



**RABBI SHALOM**

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# The Human Voice: Speech, Silence, and the Essence of Man

The Torah describes the creation of man with a unique formulation:

וַיֵּצֵר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה, וַיְנַפֵּחַ בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים, וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה

*And Hashem God formed man from the dust of the earth, and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a **living being**.*<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the phrase נפש חיה - *a living being* - seems unremarkable. After all, as Rashi notes on this *pasuk* - animals are described in the same way. Yet Rashi immediately qualifies this:

אֲבָל זֶה שֶׁל אָדָם חַיָּה שֶׁבְּכָלָן, שֶׁנֶּתַן בּוֹ דַּעַה וְדַבּוּר

*But the life of man is the most vital of all, for he has been endowed with intellect and speech.*

Onkelos sharpens this distinction even further. He translates: רוח ממללא as נפש חיה - *A speaking spirit*.

1. Bereshit 2:7

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Speech is not merely an ability, it is the defining characteristic of the human being.

## THE PARADOX OF SPEECH

As the Kuzari expresses, what man has over all other beings is the power of speech. Man is referred to as a *medaber* – a speaker.<sup>2</sup> If speech defines us, then one might assume that mastering speech through eloquence, articulation and communication is the pinnacle of human development. Yet Hazal present a strikingly different perspective:

מה אומנותו של אדם בעולם הזה? ישים עצמו כאלם

*What is the craft of a person in this world? He should make himself like one who is mute.*<sup>3</sup>

This statement is astonishing. One would have expected Hazal to say that man's *craft* and defining skill is his ability to speak. Instead, they teach that his true *profession* is knowing when not to speak. Why is silence described as a skill or a craft?

At first glance, silence seems simple. Speech requires effort. One must first formulate thoughts, choose words and then communicate ideas. Silence, by contrast, appears passive. One simply refrains from speaking. But this assumption is mistaken. If man's essence is "רוח ממללא", a speaking being, then silence is not natural. Silence is

2. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Kuzari 1: 35

3. Hullin 89a

a discipline. It requires awareness, restraint, humility, and self-control. This is why the Mishnah teaches:

לא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה

*I have found nothing better for the body than silence.*<sup>4</sup>

Silence is not the absence of speech, rather it is the mastery of it.<sup>5</sup>

### THE STORY OF RABBI YISRAEL SALANTER

A remarkable story illustrates this idea<sup>6</sup>. When Rabbi Yisrael Salanter arrived in a town to deliver a shiur, he posted a list of sources in advance so that attendees could prepare. However, those who opposed his teachings secretly replaced the sources with entirely unrelated ones.

When Rabbi Salanter returned and saw the altered list, he faced a dilemma. The audience had prepared incorrect material. Any ordinary speaker would have been thrown into confusion. He stepped up to the podium and remained silent. After a few moments, he began speaking and seamlessly wove together all the incorrect sources into a brilliant shiur. No one realized anything had gone wrong.

His student, Rabbi Naftali Amsterdam, later explained that the silence was not for intellectual preparation. Rabbi Salanter knew immediately how to deliver the shiur. His hesitation was deeper. Would delivering such a shiur risk arrogance? Would it subtly reinforce his own ego? Those few moments of silence were not about what to say, they were about whether to say it.

### THE TRUE CRAFT OF MAN

This story reveals a profound truth. Speech is easy, but silence is difficult. Speech expresses intelligence, silence expresses wisdom.

4. Pirkei Avot 1:17

5. Latetkha Elyon

6. Cited in the sefer, *Latetkha Elyon* (Zichron Lev Ari),

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Speech reveals what a person knows, silence reveals who a person is. To speak when necessary is important, but to refrain when appropriate, that is an art.

Man is defined as a speaking being, but the Torah and Hazal redefine what that truly means. To be human is not merely to speak. It is to elevate speech, refine it, control it, and thereby sanctify it.

The greatness of man lies not in how much he says, but in how deeply he understands the weight of his words. In a world filled with noise, constant expression, and endless communication, may we master the art of speech and when to be silent. ■

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