



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 7, 2011
Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

Sound of Silence



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Let me begin by reading to you a heartbreaking note from a young adult about Yom Kippur: Rabbi, I must tell you that I have absolutely no interest in coming to Synagogue this Yom Kippur. I will do so simply for the sake of my parents and grandparents. But the service doesn't speak to me and to so many of my friends. No personal offense; I just felt that you should know that.

What does one say? Is he right? Can we do anything about it?

Despite the fact that we live in a communications age - with a revolution transforming the way and speed we connect with each other - it seems that we are also undergoing a crisis in personal communication and connectedness. Are we able today to hear the pain of another? Are spouses and friends able to reach each others hearts and souls? How many of us - and of our children - are crying out right now to deaf ears?

We know how to hear the words of others. But do we know how to hear their silence?

We live in a world of sounds and sights. A sensory universe in which our senses are constantly being stimulated, even hyper-stimulated. But how much of our lives are we missing in the process? How much is being drowned out by the loud noise and rush hours of our lives?

Silence is the story of Yom Kippur, the holiest of holy days, which can teach us how to hear the rich sub-text beneath the surface and how to transform our lives in the process.

Discover the power of silence. **How you can learn more about a person - about yourself - from their silence than from their words.** On this one day be silent. Then all the sounds all year round will have another meaning.

1. Do You Feel the Moment?

Let me begin by reading to you a heartbreaking note from a young adult about Yom Kippur: Rabbi, I must tell you that I have absolutely no interest in coming to Synagogue this Yom Kippur. I will do so simply for the sake of my parents and grandparents. But the service doesn't speak to me and to so many of my friends. No personal offense; I just felt that you should know that.

What does one say? Is he right? Can we do anything about it?

We are about to enter the most sacred time and space of the entire year. We will, in a few moments, open the ark – signifying the opening of heaven itself – and begin the awesome and stirring *Kol Nidrei*. In so doing, we will be continuing a tradition that goes back in an unbroken chain for over 3,300 years – when Yom Kippur was first ordained in the time of Moses!

I am sure that everyone here is feeling something special happening this moment. But let me ask you: How relevant is it to our lives, and how long will it last? Do you feel – *really* feel the moment? Are you anticipating the arrival of this holiest day of the day with awe and fervent expectation, or are you here because you must and will go through the motions because you always have done so.

Before we begin, let us all focus on a vital – perhaps the most vital – challenge of our times: How do we make Judaism up close and personal, relevant and real?

All too often many of us just lazily allow our rich and holy tradition to become mechanical and routine, thus rendering it hollow and soulless. But what is the price we pay for that? What impact does this have on our children? What effect does it have on ourselves? What are the long-term consequences of rituals that lack heart, passion and vitality?

I will allow us each to answer that question for ourselves. But it is obvious that the implications of lifeless faith are not very pretty. How long can we keep our children committed to our heritage simply out of guilt, or fear of disappointing us, and for other uninspiring reasons? Why should they not go off seeking inspiration elsewhere if they don't find it in their own faith?

This is especially true – and far more critical – on Yom Kippur. We simply cannot afford to allow a special day like this to just pass by and not have a profound personal impact on us.

Because if not now, when?

If we don't experience a personal awakening on the most sacred day of the year, then on what day of the year will we experience it?

Therefore, I challenge myself and all of us present here at this moment to make an exerted effort to apply this great and awesome 24-hour period to our personal lives and turn it into a deeply powerful and relevant – and unforgettable – experience, the way Yom Kippur was always meant to be.

I address these words to myself, to all of you, and above all, to anyone here that feels like that young adult who may be sitting here only out of politeness.

Today, let us find the spiritual in the ritual and return it to its rightful place.

2. The Face to Face

One of the most powerful aspects of Yom Kippur is that it gives each of us the opportunity to look at our very essence – face to face – and thus to see ourselves, our *real* selves, from a fresh perspective.

And by extension – we get to see others, our loved ones as well as our friends and strangers, from a fresh perspective as well.

And perhaps above all, we are able to see God – the *real* God from a fresh perspective, unencumbered by our projections and misconceptions.

We are able to do so on the singular day of Yom Kippur¹ because on this day, tell us the mystics, the core essence of each soul radiates. This innermost dimension of the soul, known as a *yechida* (“oneness”) – the *Pintele Yid* – is the pilot flame that burns ceaselessly, but finds expression only on Yom Kippur.

¹ *Achas ba'shana* (“once a year”), Exodus 30:10.

By refraining on Yom Kippur from material activities (as much as humanly possible) – fasting, praying, surrounding ourselves all day with sacred activity – we create a conducive oasis for our essence to emerge. Because as long as the external turbulence of our lives dominates, it drowns out the inner voice of our essential selves. Like the roar of a major metropolis, it doesn't allow us to hear gentle, subtle music that may be playing right around us.

3. The Power of Silence

And this brings me to one of the central themes of Yom Kippur and its indispensable relevance to our lives – the power of silence.

Allow me to begin with a question worth pondering:

Which is louder: silence or sound? Which is deeper?

We live in a world of sounds and sights. A sensory universe in which our senses – sight, sound, taste, touch and smell – are constantly being stimulated, even hyper-stimulated. But how much of our lives are we missing in the process? How much is being drowned out by the loud noise and the rush hours of our lives?

Despite the fact that we live in a communications age – with a revolution transforming the way and speed we connect with each other – it seems that we are also undergoing a crisis in personal communication and connectedness. Are we able today to hear the pain of another? Are spouses and friends able to reach each others hearts and souls? How many of us – and of our children – are crying out right now to deaf ears?

Do you ever have a problem communicating with your spouse? With your child? With your employee or employer? With anyone? Do you only hear what people say out loud. Or do you also pick up the unspoken nuances, the pregnant pauses, the silences which speak volumes?

Silence is not quiet. Silence speaks louder than words ... if only we learn to cup our ears and eliminate the turbulence that controls so much of our lives.

Silence is the story of Yom Kippur, and it can teach us how to hear the rich sub-text beneath the surface and how to transform our lives in the process. It teaches us **how you can learn more about a person – about yourself – from their silence than from their words.**

4. The Victory of Yom Kippur

On Yom Kippur Moses descended from Mount Sinai victorious. After 80 days of incessant prayer and beseeching God's forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses finally prevailed. God told him – as we shall now recite (three times) following *Kol Nidrei*: "I have pardoned in accordance with your words."

Thus Moses triumphed and came down the mountain clutching the second set of tablets that God had given him (since he had shattered the first ones upon seeing the Golden Calf).

Yom Kippur thus becomes the day when hope was born ... when Moses succeeded in gaining God's trust and delivered to us the gift of forgiveness, along with the message that if we set our minds and hearts to it, we have the power to fix whatever we have broken.

But there is very critical component to this momentous event that is lesser known.

5. The Second Tablets

Before giving Moses the second set of tablets, God issued strict instructions on how they should be handled,² and on this the Midrash comments (cited in Rashi): "The first tablets, because they were given with fanfare and great sound and in a throng were [shattered] ... There is nothing more beautiful than modesty."³ A message that Prophet Micha also emphasizes: "And what does God demand of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God."⁴

² Exodus 34:3.

³ *Midrash Tanchuma* Shemos 31. See also *Tanchuma Yoshon* Miketz 8.

⁴ *Micha* 6:8.

In other words, the loud sounds and great sights that accompanied the giving of the first set of tablets helped bring about their undoing. Therefore, when it came to the second set given on Yom Kippur, God said (in effect): "This time the tablets will come down in silence amid the awe of Yom Kippur. And therefore they will endure."

Simply explained:

When we exult in a special occasion, and we party, sing and dance, there is always the risk that we will indulge ourselves too much, and become haughty and arrogant in our intoxication. This, in turn, can lead to catastrophic results.

The first set of tablets were given in such an atmosphere. There was jubilation and great pomp and circumstance. As the Torah relates:

There was thunder and lightning in the morning, with a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an extremely loud blast of a ram's horn. The people in the camp trembled ... They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all in smoke because of the Divine Presence that had come down on it. God was in the fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke of a lime kiln. The entire mountain trembled violently. There was the sound of a ram's horn, increasing in volume to a great degree. Moses spoke, and God replied with a Voice."⁵

Sinai was both a profoundly mystical experience and simultaneously an intense sensual experience – a multi-sensory event that stimulated all the human senses: thunder and lightning, the escalating *shofar* blast, smoke and trembling. Indeed, the people actually had a hyper-sensory reaction known as synesthesia, a condition when the senses merge and sounds are seen and sights are heard:

All the people *saw the sounds*, the flames, the blast of the ram's horn, and the mountain smoking. The people trembled when they saw it, keeping their distance. They saw what is ordinarily heard, and they heard what is ordinarily seen.⁶

⁵ Exodus 19:16-19.

⁶ Exodus 20:15 and Mechilta on the verse.

For all the excitement of this historic revelation, its prominent fireworks left room for the people to take their great gift for granted, and they lost a bit of their modesty in the process.

As a result, tragedy ensued. They ended up building a Golden Calf, which led to the shattering of the tablets.

And it took nothing less than Moses' superhuman intervention (and then some) to regain God's confidence, obtain forgiveness and a new set of tablets. But this time he came down with them in silence and awe.

And thus we spend Yom Kippur not partying, not dancing and not singing. There are no fireworks on this day. We spend the day dressed in simple white, in solemn prayer. We communicate in hushed and discreet voices, with our heads bowed in modesty and humility.

6. The Power of Silence

What is it about silence – about discretion and modesty – that has such power?

The great sage Shimon ben Gamliel said: "All my days I have been raised among scholars, and I found nothing better for the body than silence."⁷

Why?

Silence allows us to hear the deepest reality of all – that which lays beneath the surface of our sensory world.

If you look at it you can't see it. If you touch it you can't feel it. If you listen to it you can't hear it. What is it?

True Reality. The real unadulterated truth of everything – untouchable, invisible and silent.

Not invisible or silent as in non-existent. But totally present, so deeply present, in fact, that it simply cannot be contained by our limited senses, or defined by mere words.

⁷ Pirkei Avot 1:17.

Ever notice how we use so many words to discuss superficial matters (like the weather, sports and gossip), but so few words to express our most intimate thoughts?

Think about it: If someone asks you to speak about your inner self you are left silent or with few words, even though it would seem you would have many more words to express that which is closest to you than that which is far more external!

7. Words Are Containers

Words are containers. And like all containers they have limited parameters. They may be able to express superficial and surface level experiences. But when it comes to deeper feelings, words can be inadequate. So then we use the language of metaphor or poetry or even art or music, which can more aptly express what is in our hearts.

But when we travel deeper into our souls, even these tools are wanting. A cry, a gasp, a laugh, may be the only way to express that inner dimension.

The deepest part of your intimate self – the essence of your soul – can only be expressed through utter silence.

You see, the more real something is the less definition it has.

Paradoxically, the deeper you travel into the recesses of your soul, the less expression is available to you. The more intimate the experience, the fewer the words. The closer you get to reality, the more intangible the experience.

This is due to the very nature of reality. Its depth is simply indefinable.

8. The Service of the Temple

This very principle was reflected in the Temple and the two kinds of services that were conducted there – the service of the Kohanim and the service of the Levites. The Levites served through song, each day composing a new melody praising God. The Kohanim served in silence.

However great is the power of song, it cannot compare to the power of silence. The hush of the Kohanic service accessed the most intimate dimension of the Divine, whose intensity cannot be expressed even by the most beautiful melody.

Yom Kippur is the epitome of the Kohanic service. The only time of year when the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, would shed his tunic and its dangling bells, and wear simple white as he would enter the Holy of Holies all alone.⁸ There, he silently brought the incense offering, which burned in quietude, and offered a hushed prayer. This is what happened in the holiest place on the holiest day – silence.

Why were there no trumpets and choirs?

Because Yom Kippur is the day of the essence when we each enter our own holy of holies and experience ultimate intimacy. What is intimacy? Existence at its bare essence, stripped of all layers.

More than that: At its bare essence we experience things from the inside out instead of from the outside in, where there is no distinction between subject and object, where we do not undergo an experience because we *are* the experience.

9. The Still Small Voice

Listen to this eloquent verse from the Book of Kings, relating what happened to the Prophet Elijah:

And behold, God passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke pieces of rocks, but God was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.⁹

⁸ No one else shall be in the Communion Tent from the time that [Aaron] enters the sanctuary to make atonement until he leaves (Leviticus 16:17).

⁹ Kings I 19:11-16.

Intuitively, we would think that we would find God in powerful manifestations – in mighty winds, shuddering earthquakes, fiery flames. But no. We may find Divine expression in these potent forces, but God's essence is to be found in a still small voice.

The same is true of us human being since we were created in the Divine Image:

In our heavily materialistic world we value (even worship) aggression. Loud, forceful, demanding personalities are the ones that get ahead. We do not respect the subtle and calm voice. But who is more powerful: the screamer and yellor, who may temporarily get his/her way (simply due to intimidation and making others uncomfortable), or the gentle person, who with one word or just a gesture can move mountains and change lives?!

Which one will endure?

10. A Relationship Lesson (Optional)

And here Yom Kippur's subtlety offers us one of the most fundamental lessons in healthy and enduring relationships – knowing how to listen not only to the words of those we love, but also to their silence.

But first a few bits of spousal communication episodes (some of you women may appreciate this):

A husband looking through the paper came upon a study that said women use more words than men. Excited to prove to his wife his long-held contention that women in general, and his wife in particular, talked too much, he showed her the study results, which stated:

“Men use about 15,000 words per day, but women use 30,000.”

His wife thought awhile, then finally she said, “That's because we have to repeat everything we say.”

The husband said, “What?”

*

A man and his wife were having some problems and were giving each other the silent treatment.

Suddenly, the man realized that the next day, he would need his wife to wake him at 5:00 AM for an early morning business flight.

Not wanting to be the first to break the silence and lose the argument, he wrote on a piece of paper, *Please wake me at 5:00 AM*. He left the note where he knew she would find it.

The next morning, the man woke up, only to discover it was 9:00 AM and he had missed his flight. Furious, he was about to go and see why his wife hadn't awakened him, when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed.

It read: *It is 5:00 AM . Wake up.*

Only goes to show you that men are not equipped for these kinds of contests.

*

Her Diary: Tonight, I thought my husband was acting weird. We had made plans to meet at a nice restaurant for dinner. I was a bit late meeting him, but he made no comment on it. Still, conversation wasn't flowing, so I suggested that we go somewhere quiet so we could talk. He agreed, but he didn't say much. I asked him what was wrong; he said, "Nothing." I asked him if it was my fault that he was upset. He said he wasn't upset, that it had nothing to do with me, and not to worry about it.

On the way home, I told him that I loved him. He smiled slightly, and kept driving. I can't explain his behavior; I don't know why he didn't say, "I love you, too."

His Diary: Boat wouldn't start; can't figure out why.

Now, if only she would ask ... If only he would talk ...

We may know how to hear the words of our beloved. But do we know how to hear their silence? And yet this is the secret to true communication - to listen and hear the white spaces in between the words, the unspoken messages in-between the lines.

The same is true in our communication with our children: Very often a child (out of misplaced fear or other reason) may not share with us his/her innermost feelings. True care, true sensitivity, true empathy entails not just hearing our children's words, but also their unspoken feelings.

Sensitivity not just to that which is expressed, but to that which remains unexpressed.

11. Breaking the Silence

Still, we do live in a world of expression. Ultimately we have to learn to bridge the silence and sound, to express the inexpressible.

And this is what we must take away from the silence of Yom Kippur: We cannot escape and remain in the world of silence of the Holy of Holies, for we must return to tell about it. We must connect there with God's essence, but then draw upon that experience for our sensory and tangible lives.

Yom Kippur - the holiest day of the year - carries the secret of sanctity, of intimacy, of the deepest truth. The power of silence. It opens the door to our true selves, transcending our senses and our defined experiences.

But then, we leave the Holy of Holies of Yom Kippur, and spend the rest of the year engaging with the material and sensory universe. And we must bring the Yom Kippur experience into the rest of the year.

12. The Focus of Today

But for today - for the next 24 hours - let us focus on Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is actually a study in reality ... a challenge to each of us to define what is real and true in our lives. Is it the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the delights we enjoy, or our inner soul.

Yom Kippur is the birth of the untouchable – the root of all that is truly intimate. Yom Kippur is the birth of intimacy – a day when we can learn the secret of being comfortable with our vulnerability, to grow stronger as we get more exposed.

By refraining from our material activities and opening up our undefined selves, we access the power to inject the transcendent into in the daily grind of our lives throughout the entire year.

Time. Space. Man. On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year – on this one day ... just this one day – we enter the holiest space in existence and experience the holiest part of ourselves.

So ...

Take advantage of this awesome opportunity by suspending your senses this Yom Kippur, and allowing your true self to emerge. Then you can bring that reality back into your senses – so that you can actually touch the untouchable.

As you enter this holiest day of the year, close your eyes and shut out your other senses. Be silent – and allow ourselves to hear the deepest sound of all: the sound of your soul speaking to you. Open yourself up to experience the *real you*.

Now!

Amen.