

Experiencing the Silence of Sinai

Rabbi Norman Lamm, shlit"א, in a *derasha* reprinted in his book *The Royal Reach*, points out that while we often speak of the “quiet before the storm,” the inverse occurred at Sinai.

There was most certainly a “storm”:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיטּוֹת הַבְּקָר וַיְהִי קוֹל מְאֹד וַיִּבְרְקוּ וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֹזֵק מְאֹד וַיִּיחַרד כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:

It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered.

Shemot 19:15

All of this, however, occurred *before* the giving of the Torah. The actual revelation, according to Chazal, unfolded with a backdrop of utter cosmic silence.

א"ר אבהו בשם ר' יוחנן: כשנתן הקב"ה את התורה צפור לא צווח עוף לא פרח שור לא געה אופנים לא עפו, שרפים לא אמרו קדוש קדוש הים לא נזדעזע הבריות לא דברו אלא העולם שותק ומחריש ויצא הקול אנכי ה' אלקיך.

Said Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When the Holy One gave the Torah no bird screeched, no fowl flew, no ox mooed, none of the ophanim flapped a wing, nor did the seraphim chant "Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh," the sea did not roar and none of the creatures uttered a sound. Throughout the entire world there was only a deafening silence as the Divine Voice went forth speaking: "I am the L-rd your G-d."

Shemot Rabbah 29:9



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“Greatness,” explains Rabbi Lamm, “is born out of the womb of stillness.” There is no doubt that G-d could have spoken loudly enough to be heard over the din of His creation. Instead, the world is given the opportunity to partner with the Divine at the moment of revelation. He speaks, it stands quietly in awe. In the words of Rabbi Lamm, “The word of G-d comes forth when the words of man come to an end.”

G-d’s offer to partner with mankind continues to this day and His voice, in a certain sense, can still be heard. In *Parshat Va-etchanan* we are told:

אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל כָּל קְהַלְכֶם בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הָעֲנָן וְהָעֲרָפֶל קוֹל גָּדוֹל וְלֹא יָסַף וַיִּכְתְּבֵם עַל שְׁנֵי לַחֹת אֲבָנִים וַיִּתֵּן אֵלַי.

The Lord spoke these words to your entire assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the opaque darkness, with great voice, “velo yasaf.” And He inscribed them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

Devarim 5:19

What does the pasuk mean when it says “velo yasaf”? Those two words can be understood to mean “He added no more.” But the exact opposite translation is also valid. Onkelus translates:

יְתֵּן פְּתִימָא הַאֲלִין מְלִיל ה' עִם כָּל קְהַלְכוֹן בְּטוֹרָא מְגוֹ אֲשֶׁתָּא עֲנָנָא וְאֲמִיטָתָא קָל רַב וְלֹא פָּסַק.

These words spoke the Lord with all your congregation at the mount, from the midst of the fire, the clouds and the darkness, with a great voice, and has not ceased.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in *Pirkei Avot* presents a similar idea (6:2):

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בכל יום ויום בת קול יוצאת מהר חורב.

Every day, an echo resounds from Mount Horeb (Sinai).

In the words of Rabbi Lamm: “Since that first Shavuot, the Divine Voice still broadcasts on the same heavenly wavelength from Sinai every day.

So why do we not hear it? Why are we not moved to teshuvah or introspection every day?”

The answer is simple: We expend tremendous effort to make sure that there is never a moment of silence — a moment to think and to listen. Rabbi Lamm was addressing an audience in the 1960’s and asking them to “sit still, for Heaven’s sake.” Today, the obsession to keep our senses flooded has reached levels unimaginable in past generations. Walking, driving, sitting, standing; we are attached to our smartphones and are listening, watching, communicating, and reading. We multitask, doing and accomplishing everything — except for the critical task of living in the moment and

contemplating the world around us. We dread those moments of silence, but they are so important for introspection and listening for the voice of Hashem.

It is noteworthy that the holiday of Shavuot is bereft of its own unique mitzvot. There are no lulavim to shake, sukkot to dwell in, matzot to eat. There is just — quiet. We are asked on Shavuot not to do — but to listen. Ironically, the yom tov that marks Klal Yisrael's momentous proclamation of “*naaseh ve-nishma*” is commemorated through listening first and only acting later. Perhaps we have already proven our ability to fulfill “we will do.” On Shavuot, we are asked to fulfill the second part of our promise — “we will listen.”

But we need not wait for Shavuot, or even for Shabbat, to find the quiet we so desperately need. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in his *Book of the Kuzari* (3:5) explains that tefillah is to the day what Shabbat is for the week. Just as we must stop for twenty-four hours every seven days, we must pause several times every day to reorient ourselves and remind ourselves of what is truly important. Our moments of prayer provide us with an island of quiet in a world of deafening confusion.

Where is the word of G-d to be heard at those moments of quiet meditation? Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, in the first introductory essay to his siddur, *Olat Re'iyah*, makes a fascinating suggestion: Our souls — the portion of G-d within us — can “speak” and can sometimes even be heard. Our *neshamot* speak words of truth — G-dly words, through which we can properly learn values and set our priorities.

When can we hear our souls? Perhaps at any moment of quiet in which we truly take time away from the world. However, our souls “speak” very softly and are difficult to hear. Tefillah, if not rushed, can allow for such a time.

There is one time, however, that we can hear them loudly and clearly — when we mouth the words of the tefillot. The words of the siddur, which often seem disconnected from our everyday lives and our priorities, express the true desires of our souls. By listening to our prayers, we hear our souls talking. In fact, Rav Kook explains, our souls pray to G-d without interruption. Most of the time, we cannot hear those beautiful tefillot. Only three times a day do we give a “voice” to the tefillot emanating from our *neshamot*.

Have we ever considered the possibility that during tefillah, the word of Hashem is actually *coming* to us? It has been said that when we learn Torah, G-d speaks to us, and when we pray, we speak to G-d. But we rarely pray to G-d using our own words alone. We use texts that speak to us, even as we are speaking to G-d. These texts were written by those who understood *neshamot* and G-dly priorities — the *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* — with prophets among that group.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch famously explains that the word “*le-hitpalel*” comes from the root פלל — which means to judge. When we pray, we judge ourselves. What does this mean? Are we supposed to ask ourselves with each middle berachah of Shemoneh Esrei whether we are truly worthy of being granted our request? Rav Yosef Albo (*Sefer Halkkarim*) says absolutely not. Tefillah is a request for mercy. We ask Hashem not for our due but to shower love upon us, as a father would upon his children.

What, then, does it mean that we “judge” ourselves during tefillah? Perhaps we evaluate ourselves and our

When we use the words of the siddur, we can compare *our* priorities in light of the text composed by our Chachamim. If I would have asked Hashem for a different set of things, I must ask myself: Are *my* priorities correct or did Chazal perhaps have a greater understanding of what really matters?



priorities by listening to the words we utter to G-d.

When we speak in our own words, and listen to ourselves, we must challenge ourselves: Am I asking for the right things? How will I use the things I ask for? Will they truly help me in my *avodat Hashem*? Are there others I should be praying for — or am I asking only for selfish needs?

When we use the words of the siddur, we have an even greater opportunity to judge ourselves by comparing *our* priorities — the hopes and desires that we would pray for if left to devise our own prayers — in light of the text composed by our Chachamim in the Amidah. If the themes of the berachot seem foreign to us, if we would have asked Hashem for a different set of things, we must ask ourselves: Who is right and who is wrong? Are *our* priorities correct or did Chazal perhaps have a greater understanding of what really matters? And if our prayers give voice to our own *neshamot*, might we, deep down, know the truth but need daily reminders?

For example, the latter half of the requests in the weekday Amidah are for the national aspirations of Klal Yisrael — from *kibbutz galuyot* through the Mashiach. If I would not have “used” half of the requests

in my weekday Amidah on these aspirations, what does that say about my priorities?

The berachot, as the Gemara tells us in *Megillah* 17b-18a, are in a very specific order. If I would have, for example, asked for health (*Refa'einu*) and wealth (*Bareich aleinu*) before understanding (*Ata chonen*) and repentance (*Slach lanu*), do I, perhaps, have something to learn from the text of the Shemoneh Esrei?

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 101:2) instructs us:

לא יתפלל בלבו לבד — אלא מחתך הדברים בשפתיו — ומשמיע לאזניו בלחש. ולא ישמיע קולו. ואם אינו יכול לכוין בלחש — מותר להגביה קולו. והני מיילי — בינו לבין עצמו. אבל בצבור — אסור — דאתי למטרד צבורא.

One should not pray just in his heart (without saying the words) but one must actually say them with his mouth in a whisper that can be heard by his ears, but not as loud as one's voice. And if he is unable to concentrate with just a whisper, it is permitted to raise his voice, and the words remain with him, but in public it is not permitted to bother anyone else with this.

The Amidah must be said softly — so that my fellow *mitpalelim* aren't distracted, but loud enough for me to

hear myself. Yes, it adds to my level of concentration when I can hear myself. But this halacha may be about something more. I may be *listening* to my own tefillot — listening to their messages and listening to my soul. As I whisper the Shemoneh Esreh — having blocked all other sounds and distractions — I hear a *kol demamah dakah*, the calling of my soul, the truths of G-d revealed through our Sages, as passed on through our prayer-books for millennia. I have much that I can learn if I listen to that voice.

As I write this piece in honor of our outgoing President Richard Joel, I must conclude with a personal thank you to our *Nasi*. By nature, I am more resistant than almost anyone to the experience of calm silence. On many occasions, President Joel has steered me to step back, to take the time to just listen and take in the beauty around me. The voice of Hashem can be heard thundering in the walls of our Beit Midrash and in the still quiet voice of acts of kindness and greatness around the campus. Much is missed (including large objects that one can and will walk into!) if one runs around our holy campus with their eyes glued to their phone or their list of tasks to complete. Thank you for opening my eyes, my ears and my soul!

