

## The Sound of Silence – *Aharei Mot* 5782

It's always hard to move.

My family moved for the second time in three years before I started 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

A new state, a new town, a new home, and a new school. And to top it off, my dad was the new principal of my new school so that was great!

My fourth grade teacher at Solomon Schechter was Morah Roz (Morah means teacher); I remember her as a big personality and she made everything interesting – from history to science to math.

I'll never forget when she took out a clunky portable record player, put on a song, and I was mesmerized.

"Hello darkness my old friend

I've come to talk with you again

Because a vision softly creeping

Left its seeds while I was sleeping

And the vision that was planted in my brain

Still remains

Within the sound of silence..."

["The Sound of Silence" by Art Garfunkel and Paul Simon](#)

This eerily powerful song has stuck with me all these years.

I remember thinking about what it meant – not the whole song, but the phrase: the sound of silence.

I was a logical kid; if it's silence, then why is there any sound?

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Our *parashah*, our Torah reading, this morning begins with the words “*Aharei mot* – after the deaths of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached too close to God’s presence.”

A few readings ago, we learned that – Moses did not offer words of support when his brother Aaron experienced this tragedy.

But Aaron did not speak at all: *Vayidom Aharon*.

Aaron was silent.

What else can you do in the face of such a loss, in the face of such pain? A parent losing a child, losing two children!

There is nothing to say.

Often, when I sit with families before or after a loss, we simply sit in silence.



What can we say?

Silence can be more powerful than words.

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This often happens at a *shivah* when we visit someone who has experienced a loss during the seven days of mourning. We offer condolences and listen to where they are, responding to their needs, seeing what they want to talk about.

And if they want to sit in silence, then we offer support through our quiet presence.

Yet another type of silence can occur in a deep relationship with a close friend or partner where there is such comfort that words are not needed to convey feelings. The silence itself creates a chamber where two people can feel each other's being through their wordless encounter.

And finally, there is the silence of meditating alone or in a group. Deep prayer in our faith and in so many others leads to moments of quiet. This silence helps ease the chatter of our minds, providing the tools to bring healing to ourselves. It allows us to calm our nervous systems, and stop winding loops of anxiety.

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One of the greatest narratives of the *Tanakh*, of the Hebrew Bible, is found in the book of Kings. It describes a contest, really a battle where our great prophet Elijah – Eliyahu HaNavi confronts 450 priests who follow Ba'al, a pagan god. Even as Elijah wins the contest and is proven correct, a larger political conflict continues.

Overwhelmed, Elijah wanders into the wilderness, and sits down under a bush, feeling that his life has no purpose.

But suddenly, food and drink appear for him in the middle of nowhere. Like Moses on Mount Sinai, he walks for 40 days and nights to Mount Horev, another name for Sinai.

And then, on Mount Sinai, Elijah has his revelatory moment.

But, unlike Moses hundreds of years earlier when all the Israelites were present as Moses descended with the tablets, Elijah is alone when he senses God pass by.

There is a powerful wind, but God is not in the wind; an earthquake – God is not there either. Then, there is a fire, but God is not in the fire.



After the fire, there is something else – a *kol demamah dakah* – a still, small voice; it is the sound of silence.

So Elijah wraps his mantle around his face aware that this is God; this is as close as he can get to God.

The juxtaposition of these elements in nature is striking. All the loud, natural upheaval is not the source of the Divine, although that is certainly how many ancients understood God. God is in the thunder, the lightning during the first revelation at Mount Sinai.

But not so here.

God is in the stillness – in the sound of silence.

After all the upheaval that Elijah has experienced and will experience, it is in this pause that he becomes aware of the Divine Energy flowing through the silence.

God is embedded in the fabric of the universe and in the depths of our souls, and sometimes, we can calm our minds enough to hear that sound of silence.

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I want to be honest with everyone – although I practice, I find meditation difficult. I struggle with slowing down and being silent, to stop my mind from racing to worries and lists of things to do.

But even my imperfect attempts have yielded benefits: I am much more able to let things go, to not get upset when things fall apart – which they always do. These practices are not easy, but I can attest to their power.

They help us let go of unhealthy habits. We can still feel disappointed when things do not go well, but, hopefully, we can approach them differently.

When the milk is spilled, it is what it is.

And when things go wrong, perhaps we should not dwell on them.

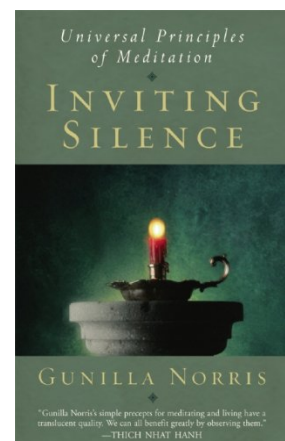
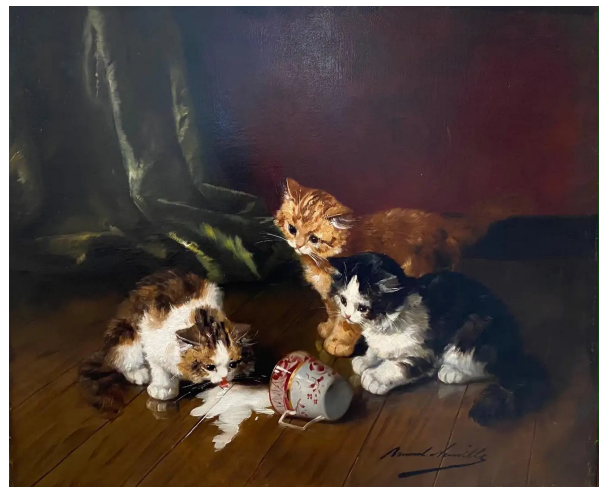
As it states in *Pirkei Avot* – the Ethics of the Sages: it is far better to forgive than hold onto anger.

All of this can be aided by sitting in the sound of silence.

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As I think of Aaron's painful silence in the Torah, as I learn of Elijah's still small silence becoming aware of God's presence, I am drawn back to Simon and Garfunkel's Sound of Silence.

Gunilla Norris in her book, *Inviting Silence* writes:



“Within each of us, there is a silence

--a silence as vast as the universe.

We are afraid of it.... And we long for it.

When we experience that silence, we remember

Who we are: creatures of the stars, created

From the birth of galaxies, created

[...]

From silence.

Silence reveals, silence heals.

Silence is where God dwells.

We yearn to be there.