



THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

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We're taught calculus and economics, US History and British Literature in school, but we're hardly taught anything at all about how to get quiet, how to find awe, to cultivate conscience, to develop a moral compass. We start the year with a call to stillness: a reordering of our inner world. A discernment practice that is both spiritually and morally audacious, and utterly essential today.

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A month after our oldest daughter, Eva, was born, something miraculous happened. We put her to bed at 630pm and she awoke at 630am. We thought it was a fluke, but then it happened again the next night, and then the next. We were astonished.

Admittedly, it made things a little awkward when we'd spend time with other parents of newborns. Whenever the conversation inevitably turned to sleeplessness, David and I would glance at one another across the room, left only to conclude that we were, somehow, just unusually gifted at parenting.

It was two and a half years later, when Sami was born, that we learned that revenge is a dish best served between 1am and 7am, every morning for five years.

Anyway, this is not a sermon about humble parenting, or revenge. But I do want to start by saying that once again I'm not sleeping so well these past few weeks, or past few years. And I suspect I'm not alone.

We'll soon hear the sound of the shofar, whose jarring blasts are like a spiritual alarm clock, designed to stir the soul from its slumber. It's a moral awakening we're striving for, the first step toward *teshuvah*, the possibility of transformation that is the hallmark of the High Holy Days. The spiritual architects of our Jewish tradition are desperate to ensure that we don't sleep through the revolution.

But this year, maybe we're already awake? It's the floods in New York City and New Jersey, tornadoes in Philly. Devastation in New Orleans and fires in Tahoe. Repression: the dystopian "fetal heartbeat" law in Texas that simultaneously harkens back to the Fugitive Slave Laws and heralds a new era in the assault on women's health and autonomy. And suppression: the recall effort in California and widespread voter disenfranchisement around the country, cynical

attempts to subvert the will of the majority. It's the images of the tarmac in Kabul, and unthinkable loss in Haiti. And watching our ICUs fill up with COVID patients again, this time with teens and children on the front lines.

The problem is not that we're sleeping through it all, the problem is that we can't sleep at all.

Nevertheless, we'll soon rise to hear the shofar's call, hoping that it somehow might pierce the layers of scar tissue around our hearts.

But this year, I want you to pay attention to an almost absurdly audacious move, when moments after the shofar blasts, our liturgy will undercut their very power:

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע וְקוֹל דְּמִמָּה דִקְהָה יִשְׁמַע

The great shofar is sounded, but it's the still small voice that's heard.

The still small voice... that's a reference to the story from I Kings of the prophet Elijah, who stood alone on the mountain—the same mountain where the people received divine revelation generations before—when suddenly:

...A great and strong wind tore through the mountains, and broke the rocks in pieces... but God was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard that, he wrapped his face in his cloak... and behold: God's voice came to him. (I Kings 19:11-13)

God is not in the fire, but in the whisper. God is not in the flood, the hurricane, the moments of cataclysmic havoc, when the world trembles. God is in the in between spaces. God is in the stillness.

The great shofar is sounded. It may awaken you, but it won't change you. *It is the still small voice that is heard* in the depths of your very being.

But I wonder: could we even hear our own inner voice above the grief and sorrow, the rage and moral confusion of our time?

We're taught calculus and economics, US History and British Literature in school, but we're hardly taught anything at all about how to get quiet, how to be still. We know we need to care for our bodies, but we rarely talk about caring for our souls. How much time and resource do we dedicate to the cultivation of an interior life: the development of awe, the awareness of the beauty, mystery, wonder of life itself? To the creation of a moral compass, the development of conscience? How can we to get quiet enough to discern what's actually right?

These questions are always with us, but we give them even greater weight during the High Holy Days, this time of *heshbon hanefesh*, when we're called to prioritize the inner work. And

especially today, in this time of compounding and accelerating crises, when the heart cries out for calm, comfort and moral clarity.

Our Rosh Hashanah observance is punctuated each year by two Torah readings, one today and one tomorrow, both character studies of Abraham from the Book of Genesis. I want to ask us to consider today what our Rabbis might have intended for us to learn by placing two harrowing Abraham tales as the central narratives of this holiday, two stories of a man confronting his responsibilities and his limitations, not primarily as a leader but as a parent.

A word of context to today’s reading: Abraham has been promised by God that he’ll be a great nation (Gen 12:2), with offspring as numerous as the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5). But he and Sarah cannot conceive. And they’re getting old, so time is running out. In desperation, Sarah suggests that Abraham take Hagar, מִצְרַיִת מִצִּיִּץ-- their Egyptian handmaid, and have a child with her (Gen 16:1). Abraham dutifully marries Hagar, and they have a boy named Ishmael, “for God has heard your prayer.” (Blessed be the fruit.)

Today’s story picks up a few chapters later, Gen 21, when Sarah, too, has miraculously, in her old age, given birth to a boy of her own named Yitzhak, Isaac. Not long after his birth, Sarah’s jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael begins to consume her. We don’t know what exactly Ishmael does to spark her ire. The text indicates simply that he was מִצְחַק, playing with his little brother. Our Rabbis of course read layers of meaning into this word, prone as we are toward confirmation bias: surely he did something nefarious to justify our matriarch Sarah’s extreme response—was it a threat, a violent assault, maybe idol worship? All that, even as the *peshat*, the obvious read of our text indicates that it was likely, simply, a toxic combination of prejudice and power. “Get rid of this slave-woman and her son,” Sarah says, “for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Gen 21:10). It’s ugly.

Abraham is torn up by Sarah’s demand. He loves Ishmael and can’t imagine sending him away. But God dismisses his concerns: *don’t worry about the boy or the slave, God says. Just listen to Sarah. She knows what’s right.* The matter is settled; Abraham’s conscience is suppressed. He will comply.

The very next morning וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם | בַּבֹּקֶר-- Abraham rises early, packs some bread and water and sends Hagar and Ishmael away. Note here that in the ancient world, sending a child and a woman out into the desert, unaccompanied, was essentially a death sentence, despite God’s hint to Abraham that they’d be ok. The narrative ends as we, the reader, learn that Hagar and Ishmael are miraculously saved. Abraham remains ignorant of that fact, however, left to believe that he essentially killed his wife and child.

That terrible rupture, which we read today, is the context for the story we read tomorrow morning, the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac.

Once again, an outside voice-- this time, God’s-- comes to tell Abraham to do the unthinkable, to take his remaining beloved son up a mountain and slaughter him for God. (וְקָח אֶת-בְּנוֹ אֶת-יִצְחָק.)

ךְיִחִיד-- *Your son, your only son...* because the other son has already presumably died in the desert!) This time, the text offers no indication of Abraham's heartache or distress. He is numb. Perhaps he learned from the last encounter to disregard his anguished heart. Less thought, more action! וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר-- Once again, he gets up early in the morning and obediently, robotically, fanatically heads up the mountain to murder his now only child. His future. He remains single minded, laser focused on the task at hand, even when confronted by Isaac's searing question: *We have the fire and the wood, Abba, לַעֲלֹה הַשֶּׁה לְאִיָּהּ* but where's the sheep for the sacrifice? (Gen 22:7).

But then, just at the moment of truth, knife above the boy's neck, Abraham *pauses*.

It is that pause that I am most interested in. That pause, a lacuna-- the empty space between the dark letters of our text. So subtle, you could miss it, were it not for the screaming logic of it: How else could a man, so feverish in his desire to fulfill God's will, have heard the quiet whisper of an angel, calling him to put down his knife? How else could this train barreling off the cliff of human decency, have stopped in its tracks?

I wonder if you've ever pursued something (or someone) with that kind of intoxicating fervor? When the heat of desire is so relentless that it drowns out all voices of reason—internal and external. Something must have switched inside Abraham to pull him back from the edge.

Luckily, I'm not alone in reading a pause here—invisible, but wholly significant. Emmanuel Levinas, the great French philosopher, reads the Akeidah not as a story of blind obedience, but instead as the very essence of *ethical disobedience*.¹ How could this be so?

Levinas, too, perceives that something causes Abraham to be still long enough to hear the voice of compassion, reason, moral urgency. That unwritten moment is "the highest point of the drama," according to Levinas, the moment that brings Abraham back to the ethical order and makes it impossible for him to harm the child.² The sacrifice is aborted. The boy survives.

The significance of the story, then, is not that Abraham is willing to take the life of his child. We already know that from the way he treats Ishmael! The significance is that unlike one chapter earlier when Abraham disengages his conscience and sends one son off to die, this time his conscience prevails and he saves another. His moral compass is activated. He's able to hear the still small voice when it matters most, and that voice compels him to embrace life.

Today I hear this with a great sense of urgency: how can we find the stillness to hear the inner voice, particularly in the crush of a chaotic, cacophonous, often violent world?

¹ See Katharine Loevy, [Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy](#), Volume 16, Issue 2, Spring 2012.

² "That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing. That he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice, *that is the essential*." Levinas, A Propos de "Kierkegaard vivant," [Proper Names](#), p. 76-77, 1937. (With gratitude to R' Danya Ruttenberg for making this connection.)

I've heard Rep. Barbara Lee's speech just after 9/11 on replay these past few weeks, the sole voice in Congress opposing the Authorization for Unlimited Military Force in the war on terror. There she stood, twenty years ago, trembling, saying that she could rely only on her "moral compass, [her] conscience, and [her] God for direction." I have wondered: how did she hear that voice? And what about us... could we even access our own moral compass, our conscience, our God?

The UN issued a CODE RED for the planet last month. "The alarm bells are deafening," said the Secretary-General. And that was before the NYC subway stations flooded like a scene from some horror movie. Climate devastation, poverty, pandemic, racism, a society seemingly collapsing on itself.

We're not the ones deciding to send troops overseas, or when or how to withdraw them. But every one of us, in this bewildering time, is making decisions every day that require the ability to hear our own inner voice above the din and drumbeat of our time. There's a massive gray area that consumes much of the space in our world today, in which we're being called to make hard calls—about our health and safety and our childrens', about our willingness to comply with or defy unjust norms and even laws. (I know this, because these are the things people often call their rabbis about.)

And yet, it's harder every day to create a clearing. The noise is real, the stakes are high, and we're exhausted. Full of grief and worry, shock and outrage. Bereft of sleep. Further than ever from moral clarity and purpose.

You know me. I try to shake us out of our complacency and indifference. To help us recognize the fierce urgency of now, and bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

And yet here I am, as we enter this new year, begging us to find *stillness*.

Stillness is not *me time*. It's not service of the self, and it's not trained passivity. It's not trading activism for mindfulness.

I'm talking about stillness as a reordering of our inner world. A discernment practice, spiritually and morally audacious. A reminder to dream, to think, to see differently.

Because especially in times like these, times of turmoil and upheaval and so much heartache, stillness is not only a spiritual necessity, but a moral one. Because the impulsive, reactive, science-denying, profit-driven, power-craving madness that has taken hold of our culture today is literally endangering our lives, our planet, and our future.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote that the ultimate purpose of Judaism is "to honor the image of God in other people, and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence." That is surely the driving force of my Jewish life, and the lifeblood of our community.

This is an ambitious, eternal goal, and one generation after the next is fueled in its pursuit by Shabbat, the central organizing principle of our faith. A holy day, a day of stillness, amidst the raging storm of life. A moment of breath, in the breathlessness of existence. Think of the power of this idea: week after week, year after year, every seventh day is dedicated not to transforming our reality, but to living in it with gratitude. One day every week to rest, to sing, to imagine, to dream what's possible. (And also to nap.) To be still.

Shabbat is an invitation to step out of the anguish of the moment and honor the still small voice. Then to reenter the landscape of human striving and human suffering with a renewed sense of clarity and purpose.

And just as our weeks are oriented around a seven day cycle, so too are our years. What shabbat is to the individual and the community, *shmita* is to the land and the greater society. The Torah prescribes a year of fallow, which will allow the people and the land to heal and regenerate. Today, the first day of the year 5782, we enter that sacred seventh year. (We'll dive deep into learning around *shmita* this year, to see how we can meaningfully embrace this practice.)

For now, I need you to know that *Shmita* is more than an ancient, ambitious set of agricultural practices. *Shmita* and Shabbat are rooted in a radical, powerful, dangerous idea: the idea that we are called to manifest a just, loving, wakeful society, a counter-testimony to the world of oppression and degradation our ancestors experienced in Egypt and we experience in so many ways today.

R' Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, writes a treatise on *shmita* in 1909 called [Shabbat haAretz](#). Here is the essence of his argument:

There is a callousness that inevitably develops in our lives-- full of toil, anxiety, anger, and competition-- which deteriorates our moral standard. It creates a tension between the inner voice that calls us to practice love and live honestly, to practice compassion and empathy on one hand—and oppression, conflict, compulsion, coercion, and the quest for material gain on the other. These things distance us from the Divine light, and permeate the morality of individuals like poison. It takes the periodic suspension of the normal social routine to raise the nation spiritually and morally..., returning it to wholeness.

Rav Kook saw periodic stillness, for the earth and for our hearts, as a moral mandate, one our very existence depends on. Our world is convulsing in anguish. We must get still to re-encounter the goodness within, to hear the inner voice of conscience that Abraham finally accessed in the heat of his sacrificial fervor.

Of course, rabbis preach the sermons we need to hear. I admit: it has been hard for me to find that stillness, myself, these past several years. But over the years, I have touched it. It's often in the hardest moments, when we no longer have any use at all for words. I can now look back at the last 18 years of IKAR's existence and see the film reel speeding through moments of trial

and triumph, ecstasy and struggle, but with certain scenes of sacred stillness appearing in my mind's eye in slow-motion:

It's when we've held hands at the bedside of a beloved, helping usher them out of this world, giving them permission to go and promising we will never let them disappear.

It's when we've stood in silence beside one other at the setting sun on Tashlikh, the Pacific Ocean at our toes, tossing into the sea our darkest fears and deepest confessions, even as we know they'll be washed right back up to where we stand.

It's when we've caught a glimpse of one of our kids up at the Torah table, discovering their voice, despite their certainty that they just couldn't do it.

It's when we've breathed deeply, tallises over our heads, knowing after the isolation that we'd never again take for granted the simple gift of standing together, lifting our voices to meet each other in harmony.

It's when we've found each other, again and again, as the whole world turned upside down and so many around us were swept up in the fevered dream of the big, dangerous lie.

It's in the midst of the twirl and swirl of Simhat Torah when the world has gone still for a moment as new love is born, and it's when I see you, under the huppah, gazing at each other with hopeful eyes.

It's when we've found a way to dance, even though we hurt so much.

It's at the graveside, when we've knelt down together to place earth with our own hands on the coffin of a beloved, taken from this world too soon.

It's when we've wept together, from the depths of sorrow and it's when we sing together, from that same sorrow.

And it's also when I'm back home, after the protest or the fire, after the disco break fast or the deathbed vidui. Those moments when I feel the weight of the work, the privilege of being alive, the blessing of being so close to such beauty and such pain.

These are the moments I'm most grateful for, especially when the scope and scale of horror and tragedy and crisis around us nearly knock the wind out of me. It's there that I can hear the voice inside that calls me, as Rav Kook suggested, back to *love and honesty, to compassion and empathy*.

What I learn from these moments is that we need to honor the interior landscape of our lives, the beauty and wonder and stillness, because that's where we find each other, and that's where we find ourselves.

On this Rosh Hashanah, even as we open our hearts to the sound of the shofar, to the cries of the anguished, to the earthquakes and wind and fire and floods and pandemic, I pray that we make space, too, for the stillness, where the small, quiet, beautiful truths are hidden.

I wish you a *shanah tovah*—a year of health and healing.