

“The power of speech; the power of silence”

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Rabbi Rachael Jackson

Did you notice that I started my sermon several seconds ago? Perhaps and perhaps not, for I did not say anything verbally, but only with body language. While we are able to communicate this way partially, it is the power of words which completes the understanding.

One of the most famous biblical references to the power of words is the very beginning of the book of Genesis when we read “*vayomer Elohim yehi or vayehi or*”¹—God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light.” Throughout the six days of creation, as we will read tomorrow, God creates everything in the world, by speaking.

We do not read that God took a beaker and gassed in hydrogen and infused oxygen and created water. We do not read that God shook the oceans and pushed the continental plates together or pulled them apart to separate dry land from the waters. We do not read that God tilled the land, fertilized the soil, and watered the crops to create vegetation. No, we do not read any of that. We read simply that “God spoke” and whatever was spoken was created. “The Midrash teaches in a number of places that for God, to speak a word is equivalent to God’s performing an action. With the Divine, the word and the action are somehow the same. Although we are *b’tzelem elohim*—made in the [image] likeness of God—and we aspire to that level, although we wish to reach the point where what we say and what we do reach a perfect consonance, we are far from such a height.”²

150 times in the Torah, we read either *vayomer* or *vayedaber* Adonai el Moshe—God speaks to Moses. God does not act and then have Moses explain God’s action. Rather, we see how God commands Moses, and thereby all the Israelites, through speech.

And in these instances, God is not speaking in a way which we cannot understand. Recall the verse from Kings which says “Come out, and stand on the mountain before Adonai.

And lo, Adonai passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind -- an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake -- fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire -- a soft murmuring sound.”³ God does not speak in earsplitting declarations, but in subtle messages to the heart.

Our tradition is filled with examples of how important and powerful speech is. Next to the written Torah, we have the Oral Torah, also known as the Talmud. For hundreds of years, this compendium of stories and discussions and rulings was passed down orally; it was not even written down. People who are illiterate are not mute. Think back to your children or your own childhood. Children learn to speak well before they learn to read or write.

¹ Genesis 1:4

² *Speech and Silence: Jewish Quest for God*; David Wolpe pg 130

³ 1 Kings 19:11-12

A 20th century great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig thought that “the detached method of sitting silently and turning over abstract concepts in the privacy of one’s mind is too remote from life as it is lived. As we speak, we affirm things we did not know we believed. As the novelist E.M. Forester once remarked ‘How do I know what I think ‘till I see what I say?’ In dialogue is discovery.”⁴ And yet we have also heard the idea that the music is between the notes, or that we need to “read between the lines”. There is more to speech and merely words.

Think about children again--before they speak, they make other noises. They coo, and giggle, and wail. They fuss and they squirm and wiggle. For several weeks after the birth of friend’s first child, “the newborn baby would cry in the middle of the night. Each night Ethan cried, regularly, predictably. Each night his father and mother would run to the cradle, watching him, comforting him.

Blery-eyed but happy, his parents knew they could count on their newborn’s midnight screams. Then one night, Ethan did not cry. There was no sound. His father woke up in the middle of the night, startled and frightened. The silence terrified him. He ran to the crib, certain something was wrong. There he saw his son sleeping peacefully, healthy and safe. That silence, he said, that silence of Ethan’s not crying, was louder than any scream.”⁵

The power of silence is also represented in the bible by the short and painful story of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu, in Leviticus 10. “Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Adonai alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from Adonai and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of Adonai. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what Adonai meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent.”⁶ Words, no matter how apt or eloquent, would limit, confine, circumscribe the experience.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “At times, silence can cut deeper than any words. It can pound and howl. The silent cry pierces the heavens. Edvard Munch’s famous painting *The Scream* is all the more powerful because the observer *sees* the scream but cannot hear it. One sees the tortured face and opened mouth of a man screaming on a bridge, his hands cradling his face. But the agony of the picture is in its absence--the absence of any sound. It is the cry that we keep anticipating, but that never comes. It exists only in the imagination of the onlooker. And the silent scream that we recreate in our own minds overwhelms us.”⁷

A great Chassidic master, Nachman of Breslov, said “Know that it is possible to let out a very great scream in a voice that no one will hear. No sound actually emerges—the scream takes place within the silence. Everyone is capable of such a cry”.⁸

Often we are silent when it comes to tragedy, but we are also quiet when it comes to great joy. Think about a time when you were surprised and overcome with happiness; did you say “I’m speechless; I just don’t know what to say”? Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai

⁴ Ibid. pg 149

⁵ Pg 184

⁶ Leviticus 10:1-2

⁷ Wolpe pg 184

⁸ Ibid. pg 197

captured this emotion when he said “Even the spaceman who floated in outer space, tethered to a spaceship, could say only, "Great, wonderful, I have no words."

“The qualities of silence will vary. There are silences of bewilderment and loss, of indignation and anger. There are silences of service, of celebration. There are silences of expectations and of endings. There are silences that explain, and silences that reject all explanation.”⁹

Words give us the ability to be nuanced about our thoughts. Rabbi Uri of Strelisk, another 18th century Chassidic tzadik, prayed “We pray that God may accept our call for help. But we also pray that God, who knows that which is hidden, may hear the silent cries of our souls”.

We need more than words and we need more than silences. Without both, neither has much potency. In order to be heard, we need to speak. At the same time, we need to be silent in order to hear.

When we see our friends hurting, we need to know when it is a time to be silent or when it is a time to speak out. We need to know when to proclaim amazement or when to have silent reverence. Words can help create and they can help destroy. We must use them wisely; authentic speech is expressing truth and passion in words.

May this coming year be filled with moments which take our breath away and we have no words to say. May we use our words to speak out against injustices we see in the world. May we hear and be heard by our friends, family, and God. May this year be one of meaningful words and meaningful silences. Ken yehi ratzon. Shanah tovah.

⁹ Ibid. pg 183