

## Rabbi's Reflections: Think About Silence

Think about silence. What comes to mind? Some might think about the presence of quiet, or the absence of noise, or even of sound. Others about a time we said something and wished we had not, "foot in mouth," or as in the Cheerios commercial where the wife asks her husband, "what else does the box say?" "The box says, 'Shut up, Steve!'" Still others about apathy, fear, or evil, the silence in the Simon and Garfunkel song, *The Sounds of Silence*, or the silence of walking down a deserted street late at night.

In *Pirquei Avot*, *The Rabbis' Maxims* (often, *Ethics of the Fathers*, which we read this time of year), silence has another function: Shim'on (Simeon) his (Rabban Gamli'el's) son said, "All my life I was raised among the scholars and I found that no virtue becomes a person more than silence; not study (*midrash*) but action (*ma'aseh*) is the chief thing; and verbosity brings on sin" (1:17). Silence can be a virtue, used as a positive force. There is a "pregnant silence," meaning, "a significant, meaningful silence." Imagine the song, *Anatevka* from *Fiddler on the Roof* without pauses. Supposedly Arthur Rubinstein, the famous pianist, said that the difference between great and lesser players is not in how they play the notes, but how they play the pauses. A great actor can communicate without words, think of Gene Wilder, or listening to Elie Wiesel, and watching his eyes. Tales are told of Hasidic rabbis who conversed for hours without saying anything. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Warka was known as the "silent *tzaddiq*," when praying he literally followed Psalm 65:2, "To You, silence is praise." He said that people possess a silent shout, that the real cry of prayer is worship within the heart, without uttering a sound. Silence is both an expression of *kavvanah*, intention and involvement, and of modesty. We see echoes of this in the *'Amidah*, what I call the *Standing, Silent Devotional*.

Silence can also be good advice, as in the expression, "ignore him and he won't bother you." Silence can be a tactful way out of a difficult circumstance. When we are silent, we can concentrate on listening to the other person, not planning our response. After we hear the message, we might better weigh our words, discovering that we do not need to respond, and we might prevent sticky situations and say fewer hurtful words.

Silence is the rule of thumb for *bikkur holim* (visiting the ill) and *nihum aveilim* (comforting the mourners—see *Pirquei Avot* 4:23). When visiting the ill, the tradition says only family and close friends visit the first two days, all others wait until the third day. We do not want to cause additional pain and suffering by overburdening them with too many visitors (*Yoreh De'ah* 335:1). Nor are we to bear bad news or mourn in their presence (*Ibid.* 337) as we are not to depress the person and retard recovery.

Similarly, when visiting mourners, only relatives and close friends should visit before the burial to help with arrangements and during the first two days (except, of course, for services when they need a *minyán* to say *Qaddish*). Waiting until the third day gradually re-introduces them into the community, as well as spreading out the visits and making sure that the last days also have visitors as the reality begins to dawn on them.

Moreover, we should not greet them socially when we visit and be silent until they open the conversation. Indeed, mourners should not greet us or respond to our greetings for at least the first two days, if not all seven. People always ask me what they should say. Tradition relieves us of the burden and also directs our conversations towards their needs and wishes, and to talk about the deceased. Our mere presence is enough and we should not remind them of social conventions and etiquette when they should not worry about them (*Ibid.* 385). Before I was a rabbi, I once went to visit a woman in the hospital. They told me that she was not seeing anyone and recently told her husband to leave the room. To the staff's surprise, she eagerly told me to enter. I sat. Eventually she spoke. As I was about to leave, I asked her why me. She replied because I knew how to sit and say nothing and only speak about her wishes.

Another version of Shim'on's saying (*`Avot deRabbi Nathan*) adds Proverbs 10:19 *Where there is much talking, there is no lack of transgressing; But one who curbs the tongue shows sense*, and Proverbs 17:28 *Even a fool, if he keeps silent, is deemed wise; Intelligent, if he seals his lips*. Rabbi Simeon ben Tzemaḥ Duran (1361-1444, Spain and North Africa) notes that a human has two ears but only one tongue, so speech ought to be little and hearing much. Shim'on says that verbosity leads to sin, while silence leads to study and study to action. Rabbi Duran also notes that practice without study is not the ideal, for a person without knowledge does not know what to do, but study which leads to practice is best, so it is enough for one who wishes to practice, to listen, and from listening to learn the right action, and so one holds one's peace.

Silence allows us time to assess and to respond, keeping us from making mistakes and offering us a course of action that causes a minimum of hurt feelings. Silence, therefore, is a vehicle for communication utilized to our benefit if we take advantage of its potential. Shim'on rightly calls silence a great virtue.