

There is a famous – or, perhaps if you prefer, infamous – piece of music from 1952 by American avant-garde composer John Cage called *Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds*. In the classic version of this piece a performer, in full concert dress, takes the stage before the audience, bows, and goes to a splendid grand piano arranged center stage. The performer sits... and sits, and keeps sitting, not playing a note, for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, at which point he or she gets up, bows, and walks off, the piece now complete. As you well might expect, Cage's 'composition' provoked a lot of strong reactions when it was first performed. Some audience members felt duped that they were attending a concert and instead of hearing music they were hearing... nothing. Now Cage's point in creating the piece is that they weren't, in fact, hearing nothing: that when a piece of music is performed live, the piece consists of the notes but also of the other sounds in the concert hall made by the performers and the audience, as well as any other ambient noise that might be present. With 4:33, Cage was trying to call attention to that aspect, inviting the audience to become co-collaborators in the piece and to realize how much sound – coughing, rustling of papers, shuffling of feet – there actually is in the so-called silence.

As a rabbi I am constantly reminded of this. Every time, for example, we enter a silent Amidah I immediately become attuned to how much sound, in fact, there is throughout the room. With our voices quiet we become more acutely aware of people shifting their weight or flipping pages, of the cars on Camp Hill Road and the birds in the trees, of the children calling out cheerfully from the next room. A couple of weeks ago, at family Shabbat, I invited us into our silent Amidah and a baby immediately started crying – and since we weren't making as much other noise there was nothing to distract us from the sound of her cries even as her mother hurried her into the community room and tried to soothe her. Not exactly silence. Which leads me to the thing that I personally think makes 4:33 a brilliant composition. It's not so much the fact that there is always noise all around us; it's a question of the way silence – or what passes for silence – changes the intensity with which we listen. Dressed for an evening out, sitting in a concert hall, the concertgoers in that moment are primed to listen. When the pianist comes out but doesn't start playing, this is unexpected; they lean forward in their seats and listen harder. When 4:33 is done right, the performer and audience collaborate in a period of attentive, sustained listening. The silence in that hall isn't like a silence that simply just happens by accident; it is a powerful silence, charged with concentrated, intentional listening... the kind of listening that sometimes only silence can bring out in us.

Silence is a powerful thing. It's an opening, an invitation... an opportunity. Silence offers us space to explore, to encounter. Perhaps this is why silence makes some people uncomfortable: it's a powerful force that takes away the distractions of the everyday and pares things down to their essence. For some people it can be overwhelming: the silence, as they say, is deafening. Some of us become deeply uncomfortable and will do anything to block out silence or to fill it – hence the proliferation of coughs and creaky chairs during a performance of 4:33. But all this is testament to the deep power of silence to destabilize and recalibrate our focus. In that way silence is like a vast desert, stretching out in all directions without as many prominent features or landmarks to help us orient ourselves. In that vastness of space we can become lost; or else we can become attuned to the subtler contours and shapes that are still there to guide us if we can only slow down and learn how to look more carefully.

In Jewish thought, the desert, the *midbar*, is the space of encounter with God. It is the wide open space, a space of connection, a space where Torah can be revealed. It is in this sense the prophet Jeremiah imagines God saying to Israel, “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the *midbar*, in a land that was not sown.” (Jer. 2:2) God recalls the closeness of the connection fostered by the shared encounter in the desert in loving, intimate terms. And I think that this is the reason that the desert is similar to silence: they are both spaces of deep intimacy. Think about it: with someone that we are truly comfortable with, someone that we love, we can share long stretches of contented silence, spaces that we don’t need to try to fill with artificial signposts or markers. Without words crowding things out or getting in the way, silence allows for more direct and immediate connection. With people we don’t know, though, silence robs us of that screen of words that we normally erect between ourselves and the world, between our personas and allowing ourselves simply to *be* – which is something we’re not generally good at doing. In the movie *Pulp Fiction*, following a lengthy pause in the conversation, Uma Thurman’s character remarks to John Travolta, whom she has just met, “Why do we feel it’s necessary to yak about [nonsense] in order to be comfortable?... That’s when you know you’ve found somebody special. When you can just shut the [hell] up for a minute and comfortably enjoy the silence.” (In the spirit of the holiday and full disclosure, I should say that, given that this is a Quentin Tarantino movie, the actual dialogue is a little stronger than that).

Enjoying the silence, even embracing it, is a practice, a discipline, not something easy or automatic for most of us. It’s no surprise that Cage’s 4:33 grew out of his interest in Zen Buddhism, with its focus on restraint and meditation: the piece is an unexpected encounter with a nothingness that many people actively avoid. Judaism, by contrast, does not find nothingness in the silence. Rather, it finds God: it finds loving, abiding presence which permeates all reality. The prophet Elijah discerns God in “the still, small voice” (1 King 19:12) and the Kabbalists described God as *Ein Sof*, the quality of boundlessness, a limitless potential that precedes any shape or form. In silence, we are able to strip away all the adornments and distractions of this world to focus on a deeper level of reality and being. It is in this sense that the Psalmist declares, “*Lecha dumiyah tehilah*” – “to You[, God,] silence is praise.” (Ps. 65:2) Why? Because silence is the place of intimacy and presence. Just as the Israelites encountered God in the open space of the desert, we can best encounter God in the openness of silence.

The midrash, fittingly, imagines complete silence at that moment of encounter in the desert. At the instant the Torah was revealed, “[N]o bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the angelic *ophanim* stirred a wing, the *seraphim* did not say ‘*Kadosh, kadosh,*’ the sea did not roar, the creatures did not speak, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence...” (Exodus Rabbah 29.9) The image of the whole world holding its breath in anticipation of revelation suggests that of an audience at a cosmic staging of 4:33 leaning forward, straining, so *ready* to hear and receive. And there is wisdom not just that comes *out* of the silence, but *in* the silence itself. The midrash teaches us that Torah is written in black fire on white fire – the black fire of the words written against the white fire of the parchment. (Y. Shelamim 6.1) The black fire has a specific form and content: it is the words of Torah, each with its own letters and sounds. But the white fire is just as much part of Torah as the black fire is: the silent spaces in between and around the words, the silence from which speech arises and

which is an intrinsic, integral part of the text. It is from this white fire, the rabbis say, that midrash emerges, for it is in these ambiguous and expansive silent spaces that discernment, interpretation, and insight can flourish.

Silence is not a quality our culture values or supports. Customer service hold time and elevator rides are filled with music, piped in to cover over the silent wait. Everywhere we go, it seems, the need for a background soundtrack rears its head: screens foisting news and advertisements at us as we pump our gas, muzak while we sit in the dentist's chair, blaring music to pump the fans up during every time out at the stadium. Noise far too often drowns out what Simon and Garfunkel termed "the sound of silence." In fact, in our current discourse, we have to shout to make ourselves heard over the literal and metaphorical noise – the constant hum of social media, non-stop ads trying to vie for our attention, the talking heads on cable news shouting over each other. Noise piles on top of more noise and the only way to be heard, it seems, is to try to be even louder. Silence is crowded out, and so we are constantly carried along on an unthinking wall of sound. Thoughtful and intentional silence can be a grounding counter-balance, reaffirming *being* in a society that pushes us to do, do, do. Silence can help us cut through the clutter to focus on what is most truly important. In our time, silence is radically countercultural.

Silence is such an important part of prayer in part for this reason – it involves stepping outside of the noise of the everyday. The silence of prayer, ideally, is like the silence at a performance of 4:33 – active, not passive; charged; filled with anticipation. One of my favorite times of prayer is the moment after I've finished saying the words of the silent Amidah and can give myself over completely to silence in a fuller way, where my hopes and fears, my contrition and gratitude aren't articulated in words but are simply expressed through my being. Silence gives feelings space to take on their own shape and form, rather than forcing them to fit into the clumsy shape of the words we can formulate. In fact, Rashi commenting on the verse from Psalms I mentioned before – "to You silence is praise" – suggests that silence is praise precisely because words are such a limited – and limiting – vehicle for trying to acknowledge God's greatness. Silence is an act of humility – of taking our own ego, our own need to understand and make sense, out of the equation and allowing presence to prevail.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, in one of my favorite passages in our siddur, writes:

To awaken to God we must listen in deep silence.  
 Silence arises when thinking ceases,  
 If we would know God  
 we must quiet the mind,  
 cease the chatter that passes for knowledge  
 when in fact it only flatters the foolish,  
 We cannot live without words  
 but let us not imagine that words are sufficient.  
 As a symphony needs rest to lift music out of noise,  
 so we need Silence to lift Truth out of words.

Yom Kippur is the day when we speak more words of prayer than any other. Our machzor is heavy, is thick with words of liturgy – ancient words, powerful words, good words. But oftentimes words can conceal as much as they reveal. We can recite the words of the prayers, voice their

expressions of contrition in Hebrew or in English but never allow those words to penetrate past the surface of our hearts. In truth, we can sometimes be guilty of hiding behind all those words, using them as a substitute for needing to articulate our deepest needs, our genuine shortcomings. What if, instead of using all these words to try to express what is supposed to be in our hearts, we quieted ourselves enough to let our hearts speak for themselves? What if we got out of the way enough, made space within our words of prayer, to listen for the truths our hearts know and are always quietly speaking? What if, like Hannah in the Haftarah reading for Rosh ha-Shanah, our lips were silent, the better to express our deepest hopes, fears, and yearnings? What if, this Kol Nidrei night, we could allow ourselves to be, without artifice or evasion, in the loving presence of One who calls to us in the silence?

What if?

It's challenging, because there's no right way to do it. Words are easy, silence is hard. But we'll never experience the power of silence if we do not make a conscious effort to try. So imagine the stage, the performer ready in the wings, the audience waiting in anticipation. Imagine that moment – not when notes will spill from the piano or words will tumble from our mouths, but when we will share charged and sacred silence. Imagine stepping into that silence, embracing it without fear, willing and open to encounter: the world around us, our deepest selves, a loving and abiding Presence. Imagine giving ourselves over to that moment of infinite possibility, redemption, and renewal.

It is Kol Nidrei night, the beginning of Yom Kippur. We stand on the stage of an ancient and holy night: hopeful, fearful, audaciously silent. And the curtain is rising.