



Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Yom Kippur 2017/5778
The Gift of Silence – a Gift of Meaning

On this day of confessions, I confess: In college, I failed one course. Truth be told I didn't even make it to the end of the semester. After only 5 weeks I dropped out of --- *Meditation 101*.

I grew up in Pennsylvania, a state founded by a Quaker and still populated by people of a faith known for their silence in worship. In college, I was a 'Penn Quaker.' I felt I should know how to sit in contemplative silence. But when I sat in that class, all I could hear was my 'un-quiet' mind screaming: this is torture!

Another confession: I'm a huge extrovert. I love conversation and the hubbub of people. I regularly embarrass my children by talking to total strangers – on the subway, at restaurants and in the supermarket. Silence is not really my go-to mode.

Yet, I haven't forgotten my attempt at meditation 101. Despite my early failure, I'm still yearning for what I hoped to learn in that class: the ability to spend long periods of time in quiet.

Even as I thrive off the energy of others, I marvel at the joy of silence. I love hiking when no one else is on the trail and I realize that I am surrounded by a thick and penetrating silence? Or walking late in the night after a heavy snow? The stillness spreads a dense blanket over everything muffling the world. And those nights when I was up at 3 am with a sleeping baby in my arms? Those were times of beautiful quiet.

When the outside world offers me those rare moments of silence, I find myself connecting with that elusive feeling I've craved since college: a silence within myself.

Some of you can tap into that inner silence easily - meditating, praying on your own, taking long walks without distractions. I admit that I am envious of you. But I know I am not alone in my struggle for more silence. We live in a world that surrounds us with unfiltered tumult and incessant noise. And our current culture pushes us to talk

louder, post more often, and use extreme language in a vain attempt to be heard. Have you noticed when you talk to some people they often only half-listen, so eager to jump in with a response? They start speaking before you have even finished your sentence. It's a loud, loud, loud, loud, loud, world.

We are paying a big price for this relentless din. Always multi-tasking, always on the go, we deny ourselves precious few opportunities for self-reflection - those pauses that invite us to reconnect with our deepest truths; those breaks that help us consider who we are in the world. With words and images scrolling constantly across our wrists and screens, we neglect to review the slide show of **our** experiences, the chance to make sense of our past and give meaning to our future. As one scholar writes: "living in an accelerating, information-saturated culture is taking its toll on us — on our bodies and our psyches, as well as on our ability to govern ourselves with the wisdom and compassion of which we are capable."¹

This truth hit home for me as I started to prepare for our Holy Days but I found myself struggling to discern which themes to address. Convinced I could use my workout time to think, I left my Ipod in the car and went into the gym. No surprise there were TVs flashing from the walls and music blasting from speakers in the ceiling. But I needed quiet – outside and inside. On my way home, I found an empty parking lot and pulled into the farthest corner. There I sat, for over an hour, in silence. As the minutes passed, I watched my mundane thoughts about dinner, the car inspection and adult ed classes come to mind, get noticed and drift away. When the incessant 'noise' ended and my mind became still, I could listen- finally - as my inner voice, my deeper thoughts and emotions finally came to the surface.

It was there in the silence of the car that I realized that my underlying feelings of unease and stress were really about something else. They were feelings of anxiety about all of the anti-Semitism we have been experiencing this past year. It was there that I began to visualize my sermon on Charlottesville that some of may have heard on Rosh Hashanah. In that moment of quiet I uncovered my truths and found the courage as well as to share them with you.

Silence, is not merely an absence of external noise; it is also an inner state that goes beyond quiet to stillness. I found this stillness to be a gift – a gift we desperately need to give to ourselves to better navigate our noisy, over stimulated world. As we look together to Yom Kippur for ways to change, let us consider how silence is entwined with the lessons and wisdom of this holy day.

What about you? Do you experience moments of quiet in your day-to-day life? Do you regularly make time for silence? Do you ever walk to the mailbox empty handed – no device? Or sit in a carpool line or wait for carryout without checking your phone? When was the last time you simply sat alone with only your thoughts?

In her book on Jewish meditation, Nan Gefen alludes to the great value of finding stillness. “Like a pregnant pause, the silence within contains all possibility. It is the raw material of creation...when we enter into this state, we have our most intense spiritual experiences and receive our most significant moments of understanding.”²

Wisdom, insights, understanding, calm, a voice speaking eternal truths, space for new ideas, room to dream, time to organize the past and imagine the future – this would be a wonderful gift to give ourselves in the New Year.

The more I have connected with this need for more silence the more I have noticed new insights around the value of quiet time. Something clicked for me when I read an article in the Washington Post about the relationship between the brain and sleep. Maybe you saw this article too. Neuroscientists have discovered that while we sleep the brain washes out toxins that have built up there during the day. These toxins may be the cause of dementia and some strokes. But with a good night’s sleep the brain rinses much of that away. Sleep is the brain’s cleanser you might say, and more and more I am feeling that silence does the same thing for the soul. After sleep we wake up, our bodies and brains refreshed; after silence our souls are awakened, cleansed of the mundane, exposed to the deeply real.

You might be a bit surprised to learn that Judaism does have a tradition of silence and contemplative quiet; surprised because well, let’s face it, we are sort of a noisy people. Try standing in line at a kosher deli in NY – sooo noisy, right? I can

remember visiting a yeshiva where the library sounded like a debate tournament! Even in the sanctuary, a supposedly peaceful place, prayers are active- mostly read aloud or sung – silent meditation is often less than 30 seconds. But this isn't the way it always was. According to our tradition, during the most significant moment in our history, God's revelation at Mount Sinai, the entire world became still. *"The Midrash reports...When God revealed the Torah, no sparrow chirped, no bird flew, no ox lowed... the sea did not roar; no creature uttered a sound and the world was completely silent."*³ Maybe this is why our central prayer is the *Shema*, which of course begins with *Hear O Israel...* Only in silence it is possible to hear – to hear God perhaps; to hear the hidden messages embedded between words our loved ones speak, and to hear our own inner voice. When we give ourselves the gift of silence, we can digest experiences and learning and convert them into meaning and wisdom.

I have found myself back in that parking space several times since my first somewhat desperate visit there. Interestingly each time I return, I am able to move toward that inner stillness a bit more quickly, more easily. It is as if I am acquiring a muscle memory of sitting in silence. And I don't always need an hour; I don't always have an hour. But its enticing to discover new ideas, reconnect with old hopes, feel strengthened to act on my own truths. I love the products of these still, quiet moments. Like me, you might also want to add a sliver more silence into your daily life. Silence doesn't have to be a big commitment. You might find your own metaphoric parking space – a place to pause and have a few minutes of personal quiet. A regular time – walking the dog, drinking your morning coffee – where you put aside your devices and push away the usual distractions. You don't have to go on a retreat or try to take a class in meditation – try just driving to work without the radio on.

In the Torah we find one of the most compelling lesson about the power of silence. Aaron, the high priest, has two sons who are killed right before his eyes for reasons that are not entirely clear. Aaron's brother Moses tries to speak to him, to explain this inexplicable event. But Aaron, Aaron is entirely silent. Perhaps his grief and

shock have rendered him mute. There are no words to explain this horrible event, no words that can comfort or capture his pain.

Silence in the realm of mourning is, I believe, among Judaism's most insightful traditions, truly a gift to those who are grieving. Silence can teach patience. There is no shortcut through the pain and no way to avoid the anguished question of why? Why this, why him, why now? Silence is a response that allows us to experience our emotions fully as we walk slowly, very slowly toward the path of healing.⁴ This doesn't mean that we shouldn't speak about our grief. Certainly, when we are able, it is valuable to talk about our feelings, to share our memories and to cry out loud. But we can't always do that.

And our tradition says that when we enter a house of mourning we, the visitors, also don't speak. The mourner must initiate conversation only if and when she is ready. Since we have no explanations and no answers, we simply must sit with our friends and give the only gift we can, our silent presence. We say *hineni*, - *here I am to offer my support and love*.

Many of us have experienced that powerful silence. We have learned that life's most difficult moments are not addressed by running around frenetically doing this and that but in stillness. When the next challenge comes, to us, and the next, our ability to return to that place of contemplative quiet will serve us well.

And what about now, today, Yom Kippur? Silence and stillness are an important part of this Day of Atonement. Although our prayers focus heavily on confessing our sins aloud and in unison, we all know that repentance actually begins with the quiet process of sifting through not only our memories of the past year, but also our thoughts, treasuring the good and flagging those that clash with our hopes for ourselves and the highest values of our tradition.

We sit in this crowded room, yet we are alone with our own *Chesbon*, the account we take today of our souls. In our silent thoughts we know we did this right and this half-right, this very wrong. In our silent thoughts we strain to hear our true voice, the one that tells us who we are, what we care about, what we hope for, what damage

we need to repair. In our silent thoughts, we hear the voices of those who have been crying out for our attention, for our understanding, for our love. We hear the voice of God, of holiness and wholeness, within us. In our stillness, we sense our sincere desire and our own power to make real change in our lives.

After Rosh Hashanah, I went back to my special parking space in the empty lot. In the silence, I tried to hear the echo of my own missteps, to understand the pain I may have caused others, to see the things I know I could and should do better. I wasn't on my way home from a workout. I just went there to finally pass meditation 101 by regularly, proactively making room in my life for silence. I can now see that a soul deprived of silence loses track of itself. I have learned that sitting still and going nowhere can be just, if not more, rewarding as going somewhere. In our age of distraction, paying attention and listening are luxuries we cannot afford to live without. In our age of constant movement, sitting still is a gift. In the New Year, may we make time and space for the silence that leads to stillness, and the stillness that leads to wisdom.

Amen

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Temple Rodef Shalom

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¹ Dr. David Levy, *No Time to Think*, 2007

² Nan Gefen, *Discovering Jewish Meditation*, page 26.

³ Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 29:9

⁴ Rabbi Zeff, *ibid.*