

RABBI AARON GOLDSCHEIDER
PIRKEI AVOT SERIES
Editor, Torah Tidbits

The Power of Silence: From Inner Reflection to Action

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (1:17)

Shimon his son says: "All my life I was raised among the Sages, and I found nothing better for the self (body) than silence..." (Pirkei Avot 1:17)

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, in his commentary on Pirkei Avot, suggests that this teaching highlights the value of moments or periods of silence in becoming more attuned to our soul and inner world. The Mishnah specifically states that "silence is good for the body." The body, too, needs serenity and calm to access the soul's inner depths, engage in introspection, and "listen to the whispers of one's soul." (Mei Marom, vol. 2, p. 100)

Rav Charlop is surely echoing a theme found throughout the thought and writings of his Rebbe, Rav Kook. Consider this beautiful passage:

"Silence is an essential demand that comes from the depths of the soul. This demand comes about as a result of higher reflections that are behind the world of speech. Such higher reflections are a permanent matter inside of us. When a Baal HaMachshava HaDomemet/a master of silent thoughts immerses oneself in one's higher silence, many worlds are created and built; exalted songs rise up in their highest holiness; a higher strength is elevated in its holy perfection beyond all spiritual realms."(Shemoneh Kevatzim 1:868, Orot Hakodesh 3, p. 274, translated in The Spiritual Wisdom of Rav Kook, Schwartz, p. 57)

A FAST OF WORDS

The Chafetz Chaim writes that when one wishes to accept a fast upon oneself, it is preferable to undertake a *Ta'anit Dibbur* (a fast of speech) rather than a conventional fast from food and drink (Shulchan Aruch, Chapter 571, Mishnah Berurah, #2).

A *Ta'anit Dibbur* is intended to limit one's speech and, in doing so, prevent transgressions such as lashon harah and other forms of inappropriate speech. Perhaps, however, the experience of silence offers something deeper: it helps a person reconnect with the soul, become more contemplative, and cultivate greater self-awareness.

YAAKOV'S NIGHT PRAYER: TOUCHING RUACH HAKODESH

Yaakov's encounter with God took place late at night. Having fled his home, he experienced a remarkable



revelation of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven.

Rav Kook teaches that nighttime is a period of quiet and solitude. This environment removes external physical distractions, making human consciousness especially receptive to extraordinary spiritual elevations, including Ruach HaKodesh and levels approaching prophecy. (*Ein Ayah, Berachot,* vol. 1, p. 109)

THE SILENT AMIDAH

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, a remarkable scholar and writer, offers a unique way of understanding the Amidah prayer: we can think of it as a form of meditation. We repeat the same words again and again, much like a mantra. It is striking that Jewish prayer so often incorporates voice and song, yet the Amidah is recited silently.


Rabb Aryeh Kaplan zt"l

Rabbi Kaplan explains:

"People often complain that saying the same prayer over and over is tedious and uninspiring. For anyone familiar with mantra meditation, the opposite is true. All types of mantra meditation involve repetition. In mantra meditation, the device repeated is a word or phrase, and it can be repeated over and over for weeks, months, or even years on end." (Jewish Meditation, Kaplan, p. 45)

RAV KOOK REINTERPRETS THE MISHNAH

In his commentary on Pirkei Avot, Rav Kook offers his own distinctive reading of the Mishnah above. Through a creative interpretation of the phrase "lo matzati leguf tov me'shtika," he understands the teaching to suggest that silence, by itself, does not benefit the body.

In other words, silent meditation, thoughts of teshuva, and intentions to do good ultimately miss their mark if they remain confined to contemplation. *Dibur* (speech) and *ma'aseh* (action) are essential to transforming oneself and the world around us.

INTERNAL YET ACTIVE PRAYER

The Talmud (Berachot 31a) describes the proper way to recite the Amidah: it should be said silently, while one's lips are still moving. Rav Kook offers a beautiful interpretation of the balance between silence and action.

The goal of prayer is to strengthen one's inner spiritual life and draw closer to God. This is the silent dimension of prayer, which focuses on the internal aspects of one's religious experience. However, Rav Kook cautions against the misconception that the internal dimension is all that matters. The physical act of moving one's lips reminds us that words and actions are also necessary to attain *shleimut* (wholeness). (Ein Ayah, Berachot, perek 5, siman 20)

REFRAINING FROM SPEAKING OVER A CUP OF BLESSING

The Talmud teaches that once a person is holding the *kos shel bracha* (cup of blessing) used for Birkat Hamazon, one should refrain



from speaking (Berachot 51a).

Rav Kook suggests that this silence reminds us that speech should always be used in ways that are enriching and sacred. Too often, we use our words in lowly and unbecoming ways.

Rav Kook cites a teaching from the Talmud Yerushalmi (Berachot 1:2), in which Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai declares that had he been present at Har Sinai, he would have requested two mouths, so that one could be reserved exclusively for Torah. He recognized the inherent indignity of using speech for physical and mundane matters. The ultimate aspiration is for our words to be devoted to the most elevated and noble purposes. (*Ein Ayah, Berachot*, vol. 2, 51a, piska #55)

SLOWLY STANDING TALL

Rav Kook beautifully explores two dimensions of religious growth, drawing a parallel to the way we bow during the recitation of the Amidah.

The Talmud (Berachot 12a) relates that Rav Sheshet, when bowing, would bend like a stick; when straightening up, he would rise like a snake. The bowing was quick, like the snapping of a stick, while the act of straightening was slower and more deliberate.

Rav Kook connects these two movements to distinct dimensions of personal growth. Bowing represents the need to break negative character traits and overcome improper behavior. Such qualities and actions must be addressed decisively and without hesitation, like the snap of a stick.

By contrast, the journey toward a more elevated and saintly life is gradual. It cannot generally be rushed. This kind of growth demands time, patience, and perseverance. (Ein Ayah, Berachot 1, piska #166, pp. 65–66)

RAV KOOK: CALLS FOR ALIYAH

Rav Kook himself personified this ideal: the combination of profound thought and inner introspection with an absolute commitment to translating contemplation into words and action.

In the realm of *dibur* (speech), Rav Kook repeatedly called upon the Jewish people, through his letters and public addresses, to return home to Zion. One remarkable public proclamation was entitled "The Great Call." [Presented here in abridged form.]

THE GREAT CALL

"To the Land of Israel, Gentlemen, To the Land of Israel! Let us utter this appeal in one voice, in a great and never-ending cry.

"Come to the Land of Israel, dear brothers, come to the Land of Israel. Save your souls, the soul of your generation, the soul of the entire nation; save her from desolation and destruction, save her from decay and degradation, save her from defilement and all evil — from all of the suffering and oppression that threatens to come upon her in all the lands of the world without exception or distinction....

"Escape with your lives and come to Israel; G-d's voice beckons us; His hand is outstretched to us; His spirit within our hearts unites us, encourages us and obliges us all to cry in a great, powerful and awesome voice: Brothers! Children of Israel, beloved and



dear brethren, come to the Land of Israel, do not tarry with arrangements and official matters; rescue yourselves, gather, come to the Land of Israel…

"From the time we were exiled from our Land, the Torah has accompanied Israel into exile, wandering from Babylon to France, Spain, Germany, Eastern and Central Europe, Poland, Russia, and elsewhere. And now, how happy we would be if we were able to say that she has returned to her first place, to the Land of Israel, together with the people of Israel, which continues to multiply in the Holy Land.

"And now, who is so blind that he does not see the L-rd's hand guiding us in this, and does not feel obligated to work along with G-d? A heavenly voice in the future will cry aloud on top of the mountains and say, 'Whoever has wrought with G-d, let him come and receive his reward (Vayikra Rabbah 27:2). Who can exempt himself from doing his part in bringing additional blessing and swifter salvation; from awakening many hearts to return to the Holy Land, to the L-rd's legacy, that they may become a part of it, to settle it with enterprises and buildings, to purchase property, to plant and sow, to do everything necessary for the foundation of life of a stable and organized settlement…." ■



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