

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Rosh Hashanah Day Two, 2017

Kehilat Reyim 5778

L'shanah tovah, may this year be filled with blessing for you and your families.

During our Torah service this morning we read the story of Abraham binding and nearly sacrificing his and his wife Sarah's beloved son, Isaac.

We read this story on the second day of Rosh Hashanah every year. And we read it again not long after as part of our cycle of Torah readings. For what feels like the course of time, rabbis and scholars, writers and poets have interpreted and retold this story, filling in its narrative gaps with wildly imagined tales.

And yet, even after two thousand years of living with this story, it is constantly renewed; almost every generation has in some way made this story its own, identifying with the unimaginable clarity of Abraham's faith, or the loss of trust felt so deeply by Sarah and Isaac, or the ram, caught in the thicket, unaware of its impending fate.

The story became known in early rabbinic writings as the *Akedah*, meaning the binding.

It goes like this:

God decides to test Abraham.

"Abraham, take your son, your favored son, the son whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering."

So Abraham gets up early the next morning, saddles his donkey, and lines up two servants and his beloved son Isaac. He splits the wood for the offering, taking particular care to prepare what he needs. And they set out on their journey.

On the third day, Abraham lifts up his eyes, and, from afar, sees this place that God has told him about. Abraham turns to his servants and says, "you stay here. The boy and I will go up there. We will pray there. And then we'll return to you."

So Abraham takes the wood for the fire and he puts it on Isaac's back. Isaac is carrying the wood for his own sacrifice! Abraham takes the firestone and the knife, **and the two of them walk off together.** *V'yalechu shneyhem yachdav*

"My Father"

"I am here, my son"

"We have the firestone and the wood. Where is the sheep for sacrifice?"

"God will see for the sheep, my son."

And, again, the two of them walk off together. *V'yalechu shneyhem yachdav*

They arrive at the place God had chosen. Abraham builds an altar, lays out the wood, binds his son Isaac, lays Isaac on top of the wood, and picks up the knife to slay this son that he loves.

An angel of God calls out, "Abraham, Abraham!" Abraham answers, "*hineini*. Here I am."

"Don't raise your hand against this boy, or do anything to him, for now I know that your fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored son from me."

His hand stayed, Abraham looks up, and his eyes fall upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. He takes the ram, and offers it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

The angel calls again from heaven: "Abraham, **because** you have done this, **because** you have not withheld your son, your favored son, I will give you my blessing. Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sands of the seashore, and they shall be victorious over their enemies. **Because** you have done this, you will be a blessing to everyone on earth."

Abraham, alone now, returns to his servants; and together, they depart.

Each year we read this story, we notice something different. A different Avraham or Isaac, a different ram, different angels, a different God. This year, preparing for our High Holy Days, I noticed in this story the permeating presence of silence. This silence - at times harrowing, at other times poignant and moving - is the heart of this story.

Yesterday I shared with you my primary questions during these holy days. When we feel depleted or disoriented, what sources can we look to support us, to help us feel enlivened and nourished and energized? Are we looking to and relying on the right sources? What else might be available? I spoke about our dreams as sources for living meaningfully. Today, drawing on this story of Avraham and Isaac, I want to talk about silence.

We're told that Abraham and Isaac travel three days together. In Torah, numbers are symbolic, not literal. Three days is not three days. In the biblical worldview, three days means a *significant duration* of time. These three days that Avraham and Isaac walk together could be weeks or months. During this entire time, they barely speak. They walk in complete silence, with the exception of one, brief interaction:

"Avi" - "My father," Isaac calls, uncertain, hesitant, longing.

With this single word, I imagine him asking a question, "Are you still my father?"

or offering a prayer: "please Avi, be my father. I need you."

"Here I am, *beyni*, my son." Avraham isn't telling Isaac where he is, physically, of course. He is saying, "I am with you." "You are still my son."

Isaac responds: "We have the firestone and the wood. Where is the sheep for sacrifice?"

"God will see for the sheep, my son," Avraham says.

This is their *only* exchange.

Otherwise, for the duration of the trip, they live only *internally, inside* their own heads. They don't offer any words of comfort or shared vulnerability. I can imagine they are afraid, painfully wanting to be reassured. Isaac by his father. Avraham by God.

How traumatic it is to live with silence in our relationships.

And yet, their silence also heightens the meaning and importance of their brief words, transforming them from a casual exchange into calls of longing, even wailing words of prayer.

“*Avi*,” my father.

“*Hi’neni, beyni*.” “Here I am, my son.”

They remain intimately connected, emotionally and spiritually, as they walk together, father and son. We experience silence all the time. It can be moving, calming and gracious; and it can be chilling and painful.

In silence - amazingly - we can feel totally together, present and connected, with another person; as if we don’t need any words at all to feel rooted, comforted, and at peace. We can sense the depth of a relationship by how much we can sit together in silence without feeling a need to fill the space with voice, or noise. To just be.

And in silence, we can feel completely alone and misunderstood, anxious what the person we’re with is saying or feeling or thinking, paralyzed by our imagination and negative predictions, angry, unmet, and alienated.

Because of its richness and emotional nuance and mystery, silence can be particularly hard to both interpret and endure. But silence is a great teacher. If we pay close attention to it, we can learn so much about our lives.

One of my favorite contemporary American poets, Stephen Dunn, who won the Pulitzer Prize, captures the tensions of silence in our most intimate relationships in a poem called *The Unsaid*. It goes like this:

One night they both needed different things
of a similar kind; she, solace; he, to be consoled.
So after a wine-deepened dinner
when they arrived at their house separately
in the same car, each already had been failing
the other with what seemed
an unbearable delay of what felt due.
What solace meant to her was being understood
so well you'd give it to her before she asked.
To him, consolation was a network
of agreements: say what you will
as long as you acknowledge what I mean.
In the bedroom they undressed and dressed
and got into bed. The silence was what fills
a tunnel after a locomotive passes through.
Days later the one most needy finally spoke.
"What's on TV tonight?" he said this time,
and she answered, and they were okay again.
Each, forever, would remember the failure
to give solace, the failure to be consoled.
And many, many future nights
would find them turning to their respective sides
of the bed, terribly awake and twisting up
the covers, or, just as likely, moving closer
and sleeping forgetfully the night long.

The poem describes the experience of silence in a most intimate relationship. For this couple, silence expresses a painful part of their lives: *they feel alone, even when together*.

In one of the great lines of the poem, Dunn writes: "the couple arrives separately - in the same car."

There is an unbearable delay in what each feels is due to one another.
In silence they fail to forgive, or provide solace or comfort.

And yet it is also true that in silence they experience intimacy and acceptance; they tacitly understand that they are together. Their love may rarely be articulated, but it is still true.

And so, as the poem closes, they seem to simultaneously turn away from one another and move closer in their shared bed.

Like Avraham and Isaac before them, Dunn's couple has only one brief interaction amidst the silence: "what's on tv tonight?", which both acts a touchpoint, reconnecting them, while reminding them how empty of meaning those points of connection are.

But most of all, what this poem, *The Unsaid*, offers us right now is a question that we struggle with all the time:

When should we bring silence more deeply into our lives, to immerse and dwell in its stillness?
And when must we raise our voices, and try to overcome the pain that silence inflicts?

Judaism intentionally brings silence into our lives as rituals. The most moving example, I think, is during shiva, the 7-day period after the burial of a family member.

In our role comforting the mourners, we are asked to stay silent. We say only "*ha'Makom yinachem*" - "May God comfort you". Jewish law teaches us: offer support, care and comfort with your silent presence. We are not even to greet the mourner, until he or she first speaks to us. The emotional and spiritual comfort we offer comes most intensively in silence, as if communicating, simply, "*hineni*" - here I am.

It's hard to be that countercultural, to hold off greeting, asking questions, or trying to comfort with words.

But the traditional insight is right: there is nothing we will say that can heal our friend who has had a loss. Worse, it's possible that our words can cause pain or discomfort. Comfort, instead, with quiet. Let stillness express your loving kindness.

As poignant as this silence is, there is also a silence that is so jarring it is hard to disentangle it from the most painfully piercing sounds.

The silence of Isaac, after being bound and offered for sacrifice. He never speaks to his father again. The experience moves Abraham and Isaac from the greatest form of togetherness to the deepest possible rupture.

The silence of Avraham, who never speaks to God again.

The silence of Sarah, who is stunningly absent from this entire story. The rabbis imagine that when Sarah discovered what happened, even before the story being told to her was finished, she simply cried out six times, six harrowing, piercing wails - *shvarim, shvarim* - and her soul departed.

I know many of you have experienced the rhythm of wailing and silence in Israel during Yom Ha'Shoah, when we remember and commemorate those who perished in the Holocaust. First in the evening, and again in the middle of the next day, a siren is sounded across the country for two minutes. Everybody stops completely. Anyone who is driving parks on the side of the road, gets out of the car, and stands outside, listening to the siren.

What's so powerful and curious about this moment is that while the siren blares a piercingly loud, howling, wailing cry, it feels as if there is complete silence at the same time. Silence is not the absence of noise - it's an intensive, internal experience that can contain wonderment and fear, intensive love and painful grief.

Over the last two generations, Jewish writers have debated these existential tensions of silence and voice best in considering whether we can bear witness to the Shoah with poetry and prose.

Perhaps most famously, Theodore Adorno, the German philosopher best known for his critique of society and culture, claimed that writing poetry after the Shoah is barbaric. He wrote that the Shoah cannot be spoken - for language begins to define it, and therefore limit it. Giving voice and witness would diminish the inexpressible nature of the trauma. He is not alone in this opinion.

Still, most others have disagreed.

[Alicia Ostriker](#), the American poet and scholar, makes the strongest case:

“Writing is what poets do about trauma,” she writes. “We try to come to grips with what threatens to make us crazy, by surrounding it with language. . . . It has always seemed to me that to fall silent in the aftermath of the Holocaust is to surrender to it. How can one write poetry after Auschwitz? How can one not.”

Though addressing the most tragic trauma in Jewish history, these authors and scholars clarify a tension we all still live with all the time: when do we stay silent? And when do we raise our voice?

I like to think of the Torah scroll itself as a great model for living with voice and silence. The words give us the stories of yearning and seeking, people full of flaws struggling to live sacred lives and gain their footing morally while living up to God’s expectations. We set our religious lives against these stories. But the white spaces between the words are at least as compelling and exciting. The negative space around the letters offers us boundless possibilities for interpretation, new ways of living inside the text of Torah. We need *both* the explicit, articulated letters - the voice - and the surrounding empty space - the silence - to live fully, with intention and meaning.

In silence we can feel at ease with another;

With voice, we can share our loves and passions and ask questions that strengthen our relationships.

In silence we look in awe at the totality of an eclipse;

With voice we bear witness to that experience, reflecting what religious experience feels like.

In silence we pray;

With voice we sing.

In silence we offer the deepest form of presence - *hineni* - I am here.

With voice, we can reassure, and ask forgiveness. *It's here, perhaps, where we need words the most.*

With voice, we raise up our concerns, pursue justice, assert our conscience, and tell the stories of our lives.

But it's in silence where we grow the most, where our souls play, where we meditate, and pray, and begin a process of healing that we so desperately need from the constant pulsing of noise around us. Silence helps us feel spiritually alive by quieting our minds when they are spinning relentlessly.

Silence doesn't counter or diminish the strength of our voice; just the opposite; it sharpens our words, making them tighter, more impactful, more powerful.

As we approach the closing hours of Rosh Hashanah this evening, carve out a little time for silence. You may not be comfortable in it yet. That's ok. But notice and consider its qualities. In time, it can become a source of strength.

I will be teaching how to embrace silence more this year in our community's religious and spiritual life. This is an ancient Jewish practice. We know from the mishna that the particularly pious ones of ancient times would meditate with silence for an hour before rising to utter a single word of prayer.

May our silence be a source of comfort and healing.

May it help feel bold; so that we can raise our voices when they need to be raised, and act in the world.

And may it offer us stillness, before and after each storm.

L'shanah tovah.