

"DIVINE SILENCE -- OR HUMAN STATIC?"

Over three thousand years ago, King David gave expression to a heart-rending cry which still retains the ring of relevance. He contemplated the enemies surrounding him, seeking to destroy all of Israel. He considered his experience as a refugee from the wrath of King Saul. He surveyed the human scene, strewn with misery and wretchedness. And so he turned to God plaintively, crying out: Elokim, al dami-lakh, al teherash, v'al tishkot el, "O God, keep not silent, hold not Thy peace, and be not still, O God" (Psalms 83:2).

Is not that prayer as meaningful today as it was thirty centuries ago?

We read last week of a volcano in the Phillipine Islands which claimed at least a thousand victims. O Lord, why are You silent? Brutality in Vietnam claims ever more victims; be not still, O God! We think, this evening, of three million of our brethren behind the Iron Curtain who cannot enjoy this holy day in the kind of free democratic surroundings with which we are blessed; O God, keep not silent! We notice all about us heart-sick parents, frustrated children, people suffering from loneliness or illness, O Lord, al dami lakh, al teherash -- be not still!

And it is not only the awareness of human suffering and misery that occasions this melancholy exclamation. We notice, too, that those who have faith in God are in the minority; those who remain loyal to Judaism are outnumbered. We are surrounded by cynics, and doubt gnaws at us from within. We are encompassed, externally and internally, by the challenge of God's silence. God, we are told, cannot speak. We recall the irreverent remark of the Englishman Carlyle: "God sits in Heaven and does nothing." He has nothing to say to us. In sheer desperation we turn to Him, and with tears in our hearts, we pray: God, once You did speak. You gave the world Your Prophets who exclaimed koh amar ha-Shem, "thus saith the Lord"; they carried the word of God from one end of the world to the other. Why are You now silent? God, speak up! Do not hide! Speak Your word, O Lord, and vindicate us. Almighty Father in Heaven, al dami lakh, al teherash!

Is, then, God silent today? The Rabbis considered that question with the utmost seriousness. And their answer was: God is not silent! On the contrary. God's word is as prevalent today as it ever was, although the form of His address may have changed.

In a famous Mishnah, they said: be'khol yom va-yom bat kol yotzet me'har horev u'makhrezet, oy la-hem la-beriyot me'elbonah shel Torah. Every single day a Heavenly voice issues from Mount Horeb, (which is another name for Mount Sinai) and declares,

"woe to those people who cause insult to Torah!" So God is not silent -- Mount Sinai still broadcasts the divine message. The divine Will still may be heard. Suffering and pain may abound, but they have meaning. To know that heartache and agony have a purpose, that they are not vain -- is to hear God's voice in our own experience. God speaks to us, and if we hear Him we can bear anything.

But this raises another question: if God is not silent, if He makes His voice heard every day, should not men be moved to repentance, should they not receive encouragement and comfort, and should they not be elevated to great heights? Apparently human beings do not hear the divine voice that issues from Mount Horeb. And if no one can hear it, what is the use of this daily divine declaration?

Hasidim relate that this question was asked of the great Hasidic Master, known as "The Holy Jew." He answered with the following parable: a father, who was a merchant, once took his young son with him on a business trip. They passed through a thick forest, where the boy espied beautiful blackberries and he very much wanted to stop and pick them. The father told his son that he could not stop, that business was pressing, and that they must continue riding. Whereupon the son said to him, let me get off and gather my berries while you ride slowly onward; do not worry, I will find you. But my son, the father replied, I fear that you will be lost. Well, said the son, every now and then I will call to you and you can

answer me. When I have finished picking my berries I will come along and join you. As the son left the wagon to go into the forest, the father told him: remember, my son, if you will hear the voice of your father and follow it, all will be well and you will not get lost. But if you do not listen, you will not hear my voice. And once you no longer hear the voice of your father, you will remain lost in this great and forbidding forest. We do not listen -- and so we wander ever farther from our Father's voice, from Mt. Horeb.

This, indeed, is the problem. Our Father still calls, but we do not hear because we ~~do not listen~~ are too busy picking the berries of life, grabbing as much as we can of the petty material luxuries available to us -- and so we are lost in the forest.

In a metaphor remarkably similar to that of the Hasidic teacher in the parable, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her

"Aurora Leigh," put it this way: Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Indeed so! The earth is crammed with Heaven! Every common bush, every phenomenon in Nature, every human being, is afire with the presence of the Almighty! If we are sensitive and intelligent, if we listen -- we shall hear the voice issuing from Mount Horeb, we shall see the fire in every bush; and then we will take off our shoes in reverence for the hallowed ground. For all ground is hallowed,

"all the earth is filled with the glory of God" -- melo khol ha-aretz kevods

Those who have eyes but do not look and ears but do not listen and hearts but do not believe -- will neither see nor hear nor feel. They are condemned to spend their lives in foolish trivialities: in picking berries !

Perhaps this is the reason that we do not wear shoes on Yom Kippur. We remind ourselves of Moses who, when he beheld the burning bush, was sufficiently sensitive to remove his shoes out of respect. No one else saw the bush burning; no one else detected the Presence of the Lord. On Yom Kippur we try to aspire to the greatness and the sensitivity of Moses. We try to listen for the Voice of God when the rest of the world thinks He is silent -- and, ignoring what is holy and pure and transcendent in life, finds nothing better to do than stuff its pockets till they bulge with blackberries.

Indeed, listening is one of the most human activities in which mankind is capable. One cannot teach unless one learns to listen. One of our Metropolitan Graduate Schools of Education offers a course entitled "listening." Education of children involves more than talking to them or teaching them to talk. It is fundamentally listening to them: their voices, their laughter, their fears, their tempers, their aches, their very heartbeat. One cannot communicate until one first listens, and authentic education requires listening with a spiritual stethoscope. So, much of psychiatry

is largely a matter of listening, and that is more than just hearing. Any counsellor, whether psychiatrist or social worker or Rabbi, must frequently do just that; and listening is a highly creative and skillful act.

The art of listening, of course, involves more than the use of the ear. It means opening one's heart, one's mind, one's soul, and sharpening one's sensitivity to listen to the divine voice, to remain alert to the holiness in all of life. No wonder that the Torah decrees that a man who willfully sells himself into permanent slavery must have his ear bored -- for that ear is the one that heard the voice of God on Sinai saying that Israel was to remain a servant of God alone and not of man, and the ear that heard this -- did not listen!

Judaism has taught us that if we know how to listen, we will hear God's voice anyplace and everyplace. When the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Naftali of Ropschitz, was a very young child, someone said to him: Naftali, I will give you a dollar if you will tell me where God is. The young child answered immediately: and I will give you two if you will tell me where He is not! "O Lord, where shall I find Thee, and where shall I not find Thee?"

The whole purpose of the High Holy Day season, which we conclude with this day of Yom Kippur, might be said to be just that: to teach us to listen, to sensitize us to the greatness that is around us, the Voice of God that can be

heard if we will just put our mind and heart to it. The season began with Rosh Hashanah and the commandment of the shofar. Recall that the blessing over the shofar is not to sound the shofar, but li'shmoa kol shofar -- to listen to the sound of the shofar! Rosh Hashanah initiates a ten-day period of listening, when we learn to be silent in order to be able to hear the kol Hashem, the voice of God.

Why do we not listen, why do we not hear? Our problem is: we are too busy talking! We are too involved in so many other things that are inconsequential and meaningless. Our society is too wordy, we are drowned in the verbosity of our mass media of communication. Words come to us not in sentences, but in veritable torrents -- from mouths and radios and TV and newspapers. Our mind and our senses are so battered with trivial and insignificant information, we do not know where to begin! And, therefore, we cannot learn to listen until we have appreciated that most of what we have to say, ultimately, is usually of little value and significance, and that it is better to keep silent -- and await the word of God.

This, indeed, is what Kol Nidrei may be all about. Tonight, the night of confession, we confess that we have talked too much; that we have indulged in nonsensical trivialities; that, despite all the importance that we attach to ourselves, our endless talk and activities are

nothing more than a great deal of static. Nidrana lo nidrei -- what we said we did not mean, and what we meant we did not say. Our promises were not promises, our vows were not vows, our words were meaningless, our expressions infelicitous, our talk vacuous, our speech unjellied gibberish, our conversation nothing more than chatter! Kol nidre -- all our talk, no matter how solemn and significant we think it is -- nidranala nidre, esarana la esarei, shevuatana lo shevuot, all of it ultimately remains worthless and vain! Our shop talk, our family discussions, our gossip, our discussions of current events, even our philosophizing -- are nothing more than static, human interference that prevents us from being able to hear the kol demamah dakkah, the still, small voice of the Almighty, that is broadcast from Mount Horeb.

This holiest day of the year will end when, after Neilah, we shall all proclaim in unison: Shema Yisroel! Hear O Israel! Be still, silence all strange thoughts, all selfish desire, all ignoble egotism that agitates within -- and listen to the voice from Sinai. And when we hear it, we shall learn: oy la-hem le'briyot me'elbonah shel Torah, woe to them who insult Torah by ignoring Torah and Judaism and Synagogue all year long, while avariciously picking the blackberries of profit and luxury and pleasure and self-indulgence.

Where shall we listen for the Voice of the Lord, if we have the intelligence to be quiet and expose ourselves to the Godliness immanent in all of life? King David himself has suggested some answers. Kol ha-shem be'hadar -- the Voice of the Lord is in beauty. We will find G-d's voice in the beauty of nature, in a dazzling sunset, in an inspiring moonlit evening, in the flutter of a falling leaf, in the cadences of poetry, ^{in the} grace of a bird in flight, in the sound of sublime music. The Voice of the Lord is in beauty -- provided that we do not deface our countryside, that we do not disrupt our vision of Nature by erecting tremendous, ugly billboards, that we do not turn up our transistors so loud that nothing else can be heard.

Kol hashem b-koah. The Voice of the Lord is in might. Who cannot but be overwhelmed by the power of Nature whether the Grand Canyon or Niagra Falls? Who cannot hear the Voice of G-d not only speaking, but even warning us, when beholding the naked might, the brutal awe, the raw splendor of an atomic explosion, the release of all those overwhelming and primitive powers of Nature, the gigantic might that lies dormant in every atom of this universe? The Voice of the Lord is in might -- promising us great reward if we harness it for noble, moral ends, and warning us of doom if we abuse this might and this power selfishly, using it only for conquest, for self-aggrandizement. For then we shall hear nothing but the absolute silence of a world destroyed.

U-ve'hekhale kulo omer kavod -- all His Temple says "glory!"

The House of G-d itself is the Voice of G-d! We come to the synagogue and listen closely; if we concentrate, if we ^S seek to understand its message -- then we shall have heard the Voice of G-d. If we do not hear, it is proof that it is our fault, that our dull and insipid conversation deafens us, so that we can no longer hear the kol Hashem. Our meaningless distractions, our infantile inability to concentrate, prevent us from perceiving the still small voice of kavod, which is the Sound of the Presence of G-d. If our mind is busy contemplating how others have insulted us, how we can exploit the market, what clothing we are going to wear, how soon we can get out, or any of the thousand other distractions that cloud one's thoughts and make him deaf to the Voice of the Lord, then we shall have wasted this precious opportunity called "Yom Kippur."

To pray means not only to speak to G-d, but far more important, to prepare yourself to hear G-d speaking to you! We must listen to the words of the mahzor -- and we will hear G-d in them. We must listen carefully to the reading of the Torah -- and we will hear the same Voice of G-d that sounded at Sinai and that today continues to proclaim the truth to us from Mount Horeb. We must listen carefully, and with great attention, to the inner voice of our conscience, to the spiritual yearnings within us which strive for recognition but which we often neglect because of the screeching ~~y~~ yell of our natural appetites and of society about us. We must listen sensitively to the needs of our neighbor who sometimes cries

to G-d silently and in solitude, despite his outward smile.

And so too, we must listen to the synagogue itself. If we listen, we will appreciate that kulo omer kavod, that it has something to teach us -- the principle of kavod, of self-respect, of Jewish dignity and nobility and sublimity. We cannot live without the synagogue; we cannot even exist without it, for then we cease being Jews. Consider what a synagogue means to a community -- for instance, what this House of G-d means to you. It is here for your use at all times, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sadness. It makes of just another metropolitan section of a big anonymous and faceless city, the spiritual home -- where you know you are always welcome. It provides youth groups and services for your children, and educational facilities for all the family. It offers adult education to the entire community. It welcomes you and seeks to serve you at all times.

Tonight, as is customary in this and many other synagogues, we appeal to you to listen not only to the Voice of G-d in it, but to the Divine Voice of your conscience in helping to support that synagogue. Do not be so busy with so many other things that you cannot give us a thought. We must turn to you to ask you for your support. We cannot possibly exist without the community's good will and cooperation. Those who refuse to listen, those who refuse to assist, do so at the risk of their own spiritual health. He who does not give is all the poorer for it.

I appeal to you, therefore, to listen to us, and to respond.

Do not allow those embarrassing periods of silence to continue after I have finished this appeal. Respond, and show that you have listened, that you have heard, and that you have acted accordingly.

Permit me to conclude with this one story which may illustrate what I have said throughout this talk. A colleague told me of it, and it is a stirring and stunning story. He was returning home from a funeral, and was in the same car as the son of the deceased, a very fine, upright man whom he had known for some time. For some reason this son seemed more disconsolate than expected. He was so shaken that the Rabbi detected that something special had happened. He turned to him and said, "What happened? Is there anything especially wrong?"

"Yes, I shall never forgive myself. Father was sick just before he passed away, and he was extremely anxious to be in contact with me at all times. I promised him that he could call at any time he wished and that I would talk to him. Father was very considerate and he did not bother me often at all. But then, when he took a turn for the worse, and was about to pass away, with his last breath and his last gust of strength, he picked up the phone to call me and to bid me farewell -- and the line was busy! I never got to talk to my father!"

Your Heavenly Father calls for you now. He asks you to support the House of G-d. In the last hours of the Ten Days of Penitence, we call to you -- do not let your line be busy. Do not be pre-occupied elsewhere. Answer us -- and may all of us have a good and blessed year, as G-d listens to us, hears our prayers - and answers us.