Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BAMIDBAR • במדבר STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.
"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

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. *Bamibar* 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 Mechilta, 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 lightning 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" (1 Kings 19:9-12)." 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.[4] When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud,

[1] Mechilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid.

[4] BBC television, first shown 1977.

argumentative voices in the *beit 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 Tanach 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, "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" (Mishna Avot 3:13). If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two (Megilla 18a). R. Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence" (Mishna Avot 1:17).

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 scholar, Israel Knohl, 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 also Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise *ta'anit 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,[5] 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.

[5] Koren Shalem Siddur.

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.

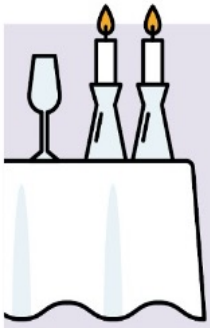
It is fascinating that despite his often-fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the "speaking cure," but it is in fact a *listening* cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

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.[6]



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Where else could God have chosen to give the Torah to the Children of Israel? Why do you think He chose the desert instead?
2. Why is listening important? Why is it "supreme religious art"?
3. Do you find it hard to listen? How can you improve this skill?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at **www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/bamidbar/the-sound-of-silence/**.

[6] For more on the theme of listening, see parshat Bereishit, "The Art of Listening," and parshat Eikev, "The Spirituality of Listening."