

The Tragedy of Silence

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Within the Jewish exegetical tradition of Torah explication, one of the oft-found modes of analysis is that of *s’ michut* (juxtaposition) of *parshiot* and *pasukim* (Torah sections and verses). Our Sages found substantive meaning in both the actual content of a verse and its placement within the Torah. Our *parasha* contains a telling example of this investigative approach: “So it was, when all the men of war finished dying from among the people, that the L-rd spoke to me saying.” (*Sefer Devarim* 2:16-17, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*) Herein, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) ask: “What may be learned from the *s’ michut* of these two verses?” i.e. “What is the connection between ‘all the men of war finished dying from among the people,’ and ‘the L-rd spoke to me saying?’”

Our question is addressed in both the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Ta’anit* 3:4) and *Bavli* (*Ta’anit* 30b). The *Yerushalmi* states:

Rabbi Zeira said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: “What can be done by the greatest leaders of the generation (*gedolei hador*) when it is recognized that the community is judged on the basis of the majority? We find this idea exemplified in that for all 38 years that the Jewish people were treated as outcasts (*nidui’im*) [i.e. from the time of the Episode of the Spies] Hashem did not speak to Moshe [in a warm and collegial manner]. As the Torah states: “So it was, when all the men of war finished dying from among the people.” What is written immediately thereafter? “That the L-rd spoke to me saying.” (Translation and brackets my own)

The Bavli's passage, while somewhat terse in comparison to the *Yerushalmi*, nonetheless manages to convey the same essential meaning:

Until the Generation of the Desert completely passed away – Hashem's word was not with Moshe. As the Torah states: "So it was, when all the men of war finished dying from among the people, that the L-rd spoke to me saying." – [Finally,] unto me [on a personal basis] was the Word revealed. (Translation and brackets my own)

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his monumental commentary on the Torah entitled, "*Torah Temimah*," provides us with the following illuminating explanation of this Talmudic portion:

Even though numerous Commandments were stated to Moshe during that time [i.e. the 38 years following the Episode of the Spies], the commentators explain that until this moment [the passing of the entire Generation of the Desert], the Call from Hashem was not one of love and closeness. This was the case since G-d, so to speak, was not pleased by the actions of the Generation of the Desert. (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, a partial *hester panim* (hiding of Hashem's "Face") descended upon the relationship that obtained between Hashem and Moshe. True, G-d continued to speak to Moshe; yet, this communication was quite business-like in nature and devoid of the expressions of affection, love, and reassurance that Moshe both needed and had come to expect from the Almighty.

One can only imagine the pain, sorrow, and depth-level loneliness that Moshe experienced when the Holy One Blessed be He no longer acted toward him as his *Yedid Nefesh* (Beloved of his Soul). My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, in his best-known essay, "*The Lonely Man of Faith*," expresses what Moshe felt at this time:

The role of the man of faith, whose religious experience is fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities, who oscillates between ecstasy in God's companionship and despair when he feels abandoned by God, and who is torn asunder by the heightened contrast between self-appreciation and abnegation, has been a difficult one since the times of

Abraham and Moses. (*Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. VII, no. 2, 1965, page 6, underlining my own)

Given the Rav's analysis, the Moshe we encounter following the debacle of the Spies is that of a truly existentially lonely individual who often felt adrift in the maelstrom of his life. Rabbi Soloveitchik portrays this state of being in the following fashion:

... companionship and friendship do not alleviate the passional experience of loneliness which trails me constantly. I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the Psalmist "My father and my mother have forsaken me" ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove. It is a strange, alas, absurd experience engendering sharp, enervating pain... I despair because I am lonely, and hence, feel frustrated. (*Ibid.*, pages 6-7)

We are now in the period of the Nine Days leading up to another commemoration of Tisha b'Av. With the loss of the Holy Temple and the heartrending pain of waiting another year for the realization of the prophecy, "And a redeemer shall come to Zion" (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 59:20), many of us feel an all-enveloping tragedy of silence. Then, too, King David's words "For my father and my mother have forsaken me" (*Sefer Tehillim* 27:10) surely reverberate incessantly in our ears, just as they did for Rav Soloveitchik. Like Moshe of old, we long for rapprochement with our *Yedid Nefesh* so that sounds of silence may finally and ultimately be stilled. Therefore, let us fervently pray: "*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah v'nashuvah chadash yemeinu kekedem*" ("Enable us to return to You Hashem and we will return, renew our days as they were in former times," *Megilat Eichah* 5:21). *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and a truly meaningful fast,

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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