Building The Sanctuary of the Heart:
The Jewish Way of Silence in Prayer

At the heart of Israelite religion, the discipline of silence reigned supreme. While neighboring Semitic cults offered their sacrifices to their gods accompanied by prayer and incantation, the Priests of the cult of the one God performed their oblations unaccompanied by speech. While the outer courts of the Temple echoed with the levites intoning their psalmodies and while the people spoke, sang and danced their devotion, the inner precincts were, in the words of biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann, "a sanctuary of silence." The absence of speech served the priesthood in many ways. Aside from dramatically distinguishing Israelite *avodah* (sacrificial service) from its pagan cousins, it also created an atmosphere of awe before the Divine Presence as the offerings were made. Priests were more mindful of their tasks and concentration marked all their actions. Quiet made the Temple a suitable dwelling place for God amidst the people. Silence was the very catalyst by which the mechanical and punctilious acts of animal and grain sacrifices were transformed into *avodat ha-lev* – sacrifice of the heart (Deut. 11:13).

In the Zohar, the pre-eminent book of Kabbalah, we find this enigmatic statement, "Silence is the means of building the sanctuary above and the sanctuary below" (2a). To make sense of this we first must know that the Temple in Jerusalem was more than just a geographic center for the Jewish people; it was also a spiritual template. Its form was a physical representation of two supernal realities. The rabbis believed that the Temple was modeled on the form of the celestial domain, and also the contours of the human soul. The universe and the individual, therefore, are reflections of each other and dwelling places for the divine.[1] While the Temple in Jerusalem existed, it served as a conduit between the twin sanctuaries of the human soul and the World Soul.

By the time the Zohar was written, however, the earthly temple service had ceased to exist. The "Sanctuary Below" to which the Zohar refers, therefore, is the temple of the human soul. In it prayer, the service of the heart, continues, and with it the need for silence. But just as the heart, which makes life possible, beats largely without our awareness, so too the soul's need for silence goes unnoticed. While prayer continues to be a vital concern for religious Jews, silence as a spiritual practice is virtually forgotten. Yet one is hardly

possible without the other. Cultivating quiet is essential if we wish the offerings of our lips to open for us the perspective of the heart. It is the key to drawing together the twin sanctuaries of heaven and earth – it is the essence of prayer.

To understand the significance of silence we must begin at the Beginning. Creation begins with words. In Genesis God creates through speaking. Based on Isaiah 43:7, the Kabbalists teach that divine speech brought into existence otherness; a chain of four universes:

- The World of Emanation and dimension of pure spirit;
- The World of Creation and the dimension of intellect;
- The World of Formation and the dimension of emotions, and
- The World of Action and the dimension of the material.

To be in any phase of this chain of being is to experience duality, a sense of our being separate from our surroundings. So even though Judaism teaches the unity of all things, as humans we see the world around us as multiplicity. The Jewish mystic understands that the human perspective innately distinguishes self from other, for the very act of creation imposes this perspective on us. For example, we are conscious of a distinction between our thoughts and ourselves. And what is true in the dimension of thought is true at all levels of creation. In our thinking, feeling, and actions therefore, we find pervasive duality. "One who descends from the Root of roots to the form of forms must walk in multiplicity.[2]"

What is more human beings, last act of creation and foremost in the World of Action, find ourselves in an ironic condition. Seemingly the culmination of God's creation, we also seem farthest removed from the Root. Judaism describes this as the condition of *galut*, exile. Like duality, it is an existential reality arising from the very act of creation itself. And even though we sense that an aspect of God, the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, remains with us, a rabbinic myth teaches that *Shekhinah* Herself is in a kind of exile. This is crucial in accounting for modern feelings of alienation. Excepting those saints blessed with the innate spiritual talent to draw worlds together, we feel trapped in the lower worlds and God is distant from us. More radical still, we even experience the one God as bifurcated, fragmented into transcendent and

immanent domains. Jewish mysticism does not deny this feeling of remoteness or the experience of multiplicity. It frequently speaks in such terms. God is described as "above," "transcendent," or "distant."

At the same time, the teachers of Kabbalah emphasize that our experience is ultimately subjective. It is foremost a matter of perspective. For, while we feel ourselves at the periphery, God experiences everything as at the center. From the divine perspective all is caught in unity, all worlds, whether "above" or "below" are still One. Duality and exile, then, are the human starting points; unity, return to the center, our desire. Return through the Four Worlds to the Root of roots is possible. Or more precisely, we can unify Intellect, Emotion and Action and so return to the realm of Spirit.

Spoken prayer is the vehicle of that return to the center and silence is the power that transports us. We receive a hint of this when the prophet Ezekiel reveals the *Maasei Merkavah* (the "workings of the Divine Chariot"). In describing his vision of the "chariot," he reports: "A storm wind came out of the north, a huge fire surrounded by radiance, and at the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of *chashmal*" (Ezekiel 1:4). In expounding on the mysteries of this vision, the Talmud includes an oral tradition on the word *chashmal*. The word, it is taught, should actually be read as two abbreviated words, *chashah* (to be silent) and *milah* (speech)" (Chagigah 13b). Thus "silent speech" is both the heart of Divinity and the essence of God's self-revelation. From our perspective, of course, "silent speech" is self-contradictory. But if we desire to be at that center then we must grapple with the paradox. The paradox is this: spoken prayer, the royal pathway to God, demands silence.

There are two dimensions to prayer: speech and silence. Of the two, speech is necessary, but silence takes precedence. This is in some ways self-evident. Without silence there is no speech. Without the pauses before, between and after each sound, communication through words would be impossible. Returning metaphorically to "building the sanctuary," words are building blocks but silence is the foundation. There is an innate inequality between experience and expression, because experience does not require words – and often defies adequate expression. While speech is a necessary act, silence engages the higher domains of thought and emotion. In the Talmud Simeon ben Gamaliel declares: "In all my days growing up among the

Sages, I have not found anything better for oneself than silence"(B.T. Avot 1:17). The Zohar offers an even more earthy evaluation: "…speech is worth a penny, silence is worth two." (2b).

Silence is the authentic medium of prayer, the rich matrix in which true communion becomes possible. And being a medium, silence has a positive existence. For the one who truly understands pray, silence also conveys a message; it too speaks. And therein lies another modern challenge. Modernity teaches us to experience silence, not as a presence, but as a void, a lacuna in our consciousness that needs to be filled. The modern person seems only to know of "uncomfortable silences" and "awkward silences." We prefer to fill our environment with sound – any sound. We equate silence with loneliness rather than with aloneness with God. It is because of this reality, along with our sense of God's remoteness, that we today have become so alienated from authentic prayer – for modern man has come to abhor silence. If it is the pauses in speech that make expression possible, then prayer particularly suffers for the lack of contrast. The consequence has been to cause our words of prayer to disappear against a background of constant speech. In a world blanketed with sound, our supplications are just so much verbiage bled of their potency and their potential. Prayer simply blends into everything else being said. Signal and the trivial speech have become indistinguishable. For prayer to be powerful, it must be reunited with its antipode, the discipline to be quiet.

The discipline of quieting ourselves is also two-fold: quieting the tongue and quieting the heart. Quieting of the tongue is the type of discipline most of us imagine as the way of silence. And in fact restraining oneself from constant speaking is a discipline prized and admired by Jewish spiritual practitioners.

Just as silence has both a value and a presence, so too it has power, "The cry one holds back is the most powerful of all."[3] Observing a fast from words has greater transformative power than a fast from food,[4] for to restrain our tongue, especially from gossip, tale-bearing or frivolous speech, is to offer up a blessing, itself a form of "silent speaking." Such silence of the tongue prepares the soul for prayer. It also opens a way of empathy. In silence one can now hear the pain of others, the pain of the world. Silence is a hammer that breaks our heart of stone and then replaces it with a heart of flesh, a heart that understands what flesh is, a heart that may be pierced by the suffering of others and that is open to Divinity.

This in turn prepares us for the discipline of quieting of the heart. In the Hebrew imagination, the heart is the seat of consciousness. Therefore this is the practice of inner quiet that soothes the soul and calms the mind. Quieting the heart is the process of cultivating intentionality, the ability to concentrate wholeheartedly on a single object or task, a critical element of prayer. In the tradition of Jewish meditation quieting the heart is achieved through the discipline of *hitbodedut*, or "self-seclusion." To the practitioners of Jewish meditation it refers to quieting the mind and reigning in the distracted self,[5] even if one finds oneself in a crowd or amidst much commotion. The practitioner of quieting the heart seeks only to reduce the cacophonous voice of the *self*, so as to open an avenue through which the transcendent dimension of God can commune with the immanent dimension of God (that is, the soul) and unite the two. Such was the discipline exercised by Elijah the prophet, who though surrounded by thunderous tumult upon Mount Horeb, quieted his heart to the point where he could hear the "sound of sheer silence" (I Kings 19:12) -- the voice of divine unity. Those who practice silence truly can hear a "silent sound."

So how does Judaism teach one to integrate silence meditation into a moment of worship? In Mishna Tractate Berachot 5:1 we are told, "the early pietists would sit silently for an hour and then pray[6] in order to concentrate their minds on their Source in heaven." The Talmud (Berachot 31b) adds that these spiritual masters continued this sitting meditation for an hour after prayer. The prayer itself they would recite very slowly in an undertone. Thus these Talmudic pietists expressed their prayer embedded in the substance of silence.

All of which brings us once again to the problem of duality and the paradox of "silent spoken" prayer. That paradox is resolved by bringing the two elements together in such a way that we may fully experience God. When we begin our prayer with silence, we begin with an act of supreme adoration, for "Silence is praise to You (Ps. 65:2)." To conclude with silence, "My soul waits silently for God (Ps. 62:2)," is to invite divine disclosure. Together they bring us before God like the ancient priesthood. By binding our prayer to concentration born of silence, we may enter the Divine precincts.

And it is through silence that God in turn "speaks" to us. The Talmudic interpretation of the word *chashmal* concludes by stating "When they are silent, the Holy One speaks" (ibid). Which is to say, only in quiet does the unmediated, unbound nature of Divinity become accessible to one who prays. The 20th Century Hasidic Master, Kolanymus Kalman Shapira, also known as the Piasetzner Rebbe, writes extensively on the metaphysical role of prayer in mystically experiencing the Divine:

> And so one must isolate himself from the world prior to spoken prayer, separating From the noise of the world with the intention that he now draw near to speak with the Eternal. Once he has isolated himself from the world and its uproar, then – if one could say such a thing – the "garments" that separate Divinity from him (for he has masked that Divinity with his ego: his thoughts, his will, his actions) pass away. Then the Divinity within them reveals itself. [7]

Through the simplicity of quiet and stillness, we expose our soul to the upper worlds so that it might achieve fusion with God, "Our soul yearns for God day and night, now she rushes out and up to dissolve in His holy embrace."

Silence makes this union is possible because it preceded the Worlds of multiplicity. The created universe is made of words. Before God's words/worlds, there was the silence that speaks only of utter unity. To transcend the world, therefore, we need silence. The Piasetzner explains that prayer without attending silence only penetrates the three "lower worlds" of Action, Formation and Creation. Our prayers can ascend to the highest world of Emanation only when we bind our prayers to simple silence.[9]

Through bridging and binding these worlds, we reverse the flow of multiplicity and achieve the unification of divine aspects, and fusion with God. Silence transforms one from a seeker of the Divine into a vessel of the Divine: "Thus we can transcend [the limitations of] speech by means of an hour's silence…in truth, every person has in one's self a portion of Divinity….if only we could stop for an hour, then that Divinity, stripped of its concealing garments, would become apparent to him" (ibid, p. 5). The silence of adoration

allows us to draw close to the Beloved, while the silence of response shows our love is requited and the Divinity below and the Divinity above merge in primordial embrace.

Just as performing *avodah* in silence allowed the priests to serve in the Jerusalem sanctuary, through the silence of adoration our prayers enter the transcendent Sanctuary of God's dwelling. There we make the *avodat ha-lev,* offerings of our heart, offerings of our wholeness. And there the pain of our exile is overcome, for we discover that in entering into God's Sanctuary on High we have not left the Sanctuary of our own soul. Seeing all finally from God's perspective, we realize our quest for closeness to God is really a journey of depth rather then of ascent. God, once perceived as remote and on high, in fact surrounds us and is within us. This ultimately is the meaning of *Zohar,* "Silence builds the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below." It builds them into one abode for the Divine. Through the catalyst of silence, the two merge. By forcing ourselves to go beyond words, all material barriers collapse behind us, all spiritual distance compresses. Where once we perceived that we stood on the periphery of God's concern, we find that through the vehicle of silent speaking we actually stand at the center, at the very core of ultimate reality. Through the disciplines of quieting the tongue and quieting the heart, "Our sensual perceptions…come around to the perspective of the heart. We can actually see the presence of God, which infuses all creation. Each of us can see with our own eyes that we stand in paradise, in the palpable presence of God."[10]

Silent speech is, as Ezekiel described it, at the heart of Divinity. Prayer at its best becomes a part of God's internal dialogue. It places us at the center of all things. It is a *merkavah*, a divine chariot of revelation of Oneness. When we pray with silence in our soul and stillness in our heart, wherever we stand is God's holy ground.

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[1] That the Temple building is a representation of both the celestial and the human parallels the Greek notion of Macrocosm and Microcosm. This myth of the Temple as cosmic model is common in Judaism. It appears in non-esoteric works, such as *Avot de Rabbi Natan* (Ch. 31), but is most elaborately expounded in mystical works, such as the kabbalistic commentary on the Torah by Bachya ben Asher (*Midrash Rabbeinu Bachya* on Ex. 25:9).

[2] Azriel of Gerona (13th Century Kabbalist) *Sod Ha-Tefillah,* 216, as translated in *The Essential Kabbalah* by Dan Matt, p. 76.

[3] The Kotzker Rebbe, (Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, 19th Century Hasidic Master) as quoted in David Wolpe's *In Speech and In Silence,* Penguin Books, (1992), p. 186.

[4] The Vilna Gaon, (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, 18th Century Ethicalist) *Iggeret HaGra* (Hebrew).
[5] Chayyim Vital (16th Century Kabbalist), *Shaarei Kedushah*, part four, as quoted in Aryeh Kaplan's *Meditation and Kabbalah*, p. 342.
[6] Referring to the "Tefillah," the spoken prayer a Jew is to recite three times daily.
[7] *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, Merkaz Chasidei Piasetznah (Hebrew) p. 2. The translation is the author's.
[9] *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 3.
[10] K.K. Shapira, *Conscious Community*, Jason Aronson, Inc. (1999), p. 2. This writer owes a great debt to my teacher Dr. Elliot Ginsberg for introducing me to the works of the Piasetzner Rebbe.