The silence between the words
The philosopher Theodor Adorno speaks about the notion of silence as an absolute expression of permanence. The silence that followed the Shoah was not a statement of emptiness and nothingness but rather an expression of everything. Historically the silence of the survivors was mistaken for an inability to speak or express, but according to him it was rather an affirmative statement of the fullness of expression through its absence. We often think that language can express everything, that if only we ‘talk’ everything will be ok. But in truth, moments of silence can be far more powerful when we recognise the magnitude of the language that silence speaks. For this to be experienced one must first learn the power of speech. Language must be developed, words constructed, imagery delineated, and paradigms explained. Language takes the chaos of our minds and organises it into a rational system that can be universally understood. Only once this process has taken place does silence play a role. For only once we know the role of language and its organising principles, will silence represent its opposite – chaos, ineffable, turmoil or that which cannot be expressed.

As Elie Wiesel poignantly states, ‘In the beginning there was silence – no words. The word itself is a breaking out. The word itself is an act of violence; it breaks the silence’.\(^1\) Sometimes language and words can violate the very notion they come to express.

One doesn’t need to look to examples as extreme and overwhelming as the Shoah. When individuals experience difficult and challenging circumstances, well-meaning people ask, ‘how are you’, to which very often a response in words will not do justice. To try and express every complexity, every nuance, every existential struggle and feeling, can’t ever vindicate the tormenting feelings, and so silence, sometimes is the easiest option, though today it is often mistaken for rudeness or impertinence. The profundity of silent communication can be observed by watching a couple who have lived many years together and have developed a deep and profound connection that is communicated without words, an understanding of the other through a look or a silent expression.

For only once we know the role of language and its organising principles, will silence represent its opposite – chaos, ineffable, turmoil or that which cannot be expressed.

The dichotomous and often contradictory narratives in Torah reveal this need for silence. As a written text by its very nature it must be a place of expression, but within the expression exists multiple positions and varying paradigms. There is not one paradigm that addresses the notion of suffering, but several, many of which contradict one another. There is not one absolute objective description of God but many, some of which seem inconsistent, others implausible. Why? What I want to suggest is that words sometimes are not enough. Words are one dimensional and we live in a multidimensional universe and contra-dimensional existence. Hermeneutical pluralism, that is the attempt to read multiple meanings into singular narratives, helps to remedy this, however I think the best remedy is silence. We must acknowledge that the Torah as a written text can only take us so far in our understanding of God, world, humanity and suffering because it is based on words and language.\(^2\) Sometimes the silence that exists between the words is our greatest learning mechanism.

\(^1\) Elie Wiesel: Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel, ed. by Irving Abrahamson, p.119
\(^2\) The fact that we have both a written and oral Torah affirms to my mind the fact that there must exist a multifarious expression of our religious commitments and tradition. The written word is static and potentially one dimensional, the oral tradition is (or should be) dynamic, diverse, contradictory and alive. The existence of both these elements allows for a more authentic and true expression of the multidimensional reality of existence.
(It is interesting that the ‘silences’ in the Torah are often filled with the voice of midrash, this phenomenon can be seen as an ‘attempt’ to fill the silence, but I think the rabbis were far more nuanced than that. I believe the midrash is the move from the written to the oral law, the singular meaning to multiple meanings. It is in a sense an acknowledgment that the silence is there for a purpose, and then attempts to find meaning in the silence).

Sadly, today’s world is one in which the beauty of silence has been hijacked by the cacophony of inaudible soundbites. Sound has been subsumed to sight, silence to audio and visual stimulants. To hear another we must carve out time without phones and technology, to hear ourselves we need to escape to a ‘retreat’. Silence is rapidly becoming a commodity that is scarce.

Of course the greatest danger with silence is that it creates a vacuum that others seek to fill (the silence of the survivors after the holocaust was filled with the voice of the deniers, the silence of the victims of crime is filled with the voice of the tormentor, the silence to listen to our inner soul is masked by superficial noise etc) So as much as there is great value to speech and language, for without it we would be unable to survive, equally we must recognise the richness that silence affords us.

How do we recover the silence as a valid and present entity? How do we reaffirm what the silence stands for-complexity, inexpressible emotion, duality of existence? How can religion, and especially religious liturgy carve out space for the importance of silent response?  

**Sefer Bamidbar as the book of words**
The Book of Bamidbar is replete with narratives that address the notion of speech – Miriam speaking badly of Moshe, the people’s complaints, the spies and the ‘evil speech’ about the land, Moshe hitting instead of speaking to the rock, Bilaam’s curse that turns into a blessing. The book takes the reader on a journey of a nation developing and maturing and gradually learning to speak and understand the power of words and language.

This week we see Moshe, a leader who we know is not blessed at the start with powerful oratory skills, punished by God for hitting instead of speaking to the rock. This is a perplexing and difficult narrative which consequently has led to a plethora of interpretations. I want to understand this narrative through a slightly alternative reading based on my introductory remarks about silence. The first generation of the Israelites are slaves, hence they are plagued by a one-dimensional existence. There is no depth to their personas, no complexity in their character. They exist to survive. They cannot speak both due to trauma but equally because they lack the maturity to express and process information, instead they moan, cry, complain and scream. At Sinai we are told ‘they saw the sounds’, the sounds must be visual, the miracles must be seen to be believed, God has to be expressed through lightning and thunder. They are a generation, maybe like ours today, whose reality is only experienced through the dimension of sight. Even sound, which is multi-dimensional, is experienced in a one-dimensional reality. As we said earlier, they have no organising principle in their minds to be able to express their reality. Like a child in early infancy they lack the cognitive capacity to process information and translate it into language. The second generation are no longer slaves. They evolve from a life of survival to a life of meaning, from a muted existence to one rich with expression and articulation. Their existence is no longer one dimensional, they begin to understand complexity and interpret their reality accordingly. They are journeying towards maturity.

Moshe is their leader, he is the leader of the first generation, the slaves, those that can’t express, those for whom language is an antipathy. For him too, language is a challenge, not because of his one-dimensional existence but rather the opposite - his existential contradictions and complexities. For him silence is a necessity, but also a deficit. He would rather remain silent than attempt an inadequate expression of reality or experience.

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3 It will be impossible to address this question in a short article, But I hope to expand on this idea during Elul

4 This silence creates a persona of distance. The distance of Moshe is criticised not just by God but also Yitro and even by Miriam when she speaks the lashon hora about Moshe and Zipporah. The balance between silence and solitude, and speech and community is a dialectic addressed through the laws of tefilla, and many other elements of Jewish life. The attempt at maintaining that balance is intrinsic to much of Jewish tradition.
Moshe and the rock: The growth of a people
What happens at the rock?
What I want to suggest is that Moshe is angry at the people. He hears their complaints and relives the complaints of the first generation,\(^2\) the hope that this generation will be different has, to his ears, suddenly been shattered. He cannot ‘talk’ to the people, he cannot ‘talk’ to the rock, for everything his life has been based on and the lessons he wanted to impart, to his mind have been totally deconstructed and destroyed. Speech is useless; language impotent. And so, he follows precedent and does what he did for the previous generation — he strikes.\(^6\) He uses actions, imagery, visual tools to express the inexpressible. But that is not what God wants. ‘Yes’, Says God to Moshe, ‘you may be angry, but this generation does not need symbols anymore. It has moved beyond symbols to language’.\(^7\)

Language ennobles us, it makes us dignified; through language God created the world, through language we also can create and destroy. It raises us above the animal kingdom, it endows us with the crown of holiness. Thus, when Moshe fails to use it, God rightly admonished him by saying

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Because you have failed to believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them. (Bamidbar 20)

You have failed to say, ‘this is holy’, to sanctify me, because the very notion of kedusha is tied to language, God sanctifies man by endowing him with speech and we sanctify God through that gift. It is here Moshe ‘fails’ as a leader. For it was a missed opportunity to educate the people, a people who had learnt to speak, now needed to experience the Divine, not through symbols and open miracles, hitting and miraculous water, but rather through speech, prayer and witnessing the quiet penitence of a God-fearing man to his Creator on behalf of his people.

God says to Moshe and Aaron: You have failed to believe in me — because you have failed to believe in me: this is a strange sentence structure — and moreover why does this event show a lack of faith/trust/belief in God.

The classic responses are linked to Moshe and Aaron’s lack of belief that God would bring about a miracle etc but following on from the line of thought I have developed I want to suggest a more nuanced reading of this phrase. Perhaps this is a discourse on how we ‘believe’- belief in God in ourselves and in others. How do we ‘believe’ anything? By this reading what God is saying here to Moshe and Aaron is that ‘belief’ requires more than a one-dimensional paradigm of reality. Real true belief, as the Rambam\(^8\) tells us cannot possibly be founded on open miracles — on rocks being hit and water coming out. It has to be nurtured, interpreted, deduced from words and dialogue, and the silences between the words. To believe in anything — God, another human being, the reality of our existence, we have to understand that its essence is more than the one-dimensional reality we see. To ‘believe’ in my child, means I see my child’s complexities, his failures and his successes, his struggles and his triumphs and yet I believe in his abilities. To ‘believe’ in God requires moving away from the paradigm of ‘symbols and miracles’ that characterised the first generation. It means creating a relationship that is based on dialogue, on prayer and words but also on silences. This is what God wanted to teach the people, and this is where Aaron and Moshe fell short. A real relationship of faith is one where there is open dialogue, but also moments of silence. Where we don’t need to ‘prove’ our love and faith through surface expressions, but rather in the hidden gestures of intimacy.

Language ennobles us, it makes us dignified; through language God created the world, through language we also can create and destroy. It raises us above the animal kingdom, it endows us with the crown of holiness.

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\(^2\) It is important to note here that the complaints of this generation though they sound similar to that of their parents one, are in fact very different, instead of requesting a return to Egypt, they are complaining that they have not gotten to the land of Israel, they are ready for the challenge, they want to move on from the desert existence

\(^6\) I must mention here the interpretation brought by Rabbi Sacks to this episode that after reading many years ago totally transformed the way I understood the narrative. Though I remain here close to Rabbi Sacks reading, I am attempting to expand the interpretation beyond the notion of ‘striking’ versus ‘speaking’, viewing it from the prism of the dichotomous relationship between speech and silence.

\(^7\) The development of language moves along the path of symbolic imagery to letters and words. This in many ways parallels, in a paradigmatic way, the development of the people of Israel in their cognitive capacity of grasping and understanding reality.

\(^8\) Rambam: Mishnah Torah: Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah: 8.2
The key to the entire narrative comes to a climax in chapter 21 verse 17. There the people sing a song – the song of the well. This is their response to the episode at the rock. It is their way of showing that they understand that they are different to their parents’ generation. Music as we know is one of those things that touches the recesses of our inner being - our souls. It can reach places in our psyche that neither words, actions or images cannot do. Where words and language fail, music succeeds; it expresses the inexpressible.

Again I quote Elie Wiesel in a beautiful reminder of what the power of song possesses:

*Do you believe there is greater power in song than in words?*

Undoubtedly a more mysterious power, since everyone can respond in his own way, with his own imagination. Rabbi Nachamm of Bretzlaw used to say that every person, every human being had his own song and so does every object. Every tree has its own song, every leaf, every blade of grass. The whole world is an immense song, a vibration that flows from being to being and object to object. Without this song it is not the world that would be mute, but we ourselves: we would not hear we would be deaf and dumb. It is through song that we rise toward heaven.

Their song is not ‘led’ by Moshe like at the Red sea, in fact Moshe is not mentioned at all. It is a song that is sung at the initiative of the people and it is a song about the well and the ‘interpreters’ of their generation. The well of course, unlike the open sea, represents the multi-dimensional, the hidden, the silence. It is not ‘open’ it requires process and ‘belief’ that the water will be found. The song about the well therefore is the people embarking on the next stage of their journey towards maturity. Employing the words and language they have finally learnt to value, they elevate it to a new level. Utilising song, the dimension of the ‘unspoken’, they affirm that they are ready for the next stage, a stage in which God will become more ‘silent’, but not more absent. They affirm the truth that some things cannot be expressed in language alone.

Shabbat Shalom

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9 It may also be a response to the failure of the people to mourn Miriam appropriately, the Kli Yakar suggests that the people failed to realise that the well had come through Miriam’s merit, they had simply taken the miracle of the well for granted, and hence when Miriam dies they fail to mourn adequately and so God removes the well to ‘punish’ them so to speak. Perhaps this song represents the people’s ‘teshuva’. A ‘returning’ to God and their inner selves through appreciating the miracles of life.

10 Elie Wiesel: Evil and Exile p107