

A-196

1. I want to speak to you today about a topic which, if I practiced what I preached, I would not preach - and that topic is: Silence, the virtues of creative silence.

Silence in our times is a rare experience. In a world deafened by the grinding of industry's machines, the blast of jet planes, the unending chatter and prattle of little talk, the sabre-rattling of great powers, the commercials over the air-waves and the propoganda barrages of enemy nations, silence is a valuable commodity indeed. Ours is a society which places a premium on talk. Sociologists have observed that today it is not the product as such which is important, but rather the "personality". They speak of "the personality market" at which a man must "sell himself" by smooth talk, by making the "proper impression". It is a society which measures success by decibels.

Yet silence can be most impressive - and also eloquent, creative and unforgettable. Silence is significant not only for what it does not say, but for what it does say. There are as many different kinds of silence as there are different kinds of sound; each has its own distinctive character. There is the silence of tension and hatred when two enemies meet, and the silence of ecstasy that passes between two lovers. There is the terrible silence of the prisoner just told that he must die, and the wonderful silence of a mother who has just witnessed a child being greatly honored. There is the silence that comes from great ignorance, and the silence that comes from great wisdom.

On this Shabbos Shirah, when we read that great and glorious song which Moses and the Children of Israel sang as a hymn to the triumph of G-d, a song in which they exalted and glorified the Divine Name, on this Shabbos I want to analyze with you three kinds of silence: two that must precede such great and exalted expression like Shirah, and the kind of silence that goes beyond Shirah - that is greater even than Shirah itself.

2. The first of these is described by the Torah itself. The Children of Israel were frightened, but Moses reassured them, saying: HA'SHEM YILACHEM LACHEM V'ATEM TACHARISHUN - The Lord will fight for you, and you will remain silent. What kind of silence is that? It is the Silence of Wonder. Here this band of weakened, frightened, disorganized slaves would see the might of Egypt crumble at their feet and be swept away miraculously in the depths of the Sea. Before they could sing they must wonder. And wondering - a thoroughly human act - is done only in silence. It is the sense of being overwhelmed, too overwhelmed for words, no matter how eloquent.

It is a kind of silence which children can practice better than adults who have already become over-wordy. It is something we must learn if we are to appreciate and enjoy life - better, appreciate and enjoy G-d. Isarel at the Red Sea wondered at G-d's might - only then were they able to break into lofty song and praise. We can wonder too - in silence - about other equally wonderful attributes of G-d. There is beauty, for instance. The only really effective way of absorbing it in its fullness is first to remain silent in wonder, to passively allow yourself to be overwhelmed by the scene or the canvas or whatever it is that is beautiful. I remember the first time I looked at a bacterial specimen under a microscope. It would have been foolish of me to say anything. I just fell into deep silence and wondered - I allowed myself to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the miracle I now discovered on that slide. All about us, in the large and the small, the astronomic and the microscopic, in the ordinary and commonplace, there is something to wonder about, for all the creation of G-d is wonderful. No wonder the Prophet exclaimed HAS KOL BASSAR MI'LIFNEI HA'SHEM - be silent, all flesh, before the Lord. There is no other way to experience great and satisfying wonder except through silence.

The story is told of the old Stolliner Rebbe who was known as Der Schweiger (the silent one), that once a gentile farmhand, whose wife was critically ill, came to visit the Rabbi for a Sgabos upon the recommendation of some friends who suggested this as a last remedy for his ailing wife. When the peasant returned home after this visit at the home of the saintly Rabbi, his friends asked him what he had seen and experienced there. He replied, "After the services the Rabbi, a very short, thin and bearded man, sat at the head of the table and said absolutely nothing. About him sat about three hundred Jews, and for two hours they sat and listened intently to the Rabbi's silence".

The Halacha demands that at certain parts of the regular prayer there be no HEFSEK, i.e. that we do not interrupt the service with idle talk, but rather be absolutely silent. For just as religious creativity can be expressed in holy words, so can it be expressed in the holy silence of wonder. Only in deep silent wonder ~~can~~ when we expose ourselves to the overwhelming sense of awe and sanctity, can we hear the Voice of G-d to which we may then respond with every fibre of our being. That is why, as the Talmud tells us, CHASSIDIM RISHONIM HAYU SHOHIM SHA'AH ACHASS KODEM TEFILLASSAN - a period of silence, of exposing one's self to overwhelming closeness of G-d, must precede prayer. The silence of wonder is, indeed, a beautiful and eloquent prayer in its own right.

3. The second kind of silence which must precede Shirah, or exalted verbal expression, is the Silence of Contemplation. After the sense of wonder, which is basically passive, it is a matter of receiving passively, must come an active kind of silence, a silence which hums with true creativity.

The silence of contemplation is a prerequisite for eloquent speech or great and effective action. I have never known a really creative person who did not precede the creative act with at least a moment of profound, thoughtful silence. No really great speech or beautiful musical composition is rolled off extemporaneously; it is hatched in the deep silence of the mind. No brilliant idea, - whether in the sciences or in business - is born out of the brawl of life; it is forged out of the stillness of a creative personality. What is inspiration? - it is nothing but the product of positive and constructive silence, the silence of contemplation.

In his Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides maintains that a true understanding of G-d cannot come through language, which is so inaccurate, but only through silence. Commenting on the verse in Psalms (65:2) that "Silence is praise to Thee", Maimonides says, "whatever we utter with the intention of extolling and praising G-d, contains something that cannot be applied to Him...It is, therefore, more becoming to be silent, and to be content with intellectual contemplation...(as it is said - Psalms 4:4) Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still".

Certainly, in the contemplative silence we find wisdom. More and greater wisdom can be communicated in ~~in~~ this kind of silence than in words. Only then is a man ready for Shirah. Only then is he ready for creative expression of any kind.

4. There is, finally, a third kind of silence which goes beyond Shirah, which is more than mere "expression" no matter how eloquent or how glorious. And that is the Silence of Faithful Restraint, a disciplined silence that comes from great faith. Our rabbis found a clue to it in the very Shirah itself. Moses and Israel sang: MI CHAMOCHA BA'EILIM HA'SHEM, ...and our Rabbis played on the word EILIM and found a relationship to the word ILMIM, so that it now read, Who is like unto Thee among the SILENT, O Lord. What does that mean? - It means that G-d is often silent, that He restricts and restrains Himself, that He is patient with sinners and is cognizant of the weaknesses of those who blaspheme His Name. And so man too must learn, from G-d, this silence of self-discipline, of patience, of faithful restraint.

Those acquainted with *vision* will know what I mean when I refer to this as *PN3*.

It is this faith that ultimately truth will win out and Justice will emerge triumphant that must cause us to hold our peace and be silent when an injustice is done to us, when we are victims of unfair calumny ~~and~~ invidious defamation and dishonest criticism. There are times when we should cry out in pain and indignation, but there is a time too for silence, the silence that bespeaks a faith that Truth will of itself emerge for all to see.

The English poet John Milton writes: the best apology against false accusers is silence and sufferance, and honest deeds set against dishonest words. But many centuries before him the Sages of the Talmud had already said, with even greater depth and sweep, HA'NE'ELAVIM V'AINAM OLVIM, SHOM'IM CHERPASSAM V'AINAM M'SHIVIM...ALEIHEM HA'KASSUV OMEIR, V'OHAVAV K'TZEIS HA'SHEMESH BI'GVU'ASO....those who are insulted but do not insult, those who hear themselves maligned, but keep themselves in silence, of then it is written, and the Lovers of the Lord shall be like the sun when it rises in its full strength (Shaabos 88). This kind of silence of restraint is one of faith - of love of the Lord - and confidence that truth will emerge for all to see, even as the sun rises above the earth.

It is so much more difficult, and so much nobler, to be silent from faith than to sing from faith. Indeed, this very silence is a Shirah - a faithful song of silence.

5. It is then, the Silence of Wonder and the Silence of Contemplation that must precede Shirah, creative expression, and the Silence of Faithful Restraint that transcends Shirah and is even nobler than it. Like the Prophet Elijah who found G-d not in the thunder of storms or the breaking of the waves or the crackling of the fire, but in the voice of silence, so too we must look for G-d in silence - of wonder, of contemplation of faithful restraint; that is, the silence of the heart, of the mind and of the soul. *which is the silence of the heart; of contemplation, which is the silence of the mind; and of faithful restraint, which is the silence of the soul.*