



THE PRAISE OF SILENCE

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To speak about silence – that is the paradoxical task I have set myself today: human silence and divine silence, silence before infinite greatness and silence before terrible suffering. All this silence, and all my noise about it, flow from a verse in the psalms we are studying this week, Psalm 65:2 for Jews, 65:1 for Protestants and 64:1 for Catholics: *Lecha dumiyah tehillah Elohim be-Tziyyon*.

If there are three ways of numbering the verse, there are at least three ways of translating the Hebrew as well:

- 1) "Praise is fitting for You, O God, In Zion." We find variants of this in the Latin Vulgate, *Te decet hymnus Deus in Sion*, well known from the introit to the Catholic Requiem Mass, as well as in the Greek, the *Einheitsübersetzung*, the *Revised Standard Version* and the New JPS (Jewish Publication Society of America) translation.
- 2) "Praise waits for You, O God, in Zion." This translation sees the Psalm as a pilgrim song, sung on the way to the Jerusalem Temple where praise and promised sacrifices will be offered. This interpretation is preferred by the Jewish rationalist commentators Ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089 – 1164) and Kimchi (Provence, c. 1160 – c. 1235) as well as the philosopher Joseph Albo (Spain, c. 1360 – c. 1444), author of the *Book of Principles*, who connects it with the virtue of hope. It is also the version found in the King James Bible, perhaps reflecting the Hebrew scholarship of those 17th-century translators.
- 3) The translation that concerns us today, however, is that given by the *Targum*, the ancient Aramaic translation, and followed by Rashi (France, 1040 – 1105) the prince of Jewish commentators: "To You silence is praise, O God, in Zion." The *Targum's* exact rendering is "Before You this silence is considered praise, O God whose presence (*Shechinah*) is in Zion." It is interesting that the only non-Jewish translation to follow this Jewish understanding, as far as I could discover, is the *Luther Bibel* of 1545, where we find "*Gott, man lobt dich in der Stille zu Zion.*"

Rashi gives two explanations, and at this point we will concentrate on the first: "Silence is praise to You, for there is no end to Your praise, and one who multiplies praise merely detracts."

Rashi, as usual, is refracting the discussions of Rabbis in the Talmud, and behind his comment is the story of a certain man who was leading the service in the presence of Rabbi Chanina (3rd century CE) and prayed:

"O God the great, the mighty, the awesome, the powerful, the strong, the terrible, the firm, the valiant, the sure, the revered ..." Rabbi Chanina waited until he had finished, then said to him, "Have you completed all the praises of your Lord? What use is all that? Even the three words of praise that we do say [i.e. great, mighty

and awesome], we would not be able to say had Moses our teacher not said them in the Torah (Deut. 10:17), and had the men of the Great Assembly not ordained their use in Prayer. Yet you come and say all this! It is as though a mortal king had a million gold coins, but they praised him for having silver – would that not be an offence to him?" (*Berachot* 33b)

As quite often with rabbinic sayings, a similar dictum is found much earlier in the mouth of Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says: "And in praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words." (Matthew 6:7) Then follows the right way to pray – the "Our Father". Obviously, though, verbosity was a problem not just for "the Gentiles" but also for Jews!

Another Talmudic passage quotes our very verse. After a statement that excessive praise of God can actually be dangerous, the Talmud continues:

Rabbi Judah of Kfar Gevuraya [literally "village of the mighty ones"], and some say, of Kfar Gibbor Chayil [literally, "village of the hero"], expounded: What is the meaning of the verse "To you silence is praise"? The remedy for everything is silence! When Rav Dimi came, he said: They say in the West [that is, in Palestine], "If a word is worth one coin, silence is worth two." (*Megillah* 18a)

I have included the name of the village from which the first Rabbi came because it is almost certainly a mistake – the correct version is found in the Jerusalem Talmud – but an interesting mistake, since it seems, deliberately or unconsciously, to suggest that there is something heroic about silence as a universal cure, requiring a special strength that might be found only in a village of mighty ones. Silence does not come easily, especially to Jews, who are addicted to talking, to discussion and argument and the minutiae of words – as this lecture bears witness. A telling saying in *Pirkey Avot* (*Chapters of the Fathers*, 1:17) seems to reflect the frustration of the son of a Rabbi, probably Gamaliel the teacher of St. Paul, after being raised in a house full of sages incessantly debating the finer points of the Law:

Simeon his son says: All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better for a person than silence; study is not the main thing, but action; and whoever multiplies words brings sin.

I am not of Simeon's school, I have to confess. While taciturn at times, I am a man of words, not action, and like many Jews, I find prolonged silence hard to bear. When, in interfaith encounters, people say – as they almost invariably do at some point – "It's all very well talking, but what are we going to *do* together?" my very soul rebels and I want to protest, "No! Let's just keep talking – there is so much still to discuss, still to discover in our words, and the words of our holy books!" As I write this, the radio is on to reassure me that I am not alone with the blank screen, the blank mind, and the terror of not finding the *right* words. Silence is scary, and it takes real strength.

I witnessed some of that strength in my youth, when I spent all my university holidays staying with my closest friend in the Carmelite monastery where he was studying for the priesthood. Every morning and evening, after Mass and Office, the community spent an hour in chapel in silent contemplation, following St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, and I seem to recall how hard it was to quieten my mind, open my soul and let God in, as we were supposed to do. Before that, in my *yeshivah* years, I had thrown myself, with youthful impetuosity, into kabbalistic meditation, but that was very different. There you have divine names and the words of prayer, mysterious *sefirot* (divine emanations) and all sorts of complex processes and concepts to meditate on – an exciting, holy fantasy world. With the Carmelites, as in other mystical traditions, including some Jewish ones, the goal is to let go of thought, of words, and simply ask, as in the lovely Hopkins poem, "Elected Silence, sing to me." I'm not sure that it ever did, and I suppose I did not elect it enough.

Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher (Spain – Egypt, c. 1135 – 1204) is another counsellor of silence, and with him we arrive at its deepest theological meaning. In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he explores the limitations of language, even the language of the Bible, to convey the truth about God. Words can only hint to us what God does, not what God is, and the best way towards understanding what is beyond our mind's grasp is the *Via Negativa* (Negative Way) where any state-

ment about God must be understood only as negating an imperfection, signing to us what God is *not*. He states:

All people ... affirm clearly that God ... cannot be apprehended by the intellects, and that none but He Himself can apprehend what He is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him. Thus all the philosophers say: We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it. ... The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, "Silence is praise to You," which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. (*Guide I*, 59)

Similar thoughts were expressed centuries earlier by Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) and Neo-Platonic thinkers, and in the Hindu Upanishads, with their chant of "*neti, neti*" – Brahman is "not this, not that ..." Such is also the teaching of the influential Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (5th – 6th century), and following him the Apophatic mystics of Eastern Orthodoxy. All stress that positive knowledge of God is impossible, or at any rate inferior to the purer knowledge gained by stripping away all definitions, attributes, and positive assertions about God. God is not ignorant, but neither is God wise, in any sense of wisdom conceivable to us. God is not impotent, but neither is God powerful, in any sense of power accessible to our limited minds. God is not evil, but neither is God good, in any merely human sense of goodness. God is not non-existent, but neither does God exist, in any sense shared with our existence. All thought about God vanishes into silence and, like Socrates, we know only that we know nothing.

The Western Church, with its fondness for theological systems and definitions, has never been particularly comfortable with this, and Jews revere Maimonides far more than they understand, or even agree with him.

But our exploration of "To You silence is praise" has only just begun! For Rashi has another explanation of our verse:

Silence is praise to you, O God, in Zion: the fact that You kept silent and mute over what Your enemies did in Zion was praise to You, for You had the power to take vengeance, but You are long-suffering.

Here it is not our silence that praises God's ineffable being, but God's own silence that deserves wonder and praise. Behind Rashi's comment lies this extraordinary passage from *Midrash Tehillim* to our Psalm:

"A song of David. For You silence is praise." These words are to be considered in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere: "I have long held My peace, I have been silent and restrained Myself; now I will scream like a woman in labour," (Isa. 42:14) for, when the children of Israel said, "Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation ... Will You restrain Yourself over these things, Eternal One, will You stay silent and let us suffer so heavily?" (Isa. 64:10-11) God replied, "Fury is not in Me," (Isa. 27:4) as if to say, "I cannot do anything for you; the Attribute of Justice makes Me stay mute." ... Therefore it says "For You silence is praise," meaning: All people give You praise because You could remain silent. For You were silent at what they did to You "in Zion" and at the noise that they made in Your holy house, as it is said: "They have made a noise in the house of the Eternal One, as on a festival day." (Lamentations 2:7) And what was the noise they made? They said: "Our high hand and not the Eternal One has done all this." (Deut. 32:27)

Here we confront the heart of the mystery, and for many people – including me – the biggest problem with God: divine silence in the face of suffering and destructive evil, even in the face of the blasphemous crowing of the wicked. While the prophet holds out hope that God will scream with maternal anguish at the violation of Her children, of Her own holiness, and goodness will prevail, that scream has not yet come. The world remains pregnant with horror, heavy with the dread, unanswerable questions of Job – why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper?

And somehow the Midrash finds this a cause for praise, for admiration of God's restraint, for an adherence to Justice that even divine mercy cannot shift. Perhaps this justice means the ineluctable flow of cause and effect, of action and consequence, of hubris and nemesis, the cruel lawfulness of the universe that arose in God's mind and must be allowed to take its tragic course. If God were to intervene, the very structure of the world, and certainly our ethical autonomy, would

shatter into miraculous make-believe, so even God becomes a helpless bystander as events unfold and the silent tears fall.

In this spirit the ancient rabbinic School of Rabbi Ishmael, contemplating the destruction of the Temple and the triumph of Rome, took the verse from the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:11) "Who is like You, Eternal One, among the gods?" (*ba-elim*) and, by adding one letter, re-read it "Who is like You, Eternal One, among the dumb?" (*ba-ilmim*; see *Gittin* 56b). In 1147, as German Jewish communities were massacred during the Second Crusade, one Isaac bar Shalom took up the theme in a daring elegy beginning: "There is none like You among the dumb / Staying silent and still in the face of tormentors;" and ended each verse with the plea "Keep not silent!"

Our midrash, however, concludes with an even more worrying twist: "Hence by the words 'For You silence is praise,' David meant: You are silent, and I shall be silent, as it is said: 'Be silent to the Eternal One, and wait patiently for Him.'" (Ps. 37:7)

What kind of silence is this? OK, God's silence we have to accept, but should we then keep silent in the face of evil? Does the imitation of God go so far? Our protest, surely, will not overturn the course of nature – should we not cry out, even if God must stay dumb?

In the late 1980s, as the AIDS epidemic took hold among gay men in the West, as governments refused to act, and people with AIDS were shut away and treated as pariahs, a new slogan was born in New York: SILENCE = DEATH, inscribed under a pink triangle, the symbol of Nazi anti-gay persecution. Silence is not admirable; silence kills. Silence makes us all guilty.

So we come to the third, and final, and most terrible rabbinic presentation of "Silence is praise to You, O God."

Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar said: Come and see that the Holy Blessed One is not like flesh and blood. With flesh and blood, if a man is judged worthy of death by the government, they put a gag in his mouth so that he cannot curse the king. But with God, a person judged worthy of death by the All-Present keeps silent, as it says, "To You silence is praise." Not only that, but he gives praise, as it says, "praise;" (Maharsha comments: he praises God for punishing him in this world so that he may merit the World to Come) and not only that, but it seems to him as though he is offering a sacrifice, as it says, "And to you shall vows be paid." (*Eruvin* 19a)

There may be assumptions in this passage that many of us would reject, especially the link between death and divine judgement, but I find in it a sort of wisdom as well. For here the vital distinction is made between suffering inflicted by human agency, and the suffering all of us are born to simply as mortal beings. Against human oppression, the death inflicted by the state, we should, and would, cry out, unless that same power gags free speech, locks up dissidents, censors the press, burns books, and disseminates propaganda to disguise tyranny as law and order. A human gag can be spat out, to proclaim truth and demand justice.

But God's unfathomable justice, the way of all flesh, old age, sickness, death – what use to protest against these? Dylan Thomas, the rebel romantic poet, could write "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light;" and even Moses, we are told, undimmed by his 120 years, indignantly refused the summons of death. But that was not the way of the Rabbin, or the Saints. Even the not-always-so-pious Preacher accepted, in the face of mortality, that there is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." (*Ecclesiastes* 3:7)

Two contrasting stories in the Talmud, one from Babylonia, the other from Palestine, illustrate this. Both commence with Moses going up to receive the Torah, and discovering God attaching crowns to the Hebrew letters. In one story (*Menachot* 29b) Moses questions God: "What is making You do that?" He is shown a vision of the great Rabbi Akiva, who will interpret every stroke of the crowns in marvellous ways beyond Moses' own comprehension, so Moses asks why, when there is such a learned man, God is giving the Torah through him. "Be silent!" is the response, "Thus it

arose in thought before Me." Moses then asks to see Akiva's reward, and beholds his terrible martyrdom. Again he questions, and again he is told, "Be silent! Thus it arose in thought before Me."

In the other story (*Shabbat 89a*), the same scenario, but Moses stands mute gazing at God's activity, and it is God who demands, "Moses! Is there no 'Shalom', no greeting of peace where you come from?" Moses respectfully answers that an inferior waits to be greeted first, but God corrects him: "It was for you to help Me [with a greeting of peace]." Moses thereupon speaks up to strengthen God.

These stories seem to me to capture our dichotomy. In the face of mysteries beyond our grasp: the essential nature of God, and of divine justice in the workings of nature and history, there is "a time to keep silence." For, as Wittgenstein famously put it, "*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*" ("Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.") Before infinite, unfathomable greatness, and the human inevitability of death, we are all reduced to silence, and in silence we are all equal. In the face of human evil and avoidable suffering, however, there is "a time to speak," for our silent God, for ourselves and for one another; for love, for justice and for peace.

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