

A-220

"WHY IS G-D SILENT?"

1. There is a question that is asked wherever thinking and believing men congregate, a question that is put forward with particular urgency when men are faced with crises and confronted with the great issues of life. That question is: "Why is G-d silent?"

We think back to the unbelievable horrors of the last two decades, and we cry, "Why is G-d silent?"

We see 3 million Jews behind the Iron Curtain threatened with spiritual extinction; "Why is G-d silent?"

Our minds are troubled by doubts. We hear the voices of evil gloating. We see the apostles of irreligion revelling. We recall that G-d once spoke out clearly to Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we see the void in our world where no vision is received and no voice is heard. And we wonder: "Why is G-d silent?"

To be sure, we are not the first to ask that question. The saintly David, hunted like a wild beast by Saul and betrayed by his own son, pleaded with the Almighty, ELOKIM AL DAMI LACH, AL TECHERASH - "O G-d, keep not Thou silence; hold not Thy peace, and be not still O G-d, for lo Thine enemies are in an uproar." And the Englishman Carlyle, in an impatient and irreverent mood, concluded, "G-d sits in Heaven and does nothing." Well, we need not share his frivolousness to consider that serious problem of G-d's silence, because it is a fair question, and an appropriate one for a day when Jews gather to contemplate the ultimate ends of life and plead with the Psalmist, "Be not still, O G-d."

2. This morning I undertake to explore the question with you, not to provide the definitive answer. Greater minds have wrestled with the problem without emerging with clear solutions. But while we cannot fully explain, surely some things can be said about it.

The burden of my message to you this Rosh Hashannah is that G-d is NOT silent, that He CAN be heard. It is true that the tumult of G-dlessness is sometimes so overwhelming that we feel driven to accept the fact of G-d's silence. The Sage of the Midrash must have been deafened by what David called the "uproar of G-d's enemies" when he turned his gaze heavenward and exclaimed, MI CHAMOCHA BA'ILEIM HA'SHEM, MI CHAMOCHA RO'EH B'ELBONE BANAV V'SHOSEIK - What human father could be like Thee, O Lord, who sees the wrongs done to His children and keeps silent?

Certainly those were times when it was hard to believe that G-d was anything but silent. And yet, almost in the same breath, the same Midrash records not a complaint but an adoration: MI KAMOCHA BA'EILIM HA'SHEM - MI SHE'AMAR V'HAYAH HA'OLAM, OMEIR ASSERESS HA'DIBROSS BE'DIBUR ECHAD, "Who among the mighty is like Thee O Lord, Who spoke and thus created the world, and Who in one voice gave Ten Commandments". There IS a voice of G-d. He CAN be heard. He is NOT silent.

Of course, when we say that G-d is NOT silent, we do not mean that He makes a big noise that is obvious to everyone. The voice of G-d is not an uproar. It is, as we shall soon affirm in the UMESANEH TOKEF prayer, a KOL DMAMAH DAKAH, a still, small voice. There is a faint echo. There is a whisper. But He is not silent.

3. Why, then, do we not hear Him? Why is He not revealed to us as He was to our ancestors, to the people of the Bible?

It is not because G-d has lowered His voice. It is because we have preferred not to hear Him. It is because we turn a deaf ear to Him. We make too much noise ourselves and so drown out His voice. The noise of the market place, the sales talks, the clickety-clack of the typewriters, the ring of the telephones follow us even as we return home to our families, for we are busy planning the next day's conquests. And if that noise of our selfish and material pursuits should leave us long enough to hear the KOL DMAMAH DAKAH, the obvious whisper of G-d in every single aspect of life, we rush to fill in the void with the sound of radio and television and games and entertainment of all kinds. We will not give G-d a chance. We prefer not to hear Him. And then we say, "Why is G-d silent?"

Prof. Whitehead once said, "Religion is what a man does with his loneliness." When we are silent, G-d is not. The Kotzker Rebbe was once asked where G-d is. He replied, "wherever you let Him in." Certainly we can hear G-d's voice. But we must let Him in our hearts. We must be attuned to Him. We must manage to be alone with Him. We must be willing to listen.

So if we are not going to hear G-d over the telephone or counter or radio, where then will we hear Him? That is a question to which you are entitled to an answer.

On this Holy Day, when man's heart is most receptive to the Divine message, when we set the spiritual tone for a whole year, we are given a clear clue as to how to attune ourselves to Him. Our Mussaf Service is divided into three parts: MALCHIOS, the Kingship of G-d;

ZICHRONOS, Memories, or the past; and SHOFROSS, the Shofar. Here are three areas of life where we can most clearly prove to ourselves that G-d most certainly is not silent.

4. MALCHIOS- G-d is King. Nature is His creation and the elements His fashioned tools. And if indeed BARUCH SHE'AMAR V'HAYAH HA'OLAM, He spoke the world into being, then His voice can always be heard in this world, ~~in this Nature~~. One need not be a starry-eyed romantic to appreciate G-d's presence and hear His voice in the Nature He created.

Walk through Forest Park and let your eyes absorb the beauties of our New England foliage, and your ears will hear the whisper of G-d. KOL HA'SHEM BE'HADAR. The very leaves are the congealed syllables of G-d's speech.

Glance at the heavens on some clear night, and allow yourself to become overwhelmed by what you see. EIN OMER V'EIN DVARIM, BLI NISHMA KOLAM. There is no physical sound. Yet the voice of G-d is clearly audible - HA'SHAMAYIM MESAPRIM KVOE EIL, the Heavens declare the glory of G-d. No wonder the ancients spoke of "the music of the spheres". G-d is not silent. The stars are the notes of the Divine song.

Look at all that man is, the complicated machine that can think. And then look at all he has built, especially a structure such as this, a house dedicated to the worship of the One King and the study of His law. What loving care men put into this building. With what tenderness and affection they enter it. With what reverence they approach it. UVEHEICHALO KULO OMER KAVOD, "In the palace of G-d, everything says 'Glory to Him'." Your devotions here this day are the lofty overtones of G-d's oratory.

5. And then MALCHIOS tells us that G-d as King not only owns, He also legislates. And the laws of the King of the universe are preserved for us in Torah. Now ~~ages~~ is G-d as unsilent as He is in Torah. From its eloquent records He speaks to us ever anew. It is because we have abandoned Torah that we have convinced ourselves of what Prof. Heschel calls "the dogma of G-d's total silence."

Take for instance the all-important matter of family life. How appalling to read that nowadays ONE out of every THREE marriages ends in divorce, with the wreckage strewn in the broken hearts of parents and broken pride of children. Is G-d silent? No. It is we who have refused to listen. Were we to bend an ear to Torah, husband and wife would hear Divine counsel to discipline their lives through the observance of family purity and MIKVAH, to practice it

and not make silly and infantile jokes of it. A wife would learn that the warm glow of the Sabbath candles bespeaks SHALOM BAYYIS, the peace of her home; and the husband would hear the advice, "love your wife as much as yourself and respect her more than your self." G-d is not silent. It is we who have closed our ears.

We see auto accidents take a fantastic toll in life and limb. Is G-d silent? No. In His Torah we hear Him warn us: LO SASSIM DAMMIM BEVEISECHA. Safety is a religious principle. Do not permit blood to be spilt in home or highway. Stop the mad race for more speed. Put a brake on your profit-instinct, and a better brake in your autos. There is the voice of G-d.

We see millions of our population killed in wars. We gear all the might of science to the glory of greater massacre. Young men give up the most precious years of their lives to learn how to murder, and mothers trade children for gold stars. In the midst of all this bloody madness, we cry, "G-d, why are You silent?", Well, is He silent? No! It is we who turned stony hearts and closed ears to Torah, else we would have followed the advice of Isaiah about beating our swords into ploughshares, and not learning war any more. We would have heard the voice of G-d in the words of David: CHESSED V'EMESS NIFGASHU, TZEDEK VSHALOM NASHAKU, that there can be no peace without Love and Truth and Justice. No, Mr. Carlyle, you are wrong when you say that "G-d sits in Heaven and does nothing." His may be a voice that is soft and still. But He is not silent. If anything, we have tried to silence Him.

If we are to hear the voice of G-d, then, we must listen for it in MALCHIOS, in the possession of the King which is Nature, and in the legislation of the King which is Torah. From the pages of Torah we hear the same voice which spoke to Moses, preached to Israel, rebuked through Jeremiah and encouraged thru Isaiah. Oh no, G-d certainly is NOT silent.

6. Let us now turn to the second area - ZICHRONOS, Remembrances. G-d is revealed to us in History - in the past of our people and the immediate past of us as individuals. For we Jews are a people "poor in geography and rich in history." History is to us not, as one cynic put it, "the study of other people's mistakes." Even more than the remembrances of past facts, it is the spur to remember G-d, for history is the record of G-d's justice and morality. The great events of History are the echoes of His voice.

Just think back to the great events of the past. Pharaoh persecuted his weak Jewish slaves, saying MAH HASHEM ASHER ESHMA BKOLO, "Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice?"

He thought that "G-d sits in heaven and does nothing." But on the grim scene of his inglorious defeat, those same Jewish slaves exclaimed, SHAMU AMIM YIRGAZUN, "the peoples have heard - finally - and they trembled." G-d is not silent.

At the climax of our first exile, the mighty Babylonian King Belshazzar was feasting with his thousands of noblemen. Suddenly the clamored died down for on the wall a finger was seen writing, MENE MENE TKEIL UFARSIN, "weighed, weighed in the balance and found wanting," The voice of G-d is soft, but not silent. And when this KOL DMAMAH DAKAH is heard it has the impact of a thunderclap.

Hitler was going to rule for a thousand years. He lasted less than a decade. Stalin was proclaiming himself a god. He is now proclaimed the chief of the devils. True, terrible damage was done. But just as G-d's voice is soft, so is His ^{justice} ~~patience~~ patient and deliberate. But ultimately it comes. Judgment rides slowly, but it arrives. G-d's voice is soft, but not silent. The ZICHRONOS of the past are the echoes of His whispers. And the State of Israel of the present will remain for all future generations the eternal proclamation of His promise.

7. And for those to whom "History" is a bit too impersonal, ZICHRONOS invites you to search for G-d's voice in your own memories, your own past and your own history.

What better ZICHRONOS are there than those a man has of his own father. How often have I talked to a young man, woefully ignorant of Judaism, who would say, "Rabbi, I still love these things. I remember my father reciting the Kiddush, presiding at the Seder, wrapped in his Tallis on Rosh Hashannah." Ah young man who speaks so tenderly and lovingly of father and mother and grandparents, if only you had realized that theirs was the voice of G-d, that their reproach and encouragement to live fuller Jewish lives, was a message of G-d direct to you. He is not silent. G-d speaks thru the still, small voice of such ZICHRONOS.

No wonder that in our Tradition records that when G-d appeared to Moses out of the Burning Bush, He spoke to the young prophet BKOLO SHEIL ABBA, in the voice of his own father!

8. And on this day dedicated to Shofar, that sacred instrument is itself a carrier of G-d's voice. ALAH ELOKIM BITRUAH, HASHEM BKOL SHOFAR - G-d speaks thru the Shofar. According to Maimonides, Shofar is the sound which causes us to wake up from our slumber, remember our Creator and look well into our own souls. In a word: Conscience. It stimulates our consciences

to hear the still, small voice. UVASHOFAR GADOL YITAKA VKOL DMAMAH DAKAH YISHAMA: the sound of the great Shofar makes us listen more ~~ele~~sintently to the soft whispers of conscience.

As humans and as Jews, when we depart from the ways of humanity and Torah, we hear the soft but sharp reproach of conscience, the voice of G-d sounding within us, reechoing in the chambers of our hearts. But so often we refuse that voice a hearing because we are shy, we are afraid of what others will think if we give it an audience.

How often, when sitting with a group of friends and indulging in the national pastime of besmirching other people's characters, do we feel our hearts swelling up with disgust and a clear, sharp voice within us saying, "Stop! Stop this filth, this meanness, this murder of reputations". Yet we squelch the disgust and turn off the voice. We are afraid of being called "bad sport", "holier-than-thou", "aloof". G-d is not silent. We shut the Shofar off.

The Talmud says: HAROEH SHEYITZRO MISGABEIR ALAV, he who sees that temptation is getting the better of him, let him disguise himself and go incognito VYAASEH MAH SHELIBO CHAFEITZ, and do what his heart desires. Is this permission to sin in secret? Is this a license for hypocrisy? No, says the Rabbi of Kotzk. YITZRO refers to YETZER TOV, not YETZER HARA, to the temptation to do good and not evil, the temptation to obey the voice of G-d coming thru the inner Shofar of conscience. If you are afraid to obey that voice because of the ridicule of friends or society - leave them, and do what the voice of G-d tells your heart to do. Shofar is the voice of G-d waking you from your slumber. It is the awakening of your conscience. G-d is not silent. ASHREI HA'AM YODEI SERUAH, Happy is the people that understands this profound meaning of Shofar.

9. Finally, let us arrive at the last source of G-d's voice indicated by Shofar. Of the three kinds of notes sounded by the Shofar, the Talmud tells us that TEKIAH, the long and sharp blast, is the sound of a painful cry. The three notes of SHVARIM are the sound of wailing. And the nine short and quick notes of TERUAH are the expression of emotional sobbing.

That too is the voice of G-d, my friends, It is G-d weeping - yes, weeping. Listen to Jeremiah plaintively preaching his prophecy to his people: SHIMU V'HAZINU, AL TIGBAHU KI HA'SHEM DIBER (13:15,17) "Hear ye and give ear, be not proud for the Lord hath spoken". V'IM LO SISH'MA'U'HA, B'MISTARIM TIVKEH NAFSHI MIPNEI GEIVAH, "And if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret because of your pride."

So that is what Shofar is - when G-d speaks and we are too proud to listen, then G-d weeps in secret - and then we have the gall to complain, "Why is G-d silent?"

So you want to hear the voice of G-d? Then listen to the Shofar with your heart as well as your ears. Listen to the cry and the wail and the sob. It is G-d crying because we are deaf to Him throughout the rest of the year. It is G-d crying because ^{the only} ~~we are~~ time some of us are aware of him is when He takes our loved ones away from us. It is G-d crying because we have money and time for every conceivable project except synagogue and Jewish school. It is G-d crying because we have Jewish clubs, made up of Jews, catering to Jew and financed by Jews, but where G-d is never given an audience. It is G-d crying because we build Jewish fraternal orders where G-d is blacklisted and Jewish organizations where G-d is an unwelcome stranger. He cries because He has been rejected by His children. The Shofar is G-d crying because there are synagogues where, as Prof. Heschel put it, the problem is not "separation of Church and State" but "separation of Church and G-d", of Synagogue and G-d. It is G-d crying because we have erected Temples where it is possible to enter every day of the year without uttering a single prayer or hearing a word of Torah. He cries, He sobs, He weeps, because our pride has turned our hearts into stone and deafened our ears to His voice, so that even on Rosh Hashannah His crying is BEMISTARIM, in secret, unknown, unrecognized, unanswered. Oh no, G-d is Not silent. He is calling to us, asking for us, crying for us, beckoning for us to return to Him.

R. Baruch of Mezhbozh once met his little grandson crying. "I was playing hide-and-seek, waiting for my friends to look for me, but no one came to search me out." "Ah, my child," replied the great Rabbi, "G-d cries for the same reason. Everywhere and always He waits for His children to seek Him out, but no one comes to look for Him." So G-d weeps thru the Shofar. ^{We will not seek Him out.} We will not let Him in. When He speaks, we turn away. And when He turns away, we complain: "Why is G-d silent?"

10. Let us then think of Rosh Hashanah as an answer to our question. G-d is not silent. MALCHIOS, Kingship, tells us to ^{listen} ~~look~~ for Him in Nature and in Torah. ZICHRONOS - in History and Parents. SHOFAR is His voice in our consciences, and the sound of His weeping when our pride deafens us.
11. As we rise to entreat G-d for a year of blessing and peace, let us resolve to listen for His still, small voice - and respond to it. May the voice of G-d silence the uproar of His enemies,

and sound the good tidings of our redemption. And may the voice of the Shofar change from the cry of rejection to the shout of happiness, from wailing to rejoicing, and from sobbing to singing; so that, in the words we shall shortly recite, ZAMRU ELOKEINU ZAMEIRU, ZAMRU LEMALKEINU ZAMEIRU, " Sing unto G-d, sing unto our King; for G-d is King over the whole earth; let us therefore sing His praises with soft melody."