

The Gate of Silence

Silence of speech: “Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, ‘I grew up all of my days among the Sages and I have found nothing better for oneself than silence’” (*Avos* 1:17). And so said King Shelomo, may peace be upon him (*Mishlei* 17:28): “Even a fool who keeps quiet is accounted wise.” The wise man says: “When I speak, I will regret what I have said, and when I am silent, I will not regret it. And if I will regret silence once, I will regret speech many times.” And the wise man says: “When I speak, it [my speech] rules over me, for if I speak wrongly of another, that speech rules over me and compels me to humble myself before him and beg his forgiveness. But when I do not speak, I rule over it by not emitting it and by concealing it.” Our Rabbis said (*Yalkut Shimoni, parashas B’ha’aloscha* 738): ‘Two advocates stood before Hadrian, one advocating speech, the other, silence. The king said to the advocate of speech: ‘What is your case?’ He replied: ‘My master, if not for speech how could kings rule in the world? How could ships set out to sea? How could the dead be shown loving-kindness? How could brides be praised? How could business be conducted in the world?’ Immediately King Hadrian told him: ‘You have spoken well.’ He then said to the advocate of silence: ‘How could you have praised silence?’ He immediately arose to speak, whereupon the advocate of speech arose and struck him. The king asked: ‘Why did you strike him?’ He replied: ‘My master, I taught with mine for mine, for I taught with speech on behalf of speech, but this one was going to teach with mine for his. That is why I struck him.’ The other countered: ‘But did not King Shelomo advocate thus? God did not say that one should sit in silence like a mute, but (*Mishlei* 10:19): “In an abundance of words offense will not be lacking, and he who spares his lips is wise” — that is, he who refrains from speaking against his friend.’” There were none greater than Aharon and Miriam, for the well arose and provided drink in the merit of Miriam, may peace be upon her, and the clouds of glory surrounded the Jews in the merit of Aharon, yet when they gave license to their mouths to speak against Moshe, they were immediately punished.

There are several causes for the Shechinah’s departing from Israel (*Sifri, Teitzei* 23:10), chief among them blood-shed (*Shabbos* 33a), idolatry (*Mechilta, Yisro* 20:9), and slander (*Midrash Tehillim* 7:7).

Once Rabban Gamliel made a feast and gave his servant some tongues to cook. Some he cooked well and some he prepared hard. First he brought in the soft ones and then he served them the hard ones. He called his servant

and asked him: “What prompted you to do this, some soft and some hard?” He answered: “To show you that everything comes from the tongue and that a man can make it soft or hard, as he wishes” (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 33:1).

It is told of a certain king who had many counselors, sages, and wise and understanding attendants, that once, seeing the wisest of them sitting still and silent, he asked him: “Why are you so silent?” Whereupon the other responded: “I have found speech to be divided into four types: the first, all detrimental, such as men being accustomed to curse others and to speak indecently; the second, detrimental in a particular respect and beneficial in a certain respect, such as praising one to derive some benefit from him, and through that praise angering his enemy and causing harm to the one praised; the third, neither detrimental nor beneficial, such as idle talk — how a certain wall was built and how much was expended upon it, and tales of kings and princes; the fourth, all beneficial, such as talk involving Torah and things essential to life.” But there are some Torah Sages who divide speech into five types: The first, a mitzvah; the second, to be shunned; the third, petty; the fourth, beloved; the fifth, permissible. A mitzvah — speaking of Torah and fear of Heaven; to be shunned — false testimony, indecent speech, and slander; petty — speech containing neither transgression nor benefit, as most of the world’s talk, such as speaking of what has already been done and the customs of kings and other such things of the affairs of the world; beloved — speech in praise of good deeds and in deprecation of evil deeds, praising the deeds of the righteous to credit their customs in the eyes of others so that they emulate their ways, and condemning the evildoers so that they are demeaned and made despicable in the eyes of men and their memories blotted out, so that men remove themselves from them and not emulate their ways; permissible — speech of trade for one’s livelihood, and of clothing, food, and drink, and one’s other needs, but one who minimizes his speech even in this area is to be praised. According to the Sages, most of the world’s talk is unnecessary, aside from those modes of speech which are explicitly forbidden, such as levity, flattery, falsehood, and slander — each of which will have a special Gate devoted to it.

Silence is good in many situations, such as in that of one who has been visited with the attribute of justice, as in the case of Aharon , where it is written (*Vayikra* 10:3): “And Aharon was silent.” And if one hears others insulting him, he should remain silent. Silence in the face of insult is a great virtue. One should also accustom himself to silence in the privy, which is modesty

(cf. *Berachos* 62b). And it requires great zeal to remain silent in the synagogue, to refrain from speaking even in words of Torah; how much more so to refrain in other matters, and all so that he can concentrate his heart on prayer. And if one is sitting among the wise, he should be quiet and listen to their words. For when he is quiet, he hears what he did not know, and when he speaks, he does not grow in knowledge. But if he is in doubt as to what the Sages are saying, he should ask them, for remaining silent at such a time is very bad. King Shelomo, may peace be upon him, said (*Koheles* 3:7): “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.” Sometimes speech is good, and sometimes silence is good. And the Sage has said: “If you cannot find a *man* to teach you moral instruction, remain silent, lest you speak folly.” Be-cause the tongue is extremely light in speaking, one must take great care to “weigh down” the tongue to keep it from speaking. An abundance of words is like a heavy burden, and the heaviness of an abundance of words is greater than that of an abundance of silence. And if one hears his friend speaking, he should keep quiet until the other finishes, for (*Mishlei* 18:13): “If one answers before he has heard, it is folly to him and shame.”

One who is accustomed to silence is saved from many transgressions: from flattery, from levity, from slander, from falsehood, and from insults. For if one shames and insults him, if he answers him, he will receive a double portion [in return]. And thus did the sage say: “I hear the bad thing and I keep quiet.” They asked him, “Why?” He answered: “If I answer my insulters, I am afraid I will hear insults worse than the first.” And he said: “When the fool contends with the sage, and the sage keeps quiet, this is a great rejoinder against the fool.” For the fool is more distressed by the silence of the sage than if the sage would answer him. And about this it is written (*ibid.* 26:4): “Do not answer the fool according to his folly.” Furthermore, one may reveal secrets to him, since he is not much given to speech he will not reveal them. Also, he will not be prone to tale bearing. About this it is written (*ibid.* 18:21): “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” For one can do with his tongue more than he can do with his sword. For one can stand here and consign to death his friend who is at a distance from him, whereby the sword kills only at close quarters (*Arachin* 15b). That is why man was created with two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, yet only one mouth — to teach him to minimize speech. “Silence is becoming to the wise — how much more so to fools” (*Pesachim* 99b). “A fence to wisdom is silence” (*Avos* 3:13). “The universal panacea is silence” (*Megillah* 18a).

Sometimes silence is bad, as it is written (*Mishlei* 26:5): “Answer the fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his eyes.” In matters of Torah (*Shabbos* 30b), if he sees fools mocking the words of Sages, he should answer them to disabuse them of their error so that they not be wise in their eyes. If he sees a man transgressing, he should pro-test and reprove him. King Shelomo has already said (*ibid.* 15:1): “A soft answer turns away wrath,” and (*ibid.* 25:15): “And a soft tongue breaks the bone.” Therefore, one should accustom himself to soft words and not to hard speech. And take care to heed your tongue as the apple of your eye, for, “The mouth of a fool is his ruination and his lips are the snare of his soul” (*ibid.* 18:7). And it is written (*ibid.* 21:23): “He who heeds his mouth and his tongue heeds his soul from affliction” and (*Iyov* 13:5): “Would that you remained silent, and it would be reckoned wisdom unto you.” And if you find yourself in company, it is better that you be told: “Speak, why are you so still?” rather than that you speak and your words be burdensome to them and they tell you: “Be quiet.”

And one must take care not to shame anyone or to distress him with words. If he is sitting near one who has some bodily blemish of which he is ashamed, or if there is a blemish in his children or his wife of which he is ashamed, or a defect in his family, one must take care not to speak of that blemish or of that defect, even if he is not speaking about him but about another who is similarly affected, for the first will always think that he is being spoken of and he will be ashamed. If one has done an unseemly thing and repented of it, care must be taken not to speak of that thing before him, and he should not be told, even in jest: “How could you have done such a thing and not guarded yourself against it? You should have done something else.” Or if someone tells you something that you already know, be quiet until he finishes, for he may tell you something new that you have never heard before. He also derives enjoyment from telling you something; and even if you know that he will tell you nothing new, be quiet until he finishes. If two men had a dispute and were afterwards reconciled, neither of them should tell the other: “You did this and this to me, and that is why I did this and this to you” — even if it is not his intention to reawaken their dispute. For if he tells him: “You did this to me,” the other will counter: “To the contrary, the entire fault was yours,” and as a result, the dispute will be reawakened. And even if it is not, he who was at fault will be embarrassed.

One may sit before a sage and be silent and gain reward for it — as when his intention is to listen; and one may be silent and transgress — as when he thinks: Why should I speak before him if he cannot even answer me properly He knows nothing compared to me! And, in this regard, one must be extremely heedful of what our Sages have said (*Avos* 5:7): “There are seven signs of a fool, and seven of a wise man. The wise man does not speak in the presence of those greater than he in wisdom or in number; he does not interrupt his neighbor’s speech; he does not rush to answer; he asks to the point, and answers correctly; he speaks of the first point first, and of the last, last; if he has not heard of something, he says: ‘I have not heard of it’; and he admits the truth. The reverse is the case with the fool.”

The Sage has said: “Speaking with wisdom and understanding is like adding salt to the dish.” There is grace to the words of these who understand, as a ruby in a setting of gold. “The poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard” (*Koheles* 9:16). So that if one sees that his words are not heeded, let him go to one whose words *are* heeded and place his words in his mouth so that they will be heeded. But let him remain silent thereafter.

In sum, just as when one makes a door for his house, he has a time to open it and a time to keep it closed, so should one keep closed the doors of his mouth, for he has two doors, his lips and his teeth. And take great care in opening your mouth and in guarding your tongue. Just as you would guard silver, gold, and pearls in your room, within a case, making one enclosure around another, do the same with your mouth. See how the early Sages guarded themselves from idle talk, priding themselves in not having spoken idle talk all of their days (*Sukkah* 28a). And this is also a great aid toward praying with concentration, for most lapses of concentration in prayer come from idle matters implanted in one’s heart. Silence is also a great fence for the fear of Heaven, for fear of Heaven cannot exist in the heart that generates idle talk.

There must now be explained to you four Gates concerning four types who do not receive the Divine presence (*Sotah* 42a): The class of the mockers, as it is written (*Hoshea* 7:5): “He stretches away His hand from mockers”; the class of liars, as it is written (*Tehillim* 101:7): “The speaker of lies will not be established before my eyes”; the class of flatterers, as it is written (*Iyov* 13:16): “For not before Him will the flatterer come”; and the class of slanderers, as it is written (*Tehillim* 5:5): “For You are not a god who desires wickedness; evil will not abide with You.” You are righteous, O Hashem; evil will not

dwell in Your abode. And now *they* will be explained and categorized, for such *categorization* is of great benefit towards a clear understanding of the subject.

There are five categories of mockers: (1) The one with the tongue, who imputes imperfections to others, as it is written (*Tehillim* 50:20): “You sit and speak against your brother; you ascribe imperfection to your mother’s son.” And one who does so is called a mocker, as it is written (*Mishlei* 21:24): “The willful and the proud, his name is ‘mocker.’ He acts in the heat of malice.” That is, the mocker possesses two evil traits: the first, that he is willful and transgresses out of malice, contriving against his friend when he stands to gain nothing, causing his friend great damage and loss. For when he derogates him and lowers him in the eyes of others and causes him to be hated, this is the height of malice, more so than robbing or stealing. For when one steals or robs, he does so not out of malice, but for his own gain, to multiply wealth. But one who derogates others gains nothing and it is crookedness of heart. Also, the mocker is proud, vain — and it is for this reason that he ascribes imperfections to others. But the humble man recognizes his own imperfections, and therefore does not mock others, ascribing imperfections to them as the mockers do, who sit and say: “So and so did such and such,” mocking him for it.

(2) One who mocks others because he despises them for not having succeeded as he did in the acquisition of wealth and honor. And he despises the poor, not in that he imputes any imperfection to them, but in that they are despicable in his eyes. And this stems from pride, or some-times from tranquility and an abundance of pleasure, as it is written (*Tehillim* 123:4): “Our souls are full sated with the mockery of those who are at ease with the contempt of the proud oppressors,” indicating that the tranquil ones are mockers of Israel. And sometimes in the abundance of their tranquility they mock the righteous and the prophets, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 20:7): “They all mock me.” And it is written (*Mishlei* 17:5): “He who mocks the poor man blasphemes his Maker.” That is, he who mocks the poor man because he is poor, considering him poor because of his lack of wisdom, and himself rich as a result of his wisdom, as it is written (*Devarim* 8:17): “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth” — such a mocker blasphemes the Blessed One, for all is the work of the Blessed One, as it is written (*Mishlei* 22:2): “The rich and the poor have met — Hashem has made them all.” He is, therefore, mocking the handiwork of Hashem.

(3) One who mocks things and activities, without intending to shame those associated with them, but rejects things which should not be rejected and rejects activities that are potentially fruitful. This mocker is wise in his own eyes to the extent that every deed that he did not originate seems foolish to him, and he mocks it. Sometimes this trait can lead him to heresy, to mocking mitzvos, as it is written (*Tehillim* 119:51): “The willful ones have mocked me exceedingly, yet I have not turned away from Your Torah.” This type of mocker does not accept chastisement, as it is written (*Mishlei* 9:8): “Do not reprove the mocker, lest he hate you,” and (*ibid.* :7): “He who reproves the mocker takes shame for himself.” Because he is wise in his own eyes, he mocks the deeds of another. This is the trait which has no remedy, as it is written (*ibid.* 26:12): “Have you seen a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for the fool than for him.”

(4) One who gears himself always for idle talk and vain matters, such as the corner dwellers, who exert themselves to the utmost to find subjects for mockery, not having any other occupation aside from that of sitting and mocking people and poking fun at their deeds. There are two evils in this: the first, all who multiply words bring about sin (*Avos* 1:17); the second, neglect of Torah study. And imminent in this are the paths of death, for he does not consider that during the time he sat and mocked, he could have learned or performed a mitzvah to acquire life in the World-to-Come.

(5) One who mocks a deed or thing, not because he scorns the thing that he mocks, but mocking in the manner of the jesters in a spirit of frivolity, sometimes being brought to do so by drinking, as it is written (*Mishlei* 20:1): “Wine is a mocker; strong drink is riotous.”

Know that the habit of mockery does not become entrenched in a man until he removes from himself the yoke of Heaven. Therefore, he must accept upon himself the punishment of afflictions, measure for measure, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 28:22): “And now, do not mock, lest your bands be tightened.” And the Sages would warn their students not to engage in mockery, even accidentally or on occasion (*Avodah Zarah* 18b). They had to exhort their students in this regard, for many stumble into mockery by chance.

Mocking the doers of mitzvos borders upon heresy, not believing in mitzvos. It is comparable to mocking the king's commandment — can one live if he does so? Furthermore, such a mocker causes others to sin, for the doer of the mitzvah will thereby be weakened in it, and others will refrain from doing mitzvos for fear of mockery. But mockery of idolaters is permitted (*Sanhedrin* 63b), as is mockery of transgressors for the purpose of removing them from transgression, and, by exposing them to mockery, of deter-ring others from transgressing. And they will thereby merit Gan Eden.