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At the Threshold of the Ineffable: Voice, Speech and Silence as Presences in Spiritual Teaching and Learning Conversation

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For the essence of the Torah is the voice, and speech is the conduct that follows the Torah.
R. Yehuda Arie Leib Alter, Sfat Emet, Devarim.

And as it is written in *Yoma* (72b) on the verse “and a heart they do not have”—[this teaches that] words of Torah require preparation in the heart. And in truth, within [the realm of] words themselves, there is both *voice* and *speech*, as is known: *voice* and *speech* correspond to the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is that which is written and fixed and does not require toil, whereas the Oral Torah is that which requires effort and striving. *R. Tzadok Hacohen, Likutei Ma'amarim, 134.*

Silence is a basic phenomenon. That is to say, it is a primary, objective reality, which cannot be traced back to anything else. It cannot be exchanged by anything else. There is nothing behind it to which it can be related except the Creator Himself. ...

When two people are conversing with one another, a third is always present: Silence is listening. That is what gives breadth to a conversation: when the words are not moving merely within the narrow space occupied by the two speakers, but come from afar, from the place where silence is listening. That gives the words a new fullness. But not only that: the words are spoken as it were *from* the silence, from that third person and the listener receives more than the speaker alone is able to give. Silence is the third speaker in such a conversation.

Max Picard, The World of Silence, 21;25.

The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I would reply: Create silence! The Word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of today. And even if it were blazoned forth with all the panoply of noise so that it could be heard in the midst of all the other noise, then it would no longer be the Word of God. Therefore create Silence. *Søren Kierkegaard: For Self-Examination, 47.*

ישעיהו מ, ג: קול קורֵא אֶבְרָמָה בֶּן פְּנֹחַ דְּרַךְ ה' יִשְׁרוּ בְּעֶרְבָה מִסָּלָה לְאַלְהֵי יוֹ

Isaiah, 40, 3: A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

קול קורֵא אֶבְרָמָה בֶּן פְּנֹחַ דְּרַךְ ה' יִשְׁרוּ בְּעֶרְבָה מִסָּלָה לְאַלְהֵי יוֹ
דְּרַךְ ה' יִשְׁרוּ בְּעֶרְבָה מִסָּלָה לְאַלְהֵי יוֹ
השם יתברך שורה בו.

במדבר ז, טוֹב בֵּא מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֱלֹהֵי מוֹעֵד לֵדְבַר אֲתוֹ וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת הַקּוֹל מִדְּבַר אֱלֹהִים עַל הַכְּפֹרֶת אֲשֶׁר
 רָעָל אֶת הָיְהוָה
 דָּת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם
 כָּרַב יָם וַיֵּדְבַר אֱלֹהִים
 לְיוֹ.

Numbers 7:9: “And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking to him...”

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R. Zeev Wolf of Zhitomyr (1740?-1798), *Or Hameir*, Parshat Tzav

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons, saying, etc. (Leviticus 6:1-2). The intention appears to be along the lines of what we explained elsewhere regarding the verse in Parashat Naso, “And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking 10 to him” (Numbers 7:89). For at times, a person who rebukes in the public gate speaks and instructs beneficially to the people who accompany him—yet why should he enter into the dimension of speech and leave the innerness of his lofty and exalted thoughts about the Creator, blessed be He? For now, as he comes into speech, his prior thoughtfulness disappears from him, since—as is said—“being occupied with escape, he does not swallow” (i.e., when one is preoccupied with escaping, he cannot properly absorb or 15 take in), and it turns out that his gain becomes his loss. See also what we explained on Parashat Tetzaveh, and likewise in several other places (above, 176). Therefore, Scripture comes to teach a person *Da’at*. “And when Moses came...”—this refers to the aspect of *da’at* of the enlightened one (Zohar 2, 221a). “Into the Tent of Meeting”—speech can be metaphorically called the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Mo’ed*), for the reason explained above (see there): because it is only occasional (*zmanim*), at times one utters speech 20 and at times one thinks. In contrast, thought cannot be interrupted even for a brief moment, for from it his life-secret flows. And since, when one’s thought is interrupted, he is liable to die, God forbid—as is well known—and since speech is only occasional, it is called *Ohel Mo’ed*, “Tent of Meeting,” meaning a term of set time and occasion, as the Zohar expounds (Zohar II, 294a).

“**And when Moses came**”—the aspect of *da’at*—“into the Tent of Meeting”, i.e., into the dimension of 25 speech, “to speak with Him”—this means truly “to speak with the intellect and knowledge (וְהַדַּעַת הַשִּׁכְלִי), the benefit of this is great and choice, and one does not lose more than he gains by moving from thought to speech.

For behold, when a person is in the secret of thought, which is a generality needing specification, all is straight and correct in his eyes with regard to what is needed for holy service, for it remains in the 30 general. In contrast, when one wishes to bring the matter from potential to actual, to clothe his thought in words of Torah

to make it understandable to the public, he must clothe the secret of his lucid thought in distinct words, according to the many particulars of perception among the listeners. Consequently, many new particulars of wisdom and advice are added to him in order to draw from the general to the particular. **And know:** when thought is attached and bound to the primordial intellect only for the sake of one's own introspection—relative to his own practice of service—then he does not need to give separate pieces of

advice or divided wisdoms, but only the innermost point of what he himself needs for his service.

Therefore, when the enlightened person begins to utter words of wisdom and moral instruction, then this very speech rebounds into the primordial thought in the mystery of “striking” (a reverberation), and since *da'at* hears its own aspect of speech that flows from it, additional wisdom and counsel, advised for 5 divine service, are added to him, and new delight is born afresh within the inwardness of his service. By contrast, in the absence of speech, one remains only in the secret of the general first thought—the inner point—as explained.

Another great benefit is added when one departs from the inwardness of thought to bring forth speech before God with pure intention: then the combination of the blessed Tetragrammaton (YHVV) is built and 10 refined, as has been mentioned many times. And one who is wise regarding speech will find goodness in constructing and establishing the combination of the great and holy Name in the manner that has been explained to us.

And now, behold and understand the measure of the verse: “*And when Moses came*”—this is *da'at* (knowing consciousness); “*into the Tent of Meeting*”—the aspect of speech; “*to speak with Him*”—to 15 speak in *da'at*; to negate those of lesser worth who speak without *da'at*, whose benefit is false and who possess nothing, and indeed their gain becomes their loss. But the one who is enlightened about his own speech—who speaks together with *da'at*—he “*hears the voice speaking to him*,” as explained earlier in the secret of the “reverberation” (ha'aka), when the original thought strikes back upon itself. Then, additional wisdom and counsel are born within him.

20 **And once** I heard from the Rav R. Mikhel the preacher of the holy community of Zlotchov, who preached publicly and said to them: “Please listen to my words,” and then added, “I do not admonish and command only you, but I also urge myself along with you.” And I understood from his holy words that perhaps he was alluding to the teaching above. This is a great principle: one should not utter words superficially, only from the lips outward, but rather, when one brings *da'at* into one's speech, then the words are heard and 25 enter the heart of the wise-hearted, and they make an impression to arouse their hearts within them. But in the absence of *da'at*, “there is no speech, and there are no words; their voice is not heard in the heart of a person,” for “words that emerge from the heart enter the heart” (*Sefer haYashar* by Rabbeinu Tam, section 313).

And the verse (Malachi 2:7) hints at this: “*For the lips of the priest shall guard da’at*”—meaning to 30 teach that the lips of one who serves the Holy Blessed One, who is called a priest (kohen) in the sense of one who serves (see Rashi on Exodus 29:33), shall guard da’at, meaning “to wait,” as in “and his father guarded the matter” (Genesis 37:11). That is: they delay from uttering speech of Torah or of prayer until the moment that the word comes in conjunction with the aspect of da’at—only then is it completed in speech. If not, one restrains his mouth, holding back from speaking.

And once I heard explicitly from the Maggid, of blessed memory, that he said to us: “I will teach you the best manner of how to speak Torah: it is when one feels absolutely nothing of himself, only an ear that hears how the world of speech speaks within him, and not that he himself is speaking. And the moment he begins to hear his own words, he should stop.” And many times my eyes saw (and I am no stranger) that 5 when he opened his mouth to speak words of Torah, it was visible to all as if he were not in this world at all, and the Shekhinah was speaking from his throat. And at times, even in the middle of an idea, in the middle of a word, he would stop and remain silent for some time. All of this indicates that the enlightened one must wait for da’at, and only then does speech emerge together with da’at, as mentioned: “And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him”—truly “with Him,” with Moses, the aspect of 10 da’at.

And now we return to the matter: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons, saying...” And the great rabbi of the holy community of Polnoye explained in his book Toldot Yaakov Yosef on Parashat Tzav (section 4): “Command Aaron and his sons”—these are the priests, upon whom rests the duty to teach the people the ways of God, to make known to Israel what they should do, to speak 15 to them words of Torah—as in the verse (Malachi 2:7): “For the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge, and they shall seek Torah from his mouth.” This is the meaning of “Command”—He instructed and warned them to speak Torah and moral instruction.

And I say that the verse supports what we have said: “And the Lord spoke to Moses...”—then and also in every generation, whoever contains within himself knowledge (da’at) of his Creator is called “Moses.” 20 The Torah teaches him the beneficial way: “Command” (in Hebrew, tzav) implies connection and togetherness (tzavta), “Aaron and his sons”—these are the priests from whose mouths Torah is to be sought. “Command—you—the aspect of da’at, saying”—that is, connect and join the aspect of da’at within your speech, so that the speech emerges in completeness together with the aspect of da’at. And such words, even if they are few, have great effect—they enter the hearts of people like a burning fire, 25 toward Torah and divine service. Amen.

Or Hameir Tetsaveh

"And you shall command the children of Israel, and they shall take to you pure olive oil, crushed for lighting, to cause a lamp to burn continually" (Exodus 27:20).

30 To approach the explanation, let us turn our attention to the saying of the Sweet Singer of Israel: "I have concealed Your word in my heart, so that I might not sin against You" (Psalms 119:11). For it is already known (Sefer Yetzirah 1:3) that the covenant of circumcision (brit ha-ma'or) and the covenant of speech (brit ha-lashon) are aligned. If a person does not guard the covenant of speech by restraining himself from words, he thereby causes sin upon himself as well, God forbid, with the covenant of circumcision.

35 Therefore, how exceedingly necessary it is for a person to double his vigilance over his mouth and

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tongue, not to utter speech before God—and even when speaking words of Torah and moral instruction to his people, he must contemplate with his intellect whether the people will listen when he speaks with them and whether they will take rebuke to improve their ways in paths of uprightness. If so, how good is his portion.

5 However, if they will not listen and will not understand, and no moral lesson will be taken, then fear and trembling should come upon the speaker, lest he bring forth speech to no avail and become only lacking. How many and how many words of instruction have been spoken without impact.

But one who is wise and discerning regarding his own ways fulfills in himself the verse (Numbers 7:89): "And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking to him." 10 And it has been explained elsewhere that speech can be metaphorically called the Tent of Meeting – (*Ohel Mo'ed*), which indicates an ע and a time—at times one speaks, and at times not. In contrast, thought is perpetual, unceasing thought.

And it is stated (see Zohar III, 273a): "The Shekhinah speaks from Moses' throat," meaning, whoever possesses knowledge (da'at) of his Creator is called "Moses" (Zohar II, 281a), and all the particulars of 15 his speech are the speech of the Shekhinah speaking from his throat. And the verse hints (Numbers 7:89): "And when Moses came..."—this refers to the aspect of da'at of the one who instructs and commands for the good of those truly joined to him; "the Tent of Meeting" is an allusion to the aspect of speech, to speak words of Torah and moral guidance. "And he heard the voice speaking to him"—that is, he himself also hears his voice as if it were speaking to him, in order to fulfill those very words.

20 **And the outcome of this is that**—even if others do not hear or understand his words—still, it does not diminish the worth of the speech that he utters from his mouth, even if it seems to be of no benefit. For in any case, its benefit is not lost, since the voice reaches him as if he is speaking to himself, admonishing himself. And it follows that if he is careful in this, he cannot come to sin, God forbid, through speaking slander or useless words.

25 **And one may allude to this in the words of King David**, peace be upon him (Psalms 119:11): "I have

concealed Your word in my heart [so that I might not sin against You].” That is, the words of wisdom and moral instruction that I spoke before the multitude—I concealed them within my heart for my own benefit, for the service of the Blessed Creator, as it is said: “He heard the voice speaking to him.” And the benefit: “so that I might not sin against You”—this implies a sense of lacking, that I not cause a deficiency in words of Torah and moral instruction, in case I speak and they do not understand, and no moral instruction is taken, and I become only a loss within Your words.

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Or Hameir, Hukat

... And behold, we see that even in a simple voice, the letters of speech are included. And this is your sign: when the people cry out in the midst of their prayer with a simple voice, without articulating combinations of words—what is the intention in this? When a person experiences a sudden awakening and great fervor, the constriction of a specific word is not enough to contain and clothe the arousal of his thought. Therefore, his heart cries out in a simple voice. And in truth, within that simple voice is encompassed all the desires of his heart in a general way.

And thus we request from the Blessed One: “Hear our cry and attend to our utterance”—that is, “our cry” refers to a simple voice without particular words, and still, “our utterance” is also present there—for in the simple voice, the letters of thought are clothed, as mentioned.

The general principle to be heard: the enlightened person must reflect when approaching Torah or prayer. Then, with wisdom, before entering the realm of speech, there too he must build and prepare the “house”—a metaphor for the word he wishes to utter—so that afterward, when the five outlets of the mouth come to shape the voice, the Name of the Blessed YHVH will be formed and completed, as it is explained in the verse (Exodus 33:7): “All who sought YHVH went out to the Tent of Meeting.” And this is called “making a dwelling for the Shekhinah,” meaning that in the world of speech, the Name of the Blessed YHVH is built.

But the fool who does not take this to heart—he, too, may cry out in Torah and prayer, and though his voice is heard from afar with a bitter cry, he himself is very far from those words. And even if he gives rebuke and instruction, wisdom and ethical teaching, he despises his own message and Torah, for surely the words emerge only from the lips and outward. And this is not what God has chosen as a leader and commander of His people, for the benefit is little, and its impression is not recognized above, nor below in the hearts of people.

Not so the one whose heart has been touched by the fear of God—he weighs in the balance of his reason, 25 according to how he senses in himself the fervor and apprehension of divinity, in the aspect of his service with love and awe, both in revealed and hidden dimensions. In such a state, he opens his mouth in Torah and ethical teaching to guide the path of truth in which others should walk. And when this is the case, then thought and speech are bound in a strong and firm bond.

And at the very least, it is proper that even if he is not currently in a state of purification and divine 30 enthusiasm, and nevertheless he must at times open his mouth in Torah and ethical teaching—because of those who come and go to hear the word of God—when such a time arrives, it is fitting that he ask and entreat the Blessed One to grant him clarity and purification with fervor, according to his current state, in the explanation of Torah and ethics that he comprehends and is speaking to others. And he should hear the voice speaking to him, and these words should enter his own heart, to serve the Blessed One with the very 35 understanding he is now expressing.

Even though his soul knows very well that he has not served the Blessed Holy One with the Torah and ethical teachings he is now compelled to express, still he prays for the future—to distinguish from those persons who work deceit and falsehood with their right hand, who exalt themselves, and to whom the secrets of Torah have also been given. They draw from them counsel to know how to mislead the weary 5 with teachings. They speak beautifully and preach, and many they return from iniquity. They open their mouths without boundary, but in truth their tongues are sharpened arrows, and what emerges from their mouths is as distant from them as east is from west. They have never fulfilled in themselves those words to serve the Blessed Holy One with them.

Behold, such people—certainly there is no restraint to their spirit, and whatever falls into their thought 10 they expel outward. And know with certainty: this was not the Torah’s intention in those hints and simple interpretations that they fabricated from their hearts, for their heart is not with them.

And similarly, there are people who cry out in prayer with a bitter voice—beyond the measure of their actual cleaving, love, and fear of the Blessed Creator. And in their heart, they possess very little divinity. Consequently, their heart and their mouth are not aligned. Know with certainty: there are no words whose 15 voice is heard above, unless they are rooted in the heart, as explained in the interpretation of the verse (Exodus 25:27): “Opposite the frame shall be the rings.” This teaches that the content of the words must align with the innerness of his thought, that it be enclosed and bound. So too, the rings symbolize the quality of the voice that emerges from the rings of the windpipe.

And this is also the allusion in the phrase “houses for poles”—to teach the above: the “houses” are the 20 words of Torah and prayer; they must truly be equal to the “poles”—these are the thoughts imagined from the innerness of the heart. One must not raise his voice beyond the level of divine fervor present in his thought.

For then his mouth and heart are not aligned, and his Torah and prayer are abominable, and the benefit is slight—for it makes no impression above. Since the fool does not desire understanding, to produce speech of truth—where his heart and mouth are aligned—therefore his benefit is small. 25 But when they are aligned, his benefit is great: he joins the final heh of the Name YHVH to the voice, and the voice receives illumination from a higher level. And with the arousal from below, there is likewise arousal above, in the place hinted at. And it turns out that someone like this is “bald from both sides”: his speech makes no impression above, and below, among those who come to hear the word of God, the words do not enter their hearts. Just as they were taken in, so they are expelled, and they are not engraved 30 on the tablet of the heart—for only words that emerge from the heart enter the heart.