



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Yitro

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January 18, 2014

Yitro

**The Silent Tweet**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

The world is one noisy place. How to find meaning and truth in this cosmic cacophony? We all look for meaning, purpose, insight and inspiration – but how to find it in such a flooded marketplace and how to know it is real when we have found it?

Today, more than ever, we are bombarded by information in an unrelenting fashion. Across multiple platforms – from mobile devices to cloud computing to twitter handles – info, ideas, networking, and social interaction (if we can call striking a few keys a “social” interaction) are rampant and instant.

In this sermon, we will use two hi-tech terms – tablet and twitter – to demonstrate how silence is the sign of truth.

Today, a tablet is a handheld source (and means of) communication. Some 3,326 years ago, there was a tablet – two in fact – that was also a hand-held source of communication. But when the tablets of the Ten Commandments were given, the entire world was silenced. Indeed, says the Midrash, “the bird did not tweet.”

Truth is recognized not by how much noise it makes but by how much silence it opens up in our lives.

But why was the entire universe silent during the giving of the Torah? Shouldn’t this most monumental communication of all time have been accompanied by a great tumult – the equivalent of a 360 PR campaign, a few custom websites, Super Bowl ads and a Times Square billboard?

The answer to this question is also the answer to how we today can find and hear the truth, even in this deafening din. Ariel Sharon, who just passed away, captured this message in a moving speech about protecting the Land of Israel.

## THE SILENT TWEET

### 1. Timeless Noise (Joke)

This, they say, is the soundtrack of marriage.

For the first 20 years, the wife yells and the husband listens.

For the next 20 years, the husband yells and the wife listens.

For the next 20 years, they both yell and the neighbors listen.

### 2. The Sound Of Silence

The world in which we live today seems to be a place with a lot of noise, where everyone yells at everyone else – similar to the third 20 years of marriage, only here the neighbors seem to be yelling as well.

Everyone seems to have a blog where they espouse an opinion, or a Twitter handle where they chirp incessantly, or a Facebook page that provides essential information that no one really cares about. And this is only on the individual front. On the commercial front there are corporations and brands that yell for your attention, hollering that you need this or must have that; and billboards and advertisements that scream and shout how important this car or that perfume is to your wellbeing. Indeed, the greatest advertising and corporate sponsor bonanza is almost upon us, the Super Bowl, where a 30-second ad, costing north of 4 million dollars, suggests in no vague terms that the only way for you to be popular is to ingest a certain brand of soda.

The world is a place of constant noise and competitive voices. This company is selling this, that spokesperson is yelling that. How to hear the important messages within a marketplace flooded with messengers, preachers, and spokespeople?

### 3. Spokesperson (Optional Humorous Aside)

Don't you just love - and by love I mean hate - that term 'spokesperson?' If something is so essential does it really need a spokesperson to tell you how important it is? Do you need a spokesperson to tell you to breathe, or to love your children, or to be kind to your spouse? Of course not!

Spokesperson, then, is a euphemism for someone that tells you that a certain something is essential when really it is at best a luxury, and at worst a distracting addiction.

Some people say the rabbi is a spokesperson for God and Judaism. But those people are wrong. Every Jew on this planet is a representative of God and Judaism. A rabbi's job is merely to be a teacher - he is an expert, like a car mechanic. But a car mechanic is no spokesperson for automobiles - his job is simply to offer assistance when the car needs an oil change, a new tire, or some realignment. While a spokesperson's job is sell, tell and yell.

### 4. Hi-Tech

Spokespeople employ hi-tech as their means to sell, tell and yell, for hi-tech allows for truly massive means of yelling and noisemaking. Towards that end, there are laptops, tablets, and mobile devices conveying communications via Google, Wikipedia, Yahoo, Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter to name but a few of the many.

On an average day, there are close to 6 billion Google searches and around 58 million tweets. That means, if you average it out, almost every single human being on this planet performs a Google search on any given day, and 58 million different voices are competing in any 24-hour period. And these statistics are only from two of the billions of websites out there.

Thus, today, the obvious question arises: With every puny person a pundit, and with a cosmic cacophony of sounds and opinions (though not all opinions are sound), how to find truth in all this noise and, once you have found it, how to hear it in this deafening din?

Let us use two terms thrown around in the world of technology to answer our question. The first is the word 'tablet'; the second is the word 'tweet.'

Some 3,326 years ago, the original tablet – two in fact – and the silencing of the original twitter – both which are described in this week's Torah reading – offer us a meaningful message here today, in 2014.

## 5. God Has Spoken

In the Book of Amos<sup>1</sup> we read:

*God has spoken; who will not prophesy?*

To whom does this verse refer and what does this verse mean? The Midrash<sup>2</sup> on *Parshat Yitro*, our Torah portion, interprets this verse as referring to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

What does the Midrash say? What does it mean *God has spoken; who will not prophesy?*

Said R' Avahu in the name of R' Yochanan: At the moment when God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai, the bird did not tweet, the fowl did not fly, the bull did not charge, the gears did not turn, the fiery angels did not sing praise, the sea did not ripple, and the creations did not speak; simply, the world was silent and still...

Continues the Midrash:

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 3:8.

<sup>2</sup> Shemot Rabba 29 (at the end).

And if you are critical of all this, we refer to the case of Elijah the Prophet at Mount Carmel.<sup>3</sup> There Elijah gathered all the priests of the idol Baal and said to them,<sup>4</sup> *“Call with a loud voice for he is a god.”* What did the Holy One do? He quieted the entire universe, silencing the world above and the worlds below, all was made null and void as if not a single creature or creation existed, as it says,<sup>5</sup> *And there was no voice, and no answer, and no one listening.* For if something had spoken, the priests would have claimed it was Baal answering their call.

Incomparably how much more so when God spoke at Sinai, the entire universe, all of creation, was silenced so that the creations should know that there is nothing besides the Creator. And He said: *Anochi Hashem Elokecha* – *“I Am the Lord your God!”*<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Two Mountains – Sinai & Carmel

The above Midrash brings two very different episodes to convey one very absolute truth. The truth being that God – who is Truth and Reality – is perceived and conveyed through silence, not through noise or tumult.

The first episode was sacred: the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The second episode was the necessary invalidation and eradication of idolatry at Mount Carmel.

Both episodes involve mountains, prophets, and silence. And the latter episode elucidates the former.

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<sup>3</sup> Melachim I/I Kings 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 18:27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:2.

## 7. Explaining the Silence

The story with Elijah at Mount Carmel – the one the Midrash references when explaining the silence at Mount Sinai – happened in this dramatic context:

The Jewish people in the Land of Israel were being seduced by foreign substances, and substance here does in no, shape, or form mean it contained substance. Specifically, there was an idol called Baal, served by 450 priests-cum-prophets.

Elijah, the Jewish prophet, the same one that visits every Passover Seder but never gets drunk, said to the people let's resolve this once and for all. Come all to Mount Carmel where we will have a showdown – I alone the prophet of the God of Israel, versus you 450 so-called prophets of the so-called god Baal. With everyone watching, we will both call to our gods, whichever answers with fire will be known to one and all as the One God and this is how we will come to know the truth.

All sides agreed and, come high noon, all were standing at Mount Carmel for this penultimate showdown. Both sides offered sacrifices. And then the followers of the Baal called to their god, but no one answered. To which Elijah, somewhat sarcastically suggested that perhaps their god was sleeping, or talking to someone else, or busy with something else; therefore, says Elijah to them, “*Call with a loud voice,*” so that your god can hear you? And these are the words our Midrash quotes – *call with a loud voice so that your busy god will hear you!*

And this did the prophets of Baal do, as the Book of Kings relates:

*And they called with a loud voice and gashed themselves as was their custom, with swords and lances, until blood gushed on them. But, of course no one answered. There was no voice, no one answered, no one was listening.*<sup>7</sup>

When the preachers of Baal called, the true God, in all His majesty, silenced the entire world, so that no one should mistakenly think that Baal is responding to their call.

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<sup>7</sup> I Kings 18:28.

God, of course, could have proclaimed in a heavenly voice that “I Am God, and there is nothing else,” but God instead chose to silence the world, and thus reveal His Presence.

This in itself is a profound message to all people, especially when dealing with interpersonal issues. How often do we think that if we yell we will have the desired effect, we yell at our children, our spouses, our employees, our friends, and think this will inspire them? Instead, the yelling does nothing more than alienate them!

The deepest truth is known through silence. This is what God showed the people at Mount Carmel – you, people, are looking for the truth? Listen not to the loudest noise, but hear instead to the silences of the world, the peace, the serenity.

And then, of course, as Elijah prayed, God’s fire descended upon Elijah’s offering and all saw that the God of Israel answered with fire and all knew the truth.

And it was a truth that was predicated upon silence.

This is a general principle (of course like any generalization, there are exceptions) that things that make a lot of noise are usually hollow; and things that are silent are usually deep.

Indeed, the most profound things in life are silent.

## 8. About Noise (Joke)

And now a word about noise.

Moshe Horowitz is visiting his friend Yankel Goldberg in his Miami Beach condominium. The visit runs late, into the wee hours. Turns Moshe to Yankel and says: “How come you have no clocks in here? How do you tell the time?”

Yankel says: “I tell the time with this trumpet.”

“Huh, how can you tell time with a trumpet?”



“I’ll show you,” says Yankel. Yankel pick up the trumpet and gives a deafening blast.

Suddenly a voice from downstairs can be heard yelling: “Goldberg, what is wrong with you! Stop blowing that cursed trumpet – its 2:30 in the morning!”

“That,” says Yankel Goldberg, “is how you tell time with a trumpet.”

## 9. Why Silence?

Why was the entire universe, from grandest galaxy to most miniscule molecule, silent during the giving of the Torah? Why did God hit mute on the cosmic remote control, turning down the volume on the world show, essentially creating a silent film out of a normally boisterous world?

Even more: Should not this most monumental communication have been accompanied by a great tumult – the equivalent of a 360 PR campaign, and at least a few custom websites, Super Bowl ads and a Times Square billboard? When one unveils a new product one rolls it out with a huge premiere and the most exposure possible. So why, when God unveiled the greatest product of all, His Torah, did He do so in silence?

This is the question the Midrash answers by referencing the case of the Elijah at Mount Carmel.

In a desperate situation, when dealing with the corrupt Baal cult that sacrificed children and desecrated everything pure and holy, God’s response was to silence everything. He did so in order to show how every single creation, from the grandest galaxy to the most minuscule molecule is created by the One and Only, God Almighty.

And then God spoke, as we read in the next chapter of the Elijah story:

*Behold! the Lord passed, and a great and strong wind splitting mountains and shattering boulders before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small sound.<sup>8</sup>*

If, at Mount Carmel, truth was revealed through silence and the still small sound, then how else could it be with the purest event in the history of the world, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai?

In that case, the only soundtrack that was appropriate was the sound of every single creature in awe – every creature silenced by the truth of Divine Revelation.

Our Sages tell us that we need to re-experience the revelation at Sinai every day of our lives. How do we do that?

## 10. Personal Experience

Have you ever been faced with an experience – or even a moment – that was so powerfully raw, so simplistically real that you just couldn't speak? Perhaps at your wedding, or the birth of your first child, or (a thousand separations) the passing of a loved one? This silence, this inability to articulate, is the sign of depth and truth.

It is extremely easy to speak about the weather or to articulate what time your dentist appointment is. It is no great burden to find the right words to communicate these types of things because these things aren't the essence of who you are, nor do they convey your innermost being. Sure the weather and dentist appointments are very important – just imagine life without weather or teeth – but they are important the way eating is important, or sleeping is important. Eating and sleeping are things you do, they aren't who you are. This is why it is easy to speak of weather or dentist appointments.

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<sup>8</sup> I Kings 19:11-12.

Sinai was who you are – for you and me and every other human was created in the Divine Image. Sinai was not what you do, or how you do, or when you do – Sinai was you. Period. And this revelation was accompanied by the humblest and loudest expression: silence.

In our daily lives we are challenged to find those things that are silent because they express our deepest selves. This is how we experience Sinai and the giving of the Torah on a daily basis.

Ask yourself this: What in life silences all else, and what in life makes noise? The former is truth communicated by the Creator to all creation, which creation listens/receives in silence. The latter is simply one aspect of creation communicating with another.

When the Creator communicates, we know it by silence. When creations communicate, we know it by noise. The truest things need not yell.

## 11. Ariel Sharon (Optional)

As per the theme of silence, this week the Israeli cabinet observed a minute of silence to honor Israel's war hero and former Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, who last Shabbat succumbed, at the age of 85, after a long medical battle stemming from a massive stroke in 2006.

The silencing of the "bulldozer," as Sharon was known, has created much noise indeed. If you read the papers and news sites, everyone has got an opinion about Sharon. Some laud his military prowess while others criticize his political decisions. This week, the European Parliament rejected the bid to observe a moment of silence in Sharon's honor.

Sharon will be remembered for many things, some positive, some not so positive, some memories will be fond, others perplexing. But, above all, he will be remembered for his staunch defense of our Holy Land.

I would like to focus on and highlight one memory of Sharon, which connects to our theme of knowing truth through silence.

The verse from the Book of Amos which we quoted earlier begins with these words: *A lion has roared; who will not fear?* And concludes: *God has spoken; who will not prophesy?*

The name Ariel means the “Lion of God.” Two things can be learned from the life and legacy of Ariel Sharon, based on the verse from Amos.

As Ariel Sharon demonstrated throughout his confident military prowess, oft times we must be lions in life – Lions of God. We cannot be silent but must roar like a lion so that the world will respect and awesomely fear the great gift and power that the Jews and the Land of Israel gives to this world.

When it came to protecting Jews and Jewish pride, these are Sharon in his own words:

I am a Jew above all and feel the responsibility to the future of the Jewish people on my shoulders. After what happened in the past, I will not let the future of the Jewish people depend on anyone, even our closest friends ... With the deepest friendship and appreciation, we do not choose to be the lamb, but not the lion either. I will not sacrifice the nation ... I met with the Pope, who said this is Terra Sancta (Sacred Land) to all, but Terra Promisa (Promised Land) for the Jews only.<sup>9</sup>

But from whence does this confidence originate? From the silence of Sinai. As we roar the truth out loud to the world, like the Lion of Judah, at the same time we also must know from whence this power to roar comes from. And this power to speak the truth comes from the ability to know that everything in the world, from the grandest galaxy to the most minuscule molecule, is silent in the face of truth, in the face of God.

This is what makes the Land of Israel sacred to all people but the Promised Land to the People of Israel, the Jews. We know what Israel stands for, and when we connect with that truth, we can bring peace and serenity to the world.

Only sometimes the world has to hear this (loud and clear) through the roar of a lion.

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<sup>9</sup> Commentary Magazine, “Ariel Sharon: His Eye Was Not Dim,” by Elliot Abrams, January 1, 2014.

## 12. In Conclusion: The Silent Sermon

Do you know the epitome of irony?

A rabbi speaking for close to a half hour about the power of silence – that is the epitome of irony!

This rabbi should have been silent for a half hour to convey the power of silence – instead of speaking about it.

But we all know rabbis aren't perfect. And, if we could experience every talk and sermon as per the following anecdote, then I believe I have done my job as a rabbi:

There are three forms of expression – 1) the Speech, which we just experienced; 2) the Party; and 3) the *Farbrengen*. Do you know the difference between the three?

A Speech is when one man speaks and no one listens.

A Party is when everyone speaks and no one listens.

A *Farbrengen* is when no one speaks and everyone listens.

I hope this here was not a speech, where one man talks and no one listens. I know this was not a party, with everyone talking and no one listening; I can only dream that this was a *farbrengen*, an informal gathering of friends when no one speaks falsehoods but everyone listens to truths.

There are two factors that go into finding and hearing truth, and which create the *farbrengen* vibe:

1. To find the truth we must look not for the things that make the most noise or have the greatest advertising campaigns. We must look for the more internal things that resonate, the things that are quiet and serene – “the still small sound.” Things like family (though that is often loud), like real mentors and friends, like private mitzvahs such as visiting the sick or honoring parents. Within these shall the truth surface.

2. The second thing is, for us to hear the truth, we must create quiet times to silence the overwhelming noise that exists in the world. This could be once a week on Shabbat, when we focus on the quiet internal things that are most important. This can be when we pray every day. This can be when we study an hour in the morning and evening.

This was the message of Mount Sinai. And this is what we aim to achieve today – roaring the truth so that we can bring quietude to the world.

Enough said. Time to shut my mouth. Time to be silent.

Shabbat Shalom!