

Stop and Listen to the Silence Rosh Hashanah

By Rabbi Jason Miller

One year ago this week, a bizarre legal battle in London made international news. You see, a British composer named Mike Batt chose to include a song entitled "A One Minute Silence" on his rock band's album. The song, by the way, is just that - one minute of complete silence. He was accused of copying it from a work by the late American composer John Cage, whose 1952 composition "4'33" was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of total silence.

I swear, I'm not making this up. At the beginning of the court case, Mike Batt was actually quoted as saying that his song "is a much better silent piece. I have been able to say in one minute what Cage could only say in four minutes and 33 seconds." I'm happy to report that the matter was settled out of court by Batt, who paid an undisclosed six-figure sum to the John Cage Trust Fund. I tell you this story not for the legal ramifications of plagiarizing a song with no sound, although that does sound pretty silly, but rather for us to contemplate the importance of silence.

Today is the first day of Rosh Hashanah. And if you ask any child the name of the ritual object most often associated with this holiday, they are likely to respond "the shofar." The shofar is, after all, our "wake up call." That loud, trumpet-like sound emanating from the ram's horn is a powerful noise to our senses this time of year. It is a sound we are so used to hearing. During the past month in synagogues throughout the world, the sound of the shofar has been heard each morning at daily services. For some of us, it is our favorite part of the Rosh Hashanah service. And yet, because today is not only Rosh Hashanah, but also Shabbat, we will not hear from the shofar today.

Many rabbis claim that they are never really certain how to handle this omission from the service. Imagine going to a baseball game and sitting through seven long innings only to discover that the classic "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" will not be sung. Imagine the audience members at a performance of John Cage's 4'33 when the musician takes the stage, sits at a piano, and performs silence. Or when it is performed by a full orchestra, with a hundred or so musicians taking their seats with all the pomp and circumstance, only to leave the listeners engulfed in that sea of silence.

Traditionally, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah coincides with Shabbat, we skip over all sections that require the blowing of the shofar. A couple of years ago, however, I heard of a synagogue that decided to try something different. They went through the calls for the shofar, but then, instead of hearing the notes stemming from the ram's horn, they heard the power of silence.

We can imagine that it sounded something like this:

Teki'ah [silence] Sh'varim Teru'ah [silence] Teki'ah [silence]

Teki'ah [silence] Sh'varim [silence] Teki'ah [silence]

It's quite possible that the sound of complete silence following the calls for the shofar are more intense, more powerful than had we just heard the actual shofar. It is that sense of anticipation. The feeling that we know what is yet to come, but it never does, and we are left unshakable in the silence.

It also leaves us asking ourselves, what is silence? How does silence affect us? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Do we have enough silence in our lives? One of the most poignant scenes in the entire Torah, in my opinion, is the aftermath of the sudden death of Aaron's sons at the hand of God. To jog your memory, Moses' brother Aaron is the High Priest, and his sons are the priests of lower rank. When two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, are struck down by God for questionable actions, our attention turns to Aaron. What will his response be to this tragedy? The text tells us, Vayidom Aharon - "And Aaron was silent."

We must marvel at this reaction. After all, we know that Aaron was a very vocal person. He was the spokesperson for the Israelite people since Moses wasn't much of a communicator himself. And yet, here, when we expect him to cry out to God, to question this disturbing death punishment, Aaron is silent. And it is a biting silence.

Sometimes it is the silence that is the loudest sound of all. But we have to listen for those moments of silence. We have to listen for them and become comfortable with them. Humans have a tendency to be uncomfortable with silence. We dread the awkward silences that occur during conversations.

We rarely sit alone in silence. If the TV is not on, then we are listening to music. We go for a walk, and we wear headphones. We even buy CDs from the Sharper Image store with recorded noises to help us relax. We always feel the need for background noise.

Many of us do not take advantage of the time set aside for silent worship in synagogue. The silent Amidah is your time and you should embrace it. If you can't pray in the Hebrew, or if the English translation doesn't move you at that particular moment, take advantage of those moments of silence. Use them to meditate, to reflect, and to relax. During the silent Amidah, which is coming up next, I hope we will all commit ourselves to using that time well. Remember to pause and to listen to the silence.

Our tradition has it that the prophet Elijah received a vision from God right before his death teaching him the greatest secret about the Holy One. Running for his life, Elijah sought God, but did not find God in the fire, or in the earthquake, or in the storm. The Divine presence, Elijah learned, was not to be found in any loud experience at all, but rather in "a small silent voice" - kol demama daka.

And we will hear this repeated in a short while. We will recite the Unetaneh Tokef section of the service saying "The great shofar is sounded (u'v'shofar gadol yitaka); a small silent voice is heard (v'kol d'mama daka yishama). When we listen intently to the silence, it's amazing what we can discover. We can hear the sound of the shofar that is not blown. We can discover the Divine presence of God. We can find peace and contentment.

We shouldn't wait for a memorial service to observe a moment of silence. We need to not let the opportunities for a moment's silence pass us by without taking advantage of them. If you are sitting at a red light, I encourage you to turn off the radio, don't pick up the cell phone, and just sit and hear the void of sound. Sit in a dark, secluded room every once in a while and just think. You might be surprised at how much silence you've been missing out on all these years.

I'd like to close by sharing with you the words from two poems about silence. The first is from The Prophet, by a Lebanese poet, philosopher, and artist named Kahlil Gibran:

You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts;

And when you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips, and sound is a diversion and a pastime...

For thought is a bird of space, that in a cage of words many indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly...

The silence of aloneness reveals to their eyes their naked selves and they would escape.

And there are those who talk, and without knowledge or forethought reveal a truth which they themselves do not understand.

And there are those who have the truth within them, but they tell it not in words.

In the bosom of such as these the spirit dwells in rhythmic silence..."

And finally, I leave you with these words from Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's song "The Sounds of Silence."

And in the naked light I saw, Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening,
People writing songs, that voices never share.
And no one dared, Disturb the sound of silence.

<Moment of Silence>

About his four minute and thirty-three second song of complete silence, John Cage said, "What really pleases me in that silent piece is that it can be played any time, but [it] only comes alive when you play it. And each time you do, it is an experience of being very, very much alive."

In this new year of 5764, let us seek out those rare moments of silence and really make the effort to hear them. Silence can be prayer. It can be meditation. It can be the shofar. It can be a poem or a song. It can be the Holy One Blessed Be God. Silence can be a blessing. Silence is golden. Give it a try.

Shanah Tovah - a happy and healthy New Year, and Shabbat Shalom.