels that no one wants to hear how I am really feeling.

I believe that our Torah offers us a powerful lesson about what it looks like when we get it backwards. Moses speaks and Aaron remains silent. Instead, Moses should have remained silent and Aaron should have raised his voice in grief and lamentation. That is what Jews have been doing for millennia. There is an entire literature of lamentation in Judaism, beginning with the book of Eicha, and continuing with poetry of lamentation that has been written by our people to give words to our sorrow. We were never silent in the face of sorrow. While we did not try to explain our suffering, we gave expression to our sorrow and even our sense of abandonment. Traditionally, when a Jew goes to a Shiva house, they are to sit next to the mourner without speaking. If the mourner speaks to us, we can respond; if not, we are to wait 3 minutes and simply say: *Hamakom Yinachem B'toch Sh'ar Avelei Tzion ve Yerushalayim*: May God Comfort you amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. We make room for another person's silence, no matter if it makes us uncomfortable.

Paul Simon captured the mood of many mourning the death of a loved one when he wrote:

*Hello Darkness My old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,*

Sometimes the darkness feels like an old friend; sometimes we just want to sit amidst the sounds of silence. It is written in the Ethics of the Fathers:

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר, אל תגַּזֵּה אֶת חֲבִרָךְ בָּשְׁעַת כַּעַסּוֹ, וְאֶל תִּנְחַמֵּן בָּשְׁעַה שְׁמַתּוֹ מְטַל לְפָנָיו

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Do not try to appease your friend during his hour of anger; Nor comfort him at the hour while his dead still lies before him;

Living amidst this Covid 19 epidemic this is an all too relevant lesson. Too many around the world are being put in the position of Moses and Aaron. Beyond “I am so sorry for your loss,” each of us has the power to give the gift of presence, and the gift of silence, to someone who is suffering a terrible loss, quietly allowing them to express themselves. It is based upon the humbling realization that there is nothing that you can possibly say in a moment like that to ease a person’s pain. Just being there in the moment will have to be enough. Doing what Moses should have done: *vayidom*; Being Present, amidst the sounds of the silence.