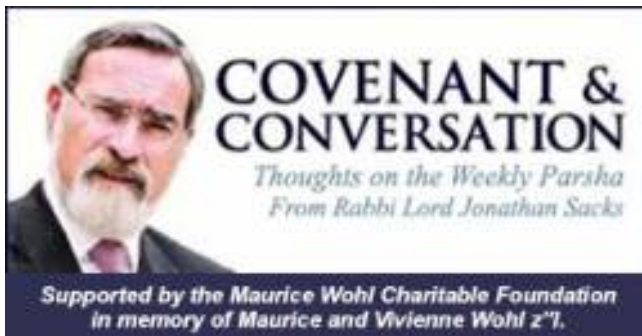


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The Sound of Silence

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bemidbar means, "In the desert." What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word?

The sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mekhilta the Torah was given publicly, openly and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no

share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.¹

Another explanation: had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that before God gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.²

Yet another: just as the wilderness is free - it costs nothing to enter - so the Torah is free. It is God's gift to us.³

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightening and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence."⁴ I define this as *the sound you can only hear if you are listening*. In the silence of the *midbar*, the desert, you can hear the *Medaber*, the Speaker, and the *medubar*, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a documentary series, *The Long Search*, on the world's great religions.⁵ When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its

blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the Bet Midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a *silence* in Judaism?"

Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but *we don't talk about them.*"

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a *speaking* soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanakh often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "Then they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom."⁶ If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two.⁷ R. Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence."⁸

The service of the priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the priests - unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions -- neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar⁹ has accordingly spoken of "the silence of the sanctuary." The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise *taanit dibbur*, a "fast of words." Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called *tefillah be-lachash*, the "silent prayer." It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child. "She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard" (1 Sam. 1:13).

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard "the voice of the child" (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence - and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a* in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, "All that God says, we will do," then said, "All that God says, we will do and we will hear [*ve-nishma*]" (Ex. 24:7). It is the *nishma* - listening, hearing, heeding, responding - that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is *the ability to hear the music beneath the noise*. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

The heavens declare the glory of God
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.
Day to day they pour forth speech,
Night to night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech, there are no words,
Their voice is not heard.
Yet their music carries throughout the earth.

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai, that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the

modern age have found the concept of "Torah from heaven" problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the "speaking cure," but it is in fact a *listening* cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, 'In memory of W B Yeats,' W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.

1. Mekhilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid.

4. 1 Kings 19:9-12.
5. BBC television, first shown 1977.
6. Avot 3:13.
7. Megillah 18a.
8. Avot 1:17.
9. Israel Knohl.



Ruth: Rectifying Lot's Mistake

On Shavuot, the custom is to read the Book of Ruth. The commentaries bring a number of connections between Shavuot and the story of Ruth. By analyzing a specific aspect of her greatness and contrasting it with her less illustrious ancestor, Lot, we can glean another connection between Ruth and Shavuot.

First, it is instructive to delve more deeply into the story of Lot and how he strayed from the correct path. Right at the beginning of the story of Avraham, the Torah relates that one of the few people who came with him, was his nephew Lot. Leaving his home and family behind must have been a great act of self-sacrifice for Lot and is surely an indication of a level of greatness. However, once they left for Eretz Yisrael, the course of events ended in Lot separating from his uncle and choosing to live in the wicked land of

Sodom, where he thought he could attain prosperity.

At the time that Lot made the decision to split from Avraham, the Torah tells us that God spoke to Avraham, “after Lot had departed from him.”¹ Rashi comments on this that, “as long as that wicked person [Lot] was with him [Avram], the Divine word was withheld from him.”² This teaches us that Lot was on such a low level that God would not even talk to Avraham while Lot was with him.

The problem is that Lot had been with Avraham from the beginning of the Torah Portion of Lech Lecha, yet God did speak to Avraham in that time. Why did Hashem speak to Avraham then if Lot was with him? The answer is that evidently, at the earlier stage, Lot was not yet wicked, indeed he was a devoted follower of Avraham who left everything to follow his teacher. The obvious question is what changed in the period between them leaving for Eretz Yisrael and their ultimate split?

When God instructed Avraham to leave everything behind to travel to Israel, He promised Avraham that he would receive prosperity and other blessings. However, as soon as Avraham arrived in the Land, the opposite took place and there was a terrible famine, forcing Avraham to leave for Egypt where he endured more challenges. Yet it is clear that Avraham remained steadfast in his trust in God. This is because Avraham’s reasoning for listening to God was not in order to receive those rewards, rather because he knew that God’s word was the Ultimate Truth. Consequently, Avraham did not become frustrated

or disheartened when he immediately faced difficult challenges.

However, Lot evidently had a different attitude from his uncle. He was also aware of the promises of success and prosperity and that was his prime motivation for accompanying Avraham. Moreover, it seems that he expected this to take place immediately. So, when he was faced with the famine in Israel and then his own sister, Sarah was taken by Pharaoh, he began to become disenchanted with Avraham's program and he began to develop an outlook of his own. This outlook prioritized material gain over spiritual accomplishments. This was demonstrated by the attitude of his shepherds, who, following his example, allowed their animals to graze in the fields of other people in Israel, based on the weak rationalization that eventually he would inherit the land from Avraham anyway. This led to his split from Avraham and his fateful decision to live in the wicked land of Sodom where he again sacrificed morality for materialism. Thus, we now understand why Lot deteriorated to the point where God calls him a wicked man. In the words of Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein.

“The path that emerges is one where Lot was prepared to follow Avraham's path on the understanding that it would lead him to prosperity and acclaim, but not on a path leading purely toward truth and elevated, Godly living. When these two ideas ceased being synonymous in his mind, he left.”³

Ruth's journey was somewhat similar to Lot until a certain point. She was a princess in Moab, who

married one of Elimelech's sons. This was not in and of itself necessarily such an act of self-sacrifice as Elimelech was a very important person. However, he then died, as did Ruth's husband. Consequently, Elimelech's wife, Naomi was left with nothing and returned to Eretz Yisrael a poverty-stricken widow. Ruth and her sister Orpah accompanied her back to the Land but she starkly warned them that there was nothing for them to gain by staying with a childless widow. This was the ultimate test of the underlying motivation of Ruth and Orpah. Orpah failed the test, succumbing to the argument that there was nothing to gain by staying with Naomi.

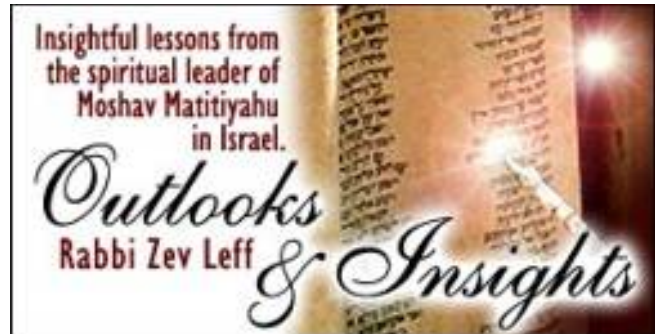
Ruth, however, was determined to stay, because she was not motivated by gain, rather because she wanted to cling to the truth of the Torah. As a consequence, she converted, and is an example to all prospective converts that their motivation to become a Jew is not to gain success, but to cleave to the truth. In this way, Ruth served to rectify the failing of her ancestor Lot – he left Divine Service when it didn't deliver the rewards he had hoped for, while Ruth clung to G-d through all her travails.

The contrast between Lot and Ruth is dramatically demonstrated by an observation of the Shelah.⁴ When Lot reached the point where he had to leave Avraham, his uncle tells him, “*hipared na m'alai*” – please separate from me.⁵ When Ruth determines to stay with Naomi through in all circumstances, she powerfully states, “*Ki hamavet yafriid beini ubeinayich*” – “for death alone will separate between me and you!”⁶ The same root, word *pered*, meaning to

separate, repeats itself in these two accounts but in totally opposite ways. Lot's faulty outlook causes him to separate from Avraham, whereas Rus's pure dedication empowers her to stay with Naomi permanently.

We have seen how Ruth teaches the importance of accepting Torah purely because it is true, and not for any specific gains.⁷ This explains another connection between Megillah of Ruth and Shavuot. When God offered the Jewish people the Torah, they did not ask what was in it⁸, rather they responded, 'Naaseh V'Nishma' – we will do and we will hear, meaning that they accepted the Torah purely because it was the Ultimate Truth. This attitude is the foundation of Torah observance – may we all merit to emulate Rus in accepting the Torah with pure motives.

1. Bereishit, 13:14-15.
2. Rashi, Ibid, 13:14, Dh: Acharei.
3. 'The Call of Sinai', p.277. See the whole of Chapter 35 for an excellent elaboration of how Ruth fixed Lot's failings.
4. Parshat Lech Lecha, cited in 'The Call of Sinai', p.278.
5. Bereishit, 13:9.
6. Ruth, 1:17.
7. It is instructive to note, that ultimately, one who keeps the Torah will gain in this world as well. Indeed Rus, who gave up everything for Torah, ultimately merited to see her descendants, David HaMelech and Shlomo Hamelech, become Kings of Israel. In contrast, Lot's 'reward' for his greed, was that he lost his wife, and some children, and all his wealthy, when Sodom was destroyed.
8. Unlike the other Nations who rejected it because it contained commandments that were too difficult for them to observe.



Like a Desert

"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert": Anyone who does not make himself *hefker* (ownerless) like the desert cannot acquire wisdom or Torah, and therefore it says, "...in the Sinai desert." (Midrash – Bamidbar Rabba 1:7)

A *hefker* object is one of such little value to its owner that he formally abandons it and makes it available to all. Let us consider what is meant by making oneself *hefker*.

One must be prepared to forsake, if necessary, all worldly pleasures for the sake of Torah (see commentary of the Maharzav to the Midrash). "Torah can only be preserved in one who kills himself for it" (Talmud – Sotah 21a).

And as the Mishnah says (Avot 6:4):

This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, and live a life of deprivation – but toil in the Torah! If you do this, "You are praiseworthy and all is well with you." You are "praiseworthy" in this world, "and all is well with you" – in the World to Come.

Material deprivation may not be a necessary condition for learning Torah, but only one who is *prepared* to forego every pleasure and comfort for his Torah learning will ever achieve a deep understanding of Torah.

The true student of Torah must be as obsessed with Torah, as the lover with his beloved (see commentary of Rashash to the above Midrash; Maimonides – Teshuva 10:6). Just as the lover's thoughts are always of the beloved, so, too, one who truly wishes to plumb the depths of Torah cannot make his learning contingent on time, place or circumstance. Only when one feels that the Torah alone gives meaning to his life, will he be able to forego all other comforts and pleasures for its sake.

After relating that the Jewish people came to Sinai, the Torah repeats itself and says that they left Refidim and came to Sinai. From this repetition, the Sages learn that just as they came to Sinai in repentance, so did they leave Refidim in repentance. The Jewish people were attacked by Amalek at Refidim precisely because of their weakness in Torah learning. After that attack, they might have reasoned that Refidim was not spiritually conducive to *teshuva* and waited until they reached Sinai to strengthen themselves in repentance.

The Torah emphatically negates such an attitude. If a person waits for the perfect time or place to undertake a new course in Torah, that ideal moment or place will never materialize. Had they not done *teshuva* in Refidim, they would not have done *teshuva* in the Sinai desert either.

HUMBLE STATUS

There is another aspect to the requirement of abandoning oneself to Torah that is even more difficult than the forfeiture of material comforts – the attainment of humility. One must both be humble enough to learn from every person and to teach everyone, regardless of status.

Even more importantly, he must be prepared to divest himself of all his preconceived ideas and beliefs. Only if one is prepared to let the Torah possess him and guide him totally, will its secrets be revealed.

"All are blind until God opens their eyes" (Midrash – Bereishis Rabba 53). When we view the world through our own eyes we are subject to our material desires and the distorting effects of passion and bias. Only when we let the Torah mold our thought processes can we view the world in its true perspective. There is no truer humility than subjugating one's most precious possession, his mind, to the Torah.

In order to serve on the Sanhedrin, one had to be able to prove that a *sherez* (species of reptile) does not cause ritual impurity, even though the Torah explicitly says that it does. The judges had to recognize that with their own great mental acuity they could convince themselves of almost anything, and therefore needed to subject their own thinking to that of the Torah.

The Rogachover Gaon once gave a lecture to his students in which he proved that *chametz* is permitted on Passover. He then asked his students to refute his proof. They tried in vain to do so. When they gave up, the Rogachover opened the Bible and read them: "*Do not eat chametz*"

(Exodus 13:3). That, he said, is the only refutation necessary. All the intellectual gymnastics in the world cannot alter one sentence in the Torah.

DA'AS TORAH

"The words of the wise are like prods." (Ecclesiastes 12:11)

Just as the prod directs the ox to plow in a straight line, so, too, does Torah guide and condition one to think in the paths of life (Talmud – Chagiga 3b).

The commentator Smah (to Choshen Mishpat 3:13) comments that the thinking of laypeople is opposite to that of Torah thinking. The intention is not to denigrate the layperson, but to point out that when we rely on our own reasoning, distortion is the inevitable result. When we seek the guidance of Torah sages, we are seeking a mind so steeped in Torah – to the exclusion of all personal biases – that everything that they say or do is solely a reflection of their understanding of the Torah, i.e., *Da'as Torah*. Only a mind conditioned to thinking from God's point of view, as revealed in the Torah, can view the world without distortion.

After their Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people needed to follow God into a harsh, howling desert, and place themselves totally in His care, before they could receive the Torah. And after the gift of the Torah, they still needed to be chastised time and again, as we read throughout the Book of Numbers, until they molded their attitudes and opinions to a Torah perspective.



Everything Depends on Action

Rabbi Berachyah said, "The tablets were six *tefachim* long - in some sense, God grasped two *tefachim*, Moshe grasped two *tefachim*, and two *tefachim* bridged the gap between them." (Shemos Rabbah 28:1)

There is no doubt that great significance lies behind this rather cryptic statement. Let us try to uncover a little of the Sages' wisdom.

We can subdivide all mitzvos and, indeed, all human endeavors into three spheres: thought, speech, and action. There are some mitzvos which require a Jew to think in a particular way. For example, the first of the Ten Commandments demands belief in God. Another is that one must not attribute power to any force other than God. Yet another is that one may not covet another's property. There are, of course, many other illustrations. Other mitzvos are dependent on speech. For example, one must verbally recall Shabbos, some say on a daily basis. A Jew must not lie to the *beis din* or speak badly of another. Finally, there are many mitzvos which utilize the

Jews' power of action. There are requirements to put on *tefillin*, shake a *lulav*, eat *matzah*, etc.

It is interesting to note that each of these three divisions reflect different interactions between man and God. Thoughts are not entirely under a person's control; they can pop into the mind when unwanted. It is all too common that while concentrating on a complex problem inappropriate ideas spring to mind, often causing great frustration. One can only conjure up particular thoughts, not prevent unwelcome ones from arising. It is reasonable to say that man's thoughts are in God's control.

Action, on the other hand, is entirely in the individual's domain. He is not forced to do anything that he doesn't want to do. If he chooses to spend many hours performing a *mitzvah*, or instead not to do it at all, he is perfectly at liberty to do so.

Speech enjoys a sort of in-between status. In this case, there is a partnership between man and God. King Solomon tells us:

The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the tongue answers from God. (Proverbs 16:1)

He arranges his counsel and his words in his heart, but when he comes to answer, God makes him stumble over his words, or, if he [the man] merits it, He prepares a good reply for him. (Rashi loc. cit.)

Using the information gathered thus far, we can reexamine the midrash with which we began. The two *tefachim* of the tablets which were grasped by

God express the power of thought, which is the dimension of man that remains in Divine control. The two *tefachim* grasped by Moshe Rabbeinu, the representative of Yisrael, symbolize action, which is entirely in man's domain. The space of two *tefachim* between Moshe and God symbolizes speech, the control of which rests between them.

We have already seen from Proverbs that if we perform our job correctly in the world of action, then God will grant us control of the power of speech. Continuing this theme just two verses later, King Solomon declares:

Commit your affairs to God, and your thoughts will be established. (Proverbs 16:3)

Something very profound is revealed to us here: If we fulfill our potential in our domain of *mitzvah* performance, not only will we be granted command over our speech, but God will deem us worthy to receive an even greater gift. If we "commit our affairs to God," then He will enable us to rule even our own thought processes, relinquishing, as it were, control over even His grasp on the tablets.

This has serious ramifications. **Everything** is dependent on our actions. If someone has trouble curbing his speech, then he can regain some control by tightening up his *mitzvah* observance. If we find it hard to direct our thoughts, or find ourselves considering inappropriate subjects during our prayers or Torah learning, then Chazal have given us the key to success: greater perfection in our service of God. The actions of the Jew determine everything, even the ultimate

success or failure of the peoples of the world.
This idea is illustrated by our Sages:

After Yisrael did that wicked act [the sin of the golden calf], God wanted to grab the tablets from Moshe. However, Moshe prevailed and snatched them back. (Yerushalmi, Ta'anis 4:5)

We can understand this quote from the Talmud according to our earlier explanation. Since Yisrael had abused their strengths and perverted their deeds, God wanted to withdraw His original arrangement, intending to avoid future disaster by removing control over action from man's domain. However, Moshe Rabbeinu "persuaded" God that the Jews still had the ability to correctly utilize their great powers and by so doing to draw into their domain the control of everything - action, speech, and even thought.

To conclude, the actions of a Jew can have enormous consequences for good or for bad. Literally everything depends on it. And it could be that when the Jews received the Torah at Sinai they had all this in mind when they proclaimed:

All that God has said, we will do and hear. (Shemos 24:7)

They realized that action was the key to everything and thus disregarded all other concerns to give preference to their intended deeds. Let us hope that we can follow their example.

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