



D'var Torah – Parshat Bamidbar – June 8, 2024

By Judy Remz

“Could everybody please be quiet – I’m getting ready for Shavuot”

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Judy Remz. I had no idea a celebrity, Dr. Rachelle Walensky would be in the main service so thanks for staying and listening to me!

If I was giving this Dvar Torah a name, I’d probably call it “Could everybody please just be quiet – I’m getting ready for Shavuot”. Now, let me explain....

“Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under heaven.... a time to be silent and a time to speak.” Thus says Kohelet in Chapter 3.

And today, it was time to read B’midbar, which is the parashah that is read just prior to Shavuot. How do these relate? Let’s start by exploring the word - B’midbar. Midbar means wilderness, where the Israelites wandered for decades. We read about the Midbar today because this is where God gives us the Torah – not in the land of Israel, not in a city, not in Gan Eden but in the wilderness. We think of wilderness as being chaotic and wild but we find out in today’s parashah that the Israelites brought order to their world by each tribe carrying their own banner and having a specific place in the procession. So the midbar is orderly.

The midbar is also a place of silence, explains Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He goes on to say “There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound.” We were given the Torah in a place of quietness. Perhaps what Rabbi Sacks is suggesting is that the unruly, kvetchy Israelites needed the silence of the wilderness to absorb the revelation. Today I’d like to talk about how quiet and silence can help us prepare for Shavuot. And perhaps, it can also help us cope with the insanity of the world we are living in now.

Silence is not the absence of communication. There are times when silence says more than words. There’s a saying that “Silence is golden. Unless you have kids. Then it is suspicious.” So it’s important to notice the silence and take it seriously.

When the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that his elderly wife, Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, maybe bitterly with cynicism. There are interpretations that this laugh, described as inward, was silent, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God confronts her and asks her why she laughed – “Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?” (v14). Sarah quickly denies laughing because she was afraid. But God answers, saying “You did laugh”. We learn from this vignette, which goes on for 3 psukim -- quite a lot of text devoted to this concept -- that God hears our thoughts even when they are silent.

In the Torah, silence is misinterpreted by other people, but not by God. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read about Hannah. She was distraught over her infertility and prayed to God that she would become pregnant. However, her prayers are only in her heart, not in spoken words. “Only her lips moved but her voice could not be heard. So Eli (the priest) thought she was drunk. Eli said to her ‘How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself! Sober up!’” (Samuel 1: 12 – 14) And while Eli had no idea what she was doing, God heard her and answered her prayers with a son.

Those were cases of when God heard even though words or sounds weren’t expressed. There is also communication via silence between people and it goes like this story.

Two rabbis, who are very good friends, planned to meet up. It took several days for one to travel to the other. When they met, here’s how the conversation went.

Rabbi one says "oy" [pause]
Rabbi two says "nu?" [pause]
Rabbi one says "nu?" [pause]
Rabbi two says "Oy"

An entire conversation – they communicated with each other with very few words and most of it was through their silence. If you leave out the silence and the pause, you are leaving out part of the message these rabbis were giving to each other.

Midrash Exodus Rabbah describes the giving of the Torah like this "When the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird screeched, no fowl flew, no ox mooed, none of the *ophanim* (angels) flapped a wing, nor did the *seraphim* (burning celestial beings) chant "*Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh* (Holy, Holy, Holy!)" 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." (Midrash Exodus Rabbah – Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yochanan)

Quiet nurtures concentration. Silence is required to think, absorb and be humble. Of course, the Israelites needed this ambiance in order to receive the Torah.

Consider Elijah. Elijah's life was endangered and he fled, eventually to Mount Horeb. There he told God that he had worked very hard for Him, but the people of Israel had torn down God's altars and killed all the prophets, and only Elijah was left, and now they were trying to kill him too. Then the story continues: "The Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain; it was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a kol demamah dakah." קול דַּמְמָה דַּקָּה The still small voice. It was in this sound of silence that God's voice was found. Here, God gave Elijah his instructions for the last stage of his life.

We learn from this that God is in the still, small voice that can barely be heard. God is in the silence.

What is your relationship with silence? Does it make you uncomfortable? Do you welcome it? I think silence can bring clarity of thought and allow us to come to grips with what is on our minds. A couple of months ago, the Minyan Ma'Or ritual committee instituted a moment of silence. It is a way of acknowledging the bloodshed and horror of war and remembering the innocent victims. Every week, I am so grateful for this time to pause, breathe and focus on the suggested kavanah.

For this Shavuot, let's put silence on the agenda. Quoting Rabbi Sacks again "In the silence of the midbar, ... you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker.... To hear the voice of God, you need a listening silence in the soul."

With all the chaos in the world, let's find time to be quiet with ourselves and with our loved ones. I was taking a walk with Pam Adelstein this week and she told me that she loves the quiet between n'tilat yadain and motzi on Shabbat. Sometimes she purposely slows it down, slowly cutting the challah, enjoying the quiet of her family and guests around the Shabbat table and the anticipation building for that wonderful first taste of challah. This Shavuot, let us make time to sit, to be enveloped by the silence, and to hear its powerful voice. Let's find the midbar, the wilderness, the silence where we can maybe hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, giving us hope that our prayers are heard, that we are still loved and that we are not alone.

Shabbat shalom