

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

16th Elul – 16th September

A religious woman was being interviewed once about her faith, and in the course of the conversation the interviewer asked her what she said to God when she prayed. "I don't say anything," she replied. "I just listen." "And when you listen," said the interviewer, "what does God say?" "He doesn't say anything," she replied. "He just listens." And before the bewildered journalists could say anything more, she added, "And if you don't understand that, I can't explain it to you."

Judaism is a very noisy religion. We pray loudly together. When we sit and study, we do so in pairs or groups. We debate, gesticulate, pound the table as if the fate of the world depended on the outcome of a disagreement between two rabbis from the 2nd or the 12th centuries. We argue with a passion going to any *Bet Midrash* and you'll hear an inspiring buzz of students immersing themselves in the words of terror the divine speech heard of Mount Sinai on which according to Jewish tradition has echoed ever since.

Years ago in a television series on the world's great faiths the presenter turned his attention to Judaism. Among those he interviewed was the Holocaust survivor and writer, the late Elie Wiesel. "Professor Wiesel," he said obviously taken aback by this impression of our faith, "Judaism seems to be a very talkative sort of faith. Tell me, are there any silences in Judaism?" "Judaism is full of silences," replied Wiesel. "It's just we don't talk about them."

Our faith is about the noise, but it's also about silence. The silence beneath speech. There's a very fine passage in Psalms 19: "*Hashamayim misaprim kavod k'el...*" "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech. Night after night they communicate knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard".

In other words, under girding, all human speech is that sense of something more deeply interfused which is the song of creation to its creator. Beneath the noise there is the music, but to hear it we need to create a silence in the soul. We have to learn to listen and listening is an art. One of the greatest there is.

In fact we can define it more precisely. Almost 100 years ago, the young anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, after fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea reflected on the role of speech in societies primitive and modern. He came to a remarkable conclusion, born out by recent psycholinguistics. Most conversation isn't what we assume it to be, the exchange of information, instead talk, in his words, serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship.

Speech joins. It creates relationship. It involves an almost tangible sense of the presence of an other. We call communication 'staying in touch' as if it were a kind of embrace, which actually it is. Malinowski called this "phatic communion", meaning the connection formed when two people talk regardless of what they say, there is a music beneath the words, and we can say what it is. It's the encounter of two persons in which each recognises in the other an answering presence. Someone else is there attending to us, listening, responding to our being, confirming our existence. Speech is intimately related to the social, to our need to belong to something larger than the self.

During Elul, Rosh Hashanah and the *aseret yemei teshuva*, we spend a lot of time in shul, reaching out to God in conversation, as it were, about who we are as individuals and what kind of life we wish to lead.

Prayer is the act of listening to God listening to us. That is phatic communion when our soul reaches out to the soul of the universe, to God Himself. Yes, there are words, many of them. There's a text, a liturgy, a *machzor*, a proper order of prayer, the libretto constructed by generation after generation of men and women of faith as they search for the words that would best express their collective thanks to heaven and their hopes for heaven's grace. But there's also a listening beyond words, a silence that gives meaning to speech. In that silence we know and are known by God, so we've over the coming weeks, you sometimes find the *davening* too complex or too long. Remember that prayer said in silence can be just as powerful as those said out loud, and in that silence we listen to God listening to us.