

Sins of Silence: Yom Kippur 5768

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow

We are not a quiet people. I once attended a Jewish leadership conference where some brave soul suggested that one table be designated at mealtime for silent meditation. And indeed, the table was very silent – mostly because nobody sat there.

It is no wonder, then, that so many of the sins we confess to on Yom Kippur are sins involving speech. Gossip, slander, taking God's name in vain... I suspect that each of us could think of our own examples. Remarkably enough, though, of all the things from which we abstain on Yom Kippur, speech is not one of them. Instead, as Hosea instructs us in the haftarah this past Shabbat, we are to "Take words, and return to God" (Hos. 14:3). We don't eat, we don't wash, we don't touch – but we still do a lot of talking. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: "I spent all my life among sages, and found nothing better for a person than silence" (Avot 1:17). His was a minority opinion, at least in practice.

"Cry aloud, do not hold back" Isaiah proclaims in the Yom Kippur morning haftarah. "Let your voice resound like a shofar" (Is. 58:1). He then proceeds to use that resounding voice to condemn us for our moral failings. "Is not this the fast I look for," Isaiah continues, speaking for God: "to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house?"

When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?”

That clarion call for justice has been one of the best ways we have used our voices, as Jews and especially as Reform Jews. Whether it is calling for justice within our own communities, speaking up for Israel, fighting for Jews around the world or seeking equality for all peoples, we have used our voices well. Especially now, with the American Jewish community secure but so much going on in the world around us, we are responsible to speak up.¹ *Shetikah k'hodaah damya*, the rabbis taught: Silence is equivalent to admission. Silence is equivalent to assent.² Of course, we debate as to what is appropriate to speak up about, and when, and how; we ask how to balance advocacy with service, when to educate and when to take a stand. But the fundamental principle of engaging with the world around us remains. It's a long and honorable tradition, going back to Abraham in his confrontation with God around Sodom. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” Abraham asks. Thus the model of Jewish trouble-makers is born. At Rodeph Sholom, we have tried to be true to that legacy.

I have always been bothered, however, by how quickly Abraham's speech turns to silence when it comes to his own cause. He can speak up for Sodom when God threatens to destroy it, bargaining God down like a tourist in the shuk – but when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his son, we don't hear a peep. Suddenly, Abraham is silent.

¹ See Rabbi David Ellenson, “For the Sin of Silence,” *Sh'ma* September 2007, p.20.

² See Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 39, Esther 4:14, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:8, Gittin 55b-56a.

This contrast raises a question: for all that we talk about, what don't we talk about? What are our sins, not of speech, but of silence?

We begin where the question of Abraham leaves us: in our most intimate relationships. For over two years now, I have kept in mind a poem by Galway Kinnell called "It All Comes Back." Like the *akedah*, this poem is about a parent-child relationship; it is set at a four year old's birthday party, but some of the themes are the same:

We placed the cake, with its four candles
poking out of thick soft frosting, on the seat
of his chair at the head of the table
for just a moment, while we unfolded and spread
Spanish cloth over Vermont maple.

Suddenly he stepped from the group
of schoolmates and parents and family friends
and ran to the table, and just as someone cried
No, no! Don't sit! he sat on his chair and his cake,
and the room broke into groans and guffaws.

Actually, it was pretty funny, we all
started yelping our heads off, and actually
it wasn't in the least funny. He ran to me,
and I picked him up but I was still laughing,
and in indignant fury he jabbed his thumbs

into the corners of my mouth, grasped
my cheeks, and yanked - he was so muscled
and so outraged I felt as if he might rip
my whole face off, and then I realized
that was exactly what he was trying to do.

It came to me: I was one of his keepers,
his birth and the birth of his sister
had put me on earth a second time,
with the duty this time to protect them
and to help them love themselves,

and yet here I was, locked in solidarity
with these adults against my own child,
hee-hawing away, without once wondering
if we weren't, underneath, all of us, striking back,
too late, at our parents for humiliating us.

I gulped down my laughter and held him and
apologized and commiserated and explained and then
things were right again, but to this day it remains
loose, this face, seat of superior smiles,
on the bones, from that hard yanking.³

The poem describes one episode in one relationship, one particular
moment in time. But it speaks to all those moments when we witness

³ *The New Yorker*, May 2nd, 2005, pp.70-71.

someone's humiliation and do not respond. It speaks to that sin of silence. In Judaism, to embarrass someone is seen as equivalent to shedding their blood⁴ – and yet we watch others being humiliated on an almost daily basis, and rarely do we speak up. Our tradition teaches us *kvod ha-briot*, the dignity due to human beings, a principle that is so important that it even trumps other rules in Jewish law. One classic case is of a young woman, an orphan, who is set to be married on a Friday afternoon.⁵ At the last moment, the groom's side disputed the financial terms of the marriage. The conflict is eventually resolved, but by then it is past sundown – and Jewish law dictates against weddings on Shabbat. Nevertheless, the decision is made that the wedding must go forward. Why? To keep the bride from being further shamed, to honor the dignity inherent in her and every human being. And so *kvod ha-briot* governs how we treat people when they are married and when they are buried, when they are wealthy and when they are in need. Yet as we go about our business, we forget that others depend on us to speak up in their defense; we forget that sometimes, others' dignity is held in our very own hands.

Think of that statue of Eleanor Roosevelt at 72nd Street in Riverside Park, and the quotation inscribed at its base: “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity.”⁶ *For the times we were complicit in the humiliation of others, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 58b.

⁵ This case is found in a responsum (sec.125) of Rabbi Moses Isserles, cited in Daniel Sperber, “‘Friendly’ Halakhah and the ‘Friendly’ Poseq,” *The Edah Journal* 5:2 (Sivan 5766), p.10.

⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958.

Of course, especially in congregational life, we don't always know when others are in pain. When a colleague of mine was ordained, a mentor gave her an unusual gift: A Magic 8 Ball. "This," he said, "is to give you the information that everyone thinks you'll magically know." When I first started my rabbinic work, I expected to be doing far more hospital visitations than I am called upon to do. It's not that we're healthier – and it's not even that insurance doesn't cover long hospital stays – rather, people just don't tell us when they're sick. As much as we like to talk, we New Yorkers also can be incredibly private. Everyone is eager to offer help if someone else is in need, but far fewer are willing to speak up when they themselves need help. And yet, some of the most important things that we do together only happen when we allow ourselves to ask. Stop for a moment and remember a shiva minyan, a hospital visit, a meal hand-delivered to a house. Think about how much it meant, to give and to receive.

We live in a society in which, if you actually use your health insurance, you may not be able to renew it. We live in a city in which hearses and funeral processions are regularly cut off in traffic, because people either can't take a moment to pause out of respect for the deceased, or manage not to notice. In such a context, illness could indeed feel like an embarrassment, and death an inconvenience. But that is not true within these walls.

In fact, we have made a special effort to move away from silence in relation to both illness and death. For many years, along with others in the Jewish community, we were very good at saying *l'chaim*, 'to life' – but less

good at confronting when life comes to an end. Rodeph Sholom's end-of-life initiative has been ground-breaking in starting conversations about topics that were previously unspoken: living wills, ethical wills, organ donation and beyond. These very conversations have revealed the costs of silence. I cannot tell you how many families agonize to discern the wishes of a dying loved one who never told them what they would want, how many are hit especially hard by a loss because they never spoke about the inevitable before it happened, how many wish they could have been honest enough about impending death to reflect together upon the meaning of a lifetime, and to use those final weeks and days to say a meaningful goodbye. *For the times that we did not ask for help, for the times we did not know we needed help, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

If there is silence on the experiences which affect us all, there is an even deeper silence around topics that are still more taboo. Two of these are domestic violence and addiction. It is with good reason that the domestic violence initiative of the New York Board of Rabbis is called "Dayenu! Enough Silence." It is a response to decades in which Jews didn't believe that Jews did such things. And yet 15 to 25% of Jewish households in the U.S. and Israel experience domestic violence, and a third of our teens tell of relationships that are physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive.⁷

At age 6, Rabbi Diana Manber – who spoke here at Rodeph Sholom last fall – stood in horror as her father pushed her mother down a flight of stairs in their New Jersey home, landing her in the emergency room. When the family rabbi visited her mother in the hospital, he asked how she was

⁷ NYBR Newsletter, Winter 2005.

doing and offered a healing prayer. But never, facing his congregant in a hospital bed with multiple stitches in her face, did he ask her the one essential question: Who did this to you?

“If my rabbi had asked what happened,” says Manber, “if my rabbi had reached out to help us, my childhood would have been different. No one ever asked if everything was OK...”⁸ The silence of that rabbi, the silence of that community, was a sin.

For over a year now, Rodeph Sholom has hosted meetings of a support group called JACS: Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons, and Significant Others. Here too, members struggle with the belief that the problem simply doesn't exist in the Jewish community, and so their experiences have been silenced. “I denied for years,” attests a member on the JACS website, “that I had a problem with cocaine. I told myself that Jews did not become drug addicts, and that I, as a Jew was simply too smart for that.” “I'm the mother of a recovering alcoholic,” writes another, “who sought help years ago from members of the rabbinate, who vehemently denied that there were Jewish alcoholics...” What a cost there is to our silence. *For the times we have not acknowledged the issues that we face, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

But there is another great silence in our community. How ironic it is that we are silent not only about topics that are painful, but also about those that are good. For a primarily-Ashkenazi, German-founded, North American congregation, we are remarkably diverse. What pride many of us felt to see that Rodeph Sholom bat mitzvah on the front page of the New York Times,

⁸ Jewish San Francisco, April 8th, 2005.

featuring a family with two Chinese daughters and their two mothers. What beautiful faces to represent our community. We take pride in welcoming everyone who comes in, of every ethnicity and sexual orientation and demographic. But we are only now learning ways to talk about difference, ways to meet different needs; we are only now realizing that treating everyone the same is not necessarily welcoming. Empty-nesters have different needs than young families. Single women and men walking into our congregation have a harder time than those who are coupled. Thanks to real leadership over the years from clergy and laity alike, we have opened our arms to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, but we are still exploring how to make our schools and synagogue fully embracing, and we are only now are beginning to be attuned to the needs of those who are transgender. Jews by choice also come on a journey, and are Jews like everyone else – but despite this, some continue to have very real needs for conversation and support. Every one of us comes in with our own baggage, bearing our own hopes and our own dreams.

But there is another population here too, which also comes with needs and baggage, hopes and dreams. For many years, we have laid out a welcome mat for non-Jews in this community. We have laid out a welcome mat, but we have also been silent: silent about their role. We may be too quick to assume that everyone feels at home here, despite the best of intentions on all sides. It is for this reason that Outreach has new initiatives this year, including the InterCircle for non-Jewish parents raising Jewish children. And it is for this reason that we have established a working group on the role of the non-Jew in the congregation, to ensure that we extend a full welcome, while holding fast to the core of Jewish identity. Let me tell

you that this is not easy; there is a very real temptation to stick with the status quo, especially when it seems to work. But if we don't talk about these issues out loud, we risk being ignorant – ignorant of what it takes to be true to ourselves, and honestly welcoming to those who come through our doors.

One of the unexpected blessings of diversity is that it does open these conversations, within families and in the congregation as a whole. What does it mean to be a community? What does it mean to be a Jew? But these things I know: Parents who make the choice to raise Jewish children, often with real sacrifice on the part of the non-Jewish partner, are deserving of recognition and support. Children who celebrate Christmas with Grandma and Grandpa in addition to having Chanukah with their parents at home need to be seen for the whole people that they are. Above all, every person in this room is an integral part of this congregation. If you don't feel it, we haven't spoken about it enough. *For the times we have not discussed diversity and its opportunities, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

If it is true that we have different needs based on our demographics, or based on a shared identity, it also must be true that we are, in the end, individuals, and have different needs as such. Yet we are silent too about that which is most personal. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav tells the story of a king who sent his son abroad to study. Upon the son's return, the king tests him by asking him to roll a huge rock up to the top of a mountain. With much effort, the son succeeds, and goes to tell his father. "Is this all you learned?" asks the king. "What were you thinking? Why didn't you consider

breaking this heavy rock into little pieces, and then it would have been easy to take the whole rock up to the top!” According to Simon Firestone:

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav used this story to teach us about teshuvah. God commands us to elevate our hearts... and the only suitable way is for us to break our rock-hard hearts into pieces... We can't work on ourselves effectively when all of the imperfections are invisible, when we are our cool and collected personas, the kind you want to be at a job interview or first date. The opportunities for change come when we are more honest, when we are present with our flaws and jagged edges.⁹

Shabbat Shuvah last Friday was incredibly powerful, precisely because two brave congregants stood up and showed us some of those jagged edges. One shared with us what it meant to grapple with his own mortality; the other spoke about missing the mark in important relationships in her life.

Together, they gave us the gift of not feeling so alone. “I wasn’t going to be so specific,” one of them said, “but then I realized someone sitting here might be living something similar, so I decided to go out on a limb.”

It is too easy for us to think that we are the only ones experiencing our problems, to think that we have to keep silent because no one else will understand. And so we come to synagogue as if to a job interview, as if on a first date, and we sit in a crowd but we sit alone. The vantage point, though, of the clergy is that we have the privilege of being part of all of your stories; we are privy to not just one conversation, but many. We know the truth of the teaching that there is no house untouched by sorrow, there is no person without their grief. “God is close to the broken hearted” (Ps. 147:3), says the

⁹ <http://netivotshalom.org/drashot/members/firestoneYK5763.html>.

Psalmist. There is no one here whose heart has never been broken. So tonight/today let me say it out loud: If you are struggling to make ends meet in this city, if you think you're the only one worrying about paying your children's tuition or making the rent, I promise you, you are not alone. If you lost your job in this past year and are struggling with a loss of both income and identity, you are not alone. If you are wrestling with mental or physical illness, your own or that of someone you love, you are not alone. If you bear the heavy weight of loss, you are not alone. If you are on the roller-coaster of trying to conceive a child, or if you have suffered pregnancy loss, you are not alone. If you are caring for an aged parent or a troubled child or both, you are not alone. If you are weighed down by family conflicts or estrangement, you are not alone. If you wake up in the morning and think that your life is not what you expected, not what you hoped it would be, you are not alone. If you are sitting here wondering where your spiritual life has gone, whether there is a God, and whether that God is listening, I promise you, you are not alone. If your marriage is under pressure or a relationship that you thought would last forever is coming to an end, you are not alone. There is no one here whose heart has never been broken.

Let this be a place where we can be honest about our lives. Let this be a place where we can be broken, and thus a place where we can begin to be whole. *For the times that we have isolated ourselves and others through our silence, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

“Cry aloud, do not hold back,” we say with Isaiah. “Let our voice resound like a shofar.” Tomorrow night/tonight, we will hear one final blast, its sound both broken and whole. In its voice, may we find our voices. May we

break all these silences as we enter this New Year, and may we know that we are not alone.