

The Gift of Silence

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On this day of confessions, I have a confession to make: When I was in Elementary School, in 4th grade to be specific, I didn't come home with a perfect report card. In fact, I remember distinctly what the problem was. Our report cards had two sections. One side focused on academic achievement and we were given grades like "A" and 'B' and 'C.' On the other side there was a list of descriptions that were more like character traits and moral achievements, like "Gets along well with others" and "Respects authority." These were given checks in boxes that said "excellent" and "good" and "needs improvement."

I was in 4th grade. I did very well in elementary school. The checks on the Academic side were all in a line under "A." And I daresay that the character page had checks right down the page under "Excellent." That is, except, for one category. Yes, this is the confession. I received one 'check' under 'needs improvement.' The category? I remember the phrase precisely. It was "Listens effectively." In 4th grade at Kensington-Johnson Elementary School that was code for: "Talks too much."

I talked too much. I loved to talk. Now, that's how I make my living. Talking. Not so terrible. The truth is, I still love to talk – and to listen – to have conversations, back & forth. To explore ideas, back & forth. I hardly know what I think until I can speak the words. I have a friend, a Christian minister colleague, who waits all year to return for one week to her precious 'silent retreat.' No talking for seven days. I would sooner choose to walk barefoot on hot coals.

In case you haven't figured it out, silence is not really my go-to mode. But oh how I have come to yearn for periods of time in quiet. Even as I thrive off the energy of others, I marvel at the joy of silence. I love hiking when no one else is around and I realize that I am surrounded by a thick and penetrating silence. Or walking late in the night after a heavy snow. The stillness spreads a dense blanket over everything muffling the world. And those summer days when I could slip off to the beach and hear only the soft waters lapping up to the shore.

When the outside world offers me those rare moments of silence, I find myself connecting with that elusive wonder that is so hard to find: a silence within myself. Some of you can tap into that inner silence easily. I've seen it. You meditate, you pray on your own; you take long walks without distractions. I admit that I am envious of you. But I know I am not alone in my struggle for more silence. We live in a world that surrounds us with unfiltered tumult and incessant noise. And our current culture pushes us to talk louder, post more often, and to speak only in headlines in a vain attempt to be heard.

We are paying a big price for this relentless din. Always multi-tasking, always on the go, we deny ourselves precious few opportunities for self-reflection - those pauses that invite us to reconnect with our deepest truths; those breaks that help us consider who we are in the world. With words and images scrolling constantly across our wrists and our screens, we neglect to review the slide show of our own experiences, the chance to make sense of our past and give meaning to our future.

Life today is harsher and more unrelenting, not only in politics. Our brains simply can't catch up with all the information. We don't have enough time to process, to think, to sit in silence. Even at the gym, the TVs are flashing from the walls and the music is blasting from the speakers in the ceiling. You can't even wait for the doctor in peace. The TV is on – no one is looking because they are looking at their own screens, but quiet is not to be found, the TV blaring to nobody.

Where do you find quiet? I have not been beyond driving my own car into an empty parking lot, turning the ignition off, and writing a sermon right there in the driver's seat. We need a place where the incessant 'noise' stops so our minds can become still, where we can listen- finally - to our own inner voice, our own deepest thoughts and our own heart-felt emotions.

We should be able to find that silence more easily, more readily. We shouldn't have to run and hide away or take a vacation. It is too important to neglect. We need silence like we need food. It sustains us.

Silence is not merely an absence of external noise; it is also an inner state that goes beyond quiet to stillness. This stillness is a gift – a gift we desperately need to give to ourselves to better navigate our noisy, over stimulated world. In fact, this stillness is a gift that Yom Kippur itself is ready to give to us. Silence is entwined with the lessons and wisdom of this holy day.

Consider your own lives. Do you experience moments of quiet in your day-to-day life? Do you consciously make time for silence? Do you ever walk out the door empty-handed, that is, no device? Or sit in a carpool line or wait for carryout without checking your phone? When was the last time you simply sat alone with only your thoughts?

In her book on Jewish meditation, Nan Gefen alludes to the great value of finding stillness. "Like a pregnant pause, the silence within contains all possibility. It is the raw material of creation...when we enter into this state, we have our most intense spiritual experiences and receive our most significant moments of understanding."

Wisdom, insights, understanding, calm, a voice speaking eternal truths, space for new ideas, room to dream, time to organize the past and imagine the future – this would be a wonderful gift to give ourselves in the New Year.

I read an article in the paper recently about the relationship between the brain and sleep. In it, neuroscientists suggested that while we sleep the brain washes out toxins that have built up there during the day. Sleep is the brain's cleanser you might say. What sleep does for the brain, silence does for the soul. After sleep we wake up, our bodies and brains refreshed; after silence, our souls are awakened, cleansed of the mundane, exposed to the deeply real.

You might be a bit surprised to learn that Judaism does have a tradition of silence and contemplative quiet; surprised because well, let's face it, we are sort of a noisy people. Just walk inside a New York deli for a minute and listen to the din. I remember visiting a yeshiva once where the library sounded like a debate tournament! Even in the sanctuary, a supposedly peaceful place, our prayers are active- mostly read aloud or sung – the silent meditation is often less than 30 seconds. But this isn't the way it always was.

According to our tradition, during the most significant moment in our history, God's revelation at Mount Sinai, the entire world became still. The Midrash reports, *"When God revealed the Torah, no sparrow chirped, no bird flew, no ox bellowed.... the sea did not roar; no creature uttered a sound and the world was completely silent."* (Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 29:9) Maybe this is why our central prayer is the *Shema*, which of course begins with **Hear O Israel...**

Only in silence is it possible to hear – to hear God perhaps; to hear the hidden messages embedded between the words our loved ones speak, and to hear our own inner voice. When we give ourselves the gift of silence, we can digest experiences and convert them into meaning and wisdom.

I have found myself thinking about that report card and Mrs. Boudouin, my 4th grade teacher, and wishing I could tell her that I have come to value the absence of talking. I realize that, while I do still love to talk and I am grateful I get to talk for my profession, I know full well that my profession requires more listening than talking; my Judaism has awakened me, not only to the precious give-and-take of debate, but to the soul-searing, spiritual depths of being in silence.

I now have a dedicated spot for silence. Every time I return, I am able to move toward that inner stillness a bit more quickly, more easily. It is as if I am acquiring a muscle memory of sitting in silence.

I love the products of these still, quiet moments. Like me, you might also want to add just a sliver more of silence into your daily life. Silence doesn't have to be a big commitment. You might find your own personal spot for silence – a place to pause and have a few minutes of personal quiet. A regular time – walking the dog, drinking your morning coffee – where you don't bring your devices and where you can push away the usual distractions. You don't have to go on a retreat or join the meditation group at the synagogue (though you could!). But if they intimidate you, just try driving to work without the radio on.

In the Torah we find one of the most compelling lessons about the power of silence. Aaron, the high priest, has two sons who are killed right before his eyes for reasons that are not entirely clear. Aaron's brother Moses tries to speak to him, to explain this inexplicable event. But Aaron, Aaron is entirely silent. Perhaps his grief and shock have rendered him mute. There are no words to explain this horrible event, no words that can comfort or capture his pain.

Silence in the realm of mourning is among Judaism's most insightful of traditions, truly a gift to those who are grieving. Silence at a moment like this is not being passive; silence is an active response that allows us and the mourners to experience our emotions more fully as we walk slowly, sometimes very slowly, toward the path of healing.

Mourners are entitled to silence, too. If we don't speak, they don't have to respond. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't speak about our grief. Certainly, when we are able, it is valuable to talk about our feelings, to share our memories and to cry out loud. But we can't always do that, nor should we.

Our tradition says that when we enter a house of mourning, those who have come to comfort the mourners, are not supposed to speak. A handshake, a nod, a smile, an embrace, these are the ways we communicate in silence. Traditionally, it is the mourner who gets to speak -- and only if and when ready. Since we have no explanations and no answers, we simply must sit with our friends and give the only gift we can, our silent presence.

Silence and stillness are an important part of this Day of Atonement. Although our prayers focus heavily on confessing our sins out loud and in unison, repentance actually begins with the quiet process of sifting through our own private memories of the past year.

We sit with our own thoughts and reflections, treasuring the good moments, learning from our trials, and flagging those memories of moments that clash with the highest values of our tradition and our own hopes for ourselves.

We sit in this crowded room, yet we are alone with our own *Chesbon HaNefesh*, the account we take today of our souls. In our silent thoughts we know we did this right and this half-right, and this very wrong. It is in our silent thoughts that we strain to hear our true voice, the one that tells us who we are, what we care about, what we hope for, what damage we need to repair.

In our silent thoughts, we hear the voices of those who need our attention, our understanding, and our love. We hear the voice of God, of holiness and wholeness, within us. In our stillness, we sense our own desires and our own power to make real change in our lives.

In the holy silence of this day of Yom Kippur, we listen for the echo of our own missteps, seek to understand the pain we may have caused others, see the things we know we could and should do better. A soul deprived of silence loses track of itself. In this New Year perhaps we can embrace the fact that sitting still and going nowhere can be as rewarding, if not more so, than going somewhere. In our age of distraction, paying attention and listening are luxuries we cannot afford to live without.

In our age of constant movement, sitting still is a gift. In the New Year, may we make time and space for the silence that leads to stillness, and the stillness that leads to wisdom.

Ken Yehi Ratzon

Amen