

# Silence

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The fourth book of the Bible was called Numbers by early Christian scholars. I guess this is because it starts off with a national census. But we call it *B'midbar*, in the wilderness, because it deals with events that led to the forty years a whole generation spent in the wilderness. The Hebrew root word of wilderness, MDBR, is exactly the same as the root for speaking. The opposite of silence. Can there be a message in the silence?

My late father, when he was in Mir Yeshivah in Lithuania, was influenced by *Mussar*, the nineteenth century movement that dominated the Lithuanian yeshivot of Eastern Europe. It was a movement of introspection and self-analysis. Silence, being alone and meditation, all played very important roles.

In the school he founded, he had the custom of getting everyone to sit in the synagogue in silence in the half hour before Shabbat ended. The sun was setting. It got progressively darker as we sat there before we could turn the lights on. Not an easy thing to do for some three hundred youngsters. Yet the atmosphere was quite magical. Then, after about five minutes or so, my father would start humming the slow, reflective tunes he had heard in Mir from his mentor, Rav Yerucham Levovitz. We would join in. And finally, he would give us a little homily on being a good, caring person.

At sixteen, I was packed off to study in Israel in the *Mussar* yeshivah, Be'er Yaakov, which was founded by two of his contemporaries from Mir. Prayer time was an amazing experience. It was unlike anything else I had encountered in formal religious settings. No rushing, mumbling or talking. There was an air of concentration and commitment in which every word was savored and dwelt on with intention and the expectation of encountering God.

In that part of the morning and evening prayers, we recited the "Shema" (Deuteronomy 6.4). After the preceding paragraph was recited, there was complete silence. A tense, expectant silence. And then miraculously, every one of the hundred or so voices broke out simultaneously in powerful unison, loudly declaiming " *Shema Yisrael.*" That silence before the explosion of sound was not the vacant silence of a disciplined school but the silence full of spiritual anticipation.

During the yeshivah break, I hitchhiked down through the Negev towards Eilat. I was dropped off at *Machtesh Rimon* – an incredible crater deep in the desert. I got out of the truck into a wall of dry heat that seemed to suck the air out of you and started to walk away from the road. The heat was oppressive. But far more striking was the absolute silence. Not a sound. No cars, no birds, no leaves to rustle and no wind to blow around. Only the sounds of my boots on the stones and the rocks.

The silence was not something eerie. It was like being complete. I do not suggest that I felt God in it. Perhaps I did. But it was unlike any other kind of experience I ever had. A sense of being alone with the earth. A speck of dust in the universe with absolutely nothing else around. No distraction. No interference. Just a private communion with the universe.

In fact, it gave me an incredible sense of myself, of my vulnerability and of my privilege to be part of something much bigger.

I understood why deserts play such an important part in the lives of so many great spiritual figures – for good and for less good. The less good is that it gives one an exaggerated sense of self. Maybe that's why so many fanatics, as well as saints, come out of the desert.

Deserts can be unforgiving, cruel and isolating. The worst punishment my father could ever give was silence. To cut me off. To refuse to speak to me. To cast me out of his world

I understand why the Children of Israel, as a people, were transported out of metropolitan, noisy, tense and oppressive Egypt into the emptiness and silence of the desert. To be away from what they were used to. To be in limbo. To be in a place of silence. You can imagine anything. You can hear voices. Your mind takes wings and you feel yourself connecting to power and energies you have never experienced before. It is exciting, elevating and potentially dangerous.

Perhaps that was how Abraham came to hear God telling him to kill his son. Perhaps that was why so many young priests and ambitious Levites rebelled against Moses in the desert. They imagined that God was speaking to them. That was why they needed a constitution to lay down boundaries and limits. Mystical experiences are all well and good. They are necessary. But they can also be dangerous. As the old saying goes, "Mysticism, starts with a mist and ends in a schism."

All religions have their sanctuaries of silence. Retreats where one can exist for a while without talking. Nuns and monks in their cells. Hermits in their caves. Judaism never had Trappist, Buddhist or any other monasteries. The Jewish way was not to withdraw from society (though once, two thousand years ago, some sects tried it briefly). Rather to find a way of living a life integrated with the messy demands and needs of other people and to take breaks instead. Times for prayer. Days off from society and its instruments of interference and control. In Yeshiva, we used to have what were called *Taanit Dibur*, fasts of speaking. Not talking at all to anyone for up to a day. It was a hard but necessary experience. It was up to us to decide when we needed it.

In addition to the importance of silence, I also learned that silence is not always to be found in communal prayer. It must be cultivated privately. Synagogues are noisy, social places. They don't offer us the silence we need. The time to reflect and step aside. We have to find our own ways of creating these moments of silence. It helps to be constantly reminded (by ritual) that there is another different and silent world for us to enter which is just as important as being part of a community.

Our world is a noisy one. So much chatter and sounds of all kinds (cars, planes, turbines) jarring and invading our senses. We have lost the art of silence. It almost feels awkward not to be talking, showing, sharing or shouting to attract attention. When we might be silent, we are looking at screens and communicating with others – bombarded with lights and texts and distractions from our inner selves.

We almost never stop to reflect or sit alone in silence. We are conditioned to think of meeting God in Cathedrals, big impressive buildings or large gatherings. We think of God as a mighty, fiery and thundering powerful force. But as the Prophet discovered, "God is in the quiet and the silent."