TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF SILENCE IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

When one thinks of Jewish tradition, religious practice, and culture, silence does not readily come to mind. From its earliest days, Judaism appears to have been an *outwardly* expressive religion, characterized not by solitude and quiet contemplation but, for instance, by sacrificial rites, the public recitation of Torah, the singing of psalms, and the performance of *mitzvot*. However, silence does indeed have a "voice" in our tradition, speaking even, on occasion, through our most sacred text. The Bible explicitly mentions silence, for example, in Leviticus 10:3, which notes Aaron's silent reaction to the death of his sons, and in 1 Samuel 1:13, which notes Hannah's silent mode of prayer. This thesis explores rabbinic, medieval, and modern interpretations of these and other biblical references to silence in an effort to establish a preliminary understanding of silence in the Jewish tradition. It examines the role of silence in the religious understanding of our sages, philosophers, and theologians and considers whether a Jewish *theology of silence* emerges from their works. The thesis concludes that indeed silence bears profound religious meaning and theological significance in the Jewish tradition, but that one likely cannot speak of a single, coherent, consistent theology of silence that holds true for every sage and in every age.

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INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of Jewish tradition, religious practice, and culture, silence does not readily come to mind. From its earliest days, Judaism appears to have been an *outwardly* expressive religion, focused not on solitude and quiet contemplation but on sacrificial rites, the public recitation of Torah, the singing of psalms, and the performance of *mitzvot*. Later, expressions included partnered *chevruta* study and debate in the academies, oral traditions shared aloud via a *meturgeman* (professional translator),[1] communal prayer, and ritual activities (*demonstrative* acts introduced by *spoken* blessings). But is there, perhaps, a place for silence in our tradition? Has silence ever been a form of Jewish expression, or is it simply a void, or placeholder—something that happens in between expressions of religion, but signifying nothing religious in and of itself? Have our sages, commentators, and thinkers ever found silence to play a meaningful role in their religious understanding? The goal of this thesis is to begin to examine what it is that silence expresses in the Jewish tradition, if indeed it has a voice.

My interest in studying "silence in the Jewish tradition" derives, in part, from my own experience as an "introvert" who relishes the rare moments of silence in Jewish worship, studies better in quiet solitude than in *chevruta*, and is, by nature, more contemplative and reflective than expressive. I have always been well aware that there is much that *happens* in silence and that, therefore, silence can be laden with meaning. While I am deeply proud of Judaism's emphasis on the importance of our actions and our words, I also know that one's lack of outward expression does not necessarily indicate a lack of religious sentiment, engagement, or commitment. My interest in this topic thus begins with the awareness that there is, in fact,

[1] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.vv. "Bible: Translations," "Aramaic: The Targumim."

something in silence to be studied—with the suspicion that there is something to be gained, religiously, through an understanding of silence in our tradition.

My faith that religious meaning can indeed be found in silence has led me to consider the many ways that silence "speaks" in our tradition, for indeed silence does appear to have a place and a "voice" in Judaism. "Silent" prayer long ago replaced daily sacrifice and is addressed by *halakhah* and in Jewish legal codes. Torah *study* took an honored place alongside public recitation, once oral traditions were committed to writing, and its virtues are praised in rabbinic literature. The age-old practice of keeping silent in the house of mourning and in the wake of tragedy remains our *minhag* to this day. References to silence abound in Hasidic stories, Jewish mystical thought, writings about martyrdom and forced conversion, the Mussar tradition, and Holocaust literature. And today, many Jews participate in such quiet, contemplative practices as silent spirituality retreats and "Jewish meditation." In all these ways, our tradition and our people affirm that silence does not necessarily represent the *absence* of meaningful action, interaction, or religious response, but that silence can be active, interactive, and responsive in its own right. Silence carries meaning and valence. It *expresses* something.

Silence also speaks through Jewish text. There are instances in the Tanakh that explicitly mention a character's silent response or an act that was—or ought to be—performed silently. For instance, rather than merely not mentioning how Aaron reacted to his sons' death, the Torah includes in Leviticus 10:3 the words *vayidom Aharon*—"and Aaron held his peace."[2] The Torah finds Aaron's silent response noteworthy. Rather than simply saying that Hannah prayed, 1 Samuel 1:13 explains that Hannah *m'daberet al libah, rak s'fateihah naot, v'kolah lo yishamea*—"spoke in her heart, only her lips moved but her voice could not be heard."[3] The

[2] Tanakh. (Except where otherwise noted, I have used the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation.)
[3] Ibid.

Bible finds it necessary to mention the silent nature of Hannah's prayer. Through these and other passages, the Bible suggests that silence is significant, for it is worthy of note. Silence, says our sacred text, bears mentioning and bears meaning.

However, the Bible tells us only that silence is significant, not what it signifies! References to silent responses or actions in the Bible, such as those in Lev. 10:3 and 1 Sam. 1:13, are left unexplained, paving the way for much interpretation. *Why* was Aaron silent in the wake of personal tragedy? Why did Hannah pray in a manner that was, judging by the priest Eli's reaction, so unusual for her time? The Bible tells us that silence has a voice and even gives it the floor, but if we want to understand the *meaning* of silence in Judaism we must turn to biblical *commentary*. One key to learning what silence represents in the Jewish tradition is to examine how biblical silences have been interpreted through the generations by our tradition's sages, exegetes, and thinkers. This thesis endeavors to begin such an examination.

Yet given the innumerable references to silence in the Bible, the variety of situations and contexts in which it is mentioned, and the corresponding abundance of commentary on such references by rabbis, philosophers, and theologians over the centuries, gaining an understanding of silence in the Jewish tradition is a daunting task. Consequently, this thesis focuses on establishing a *preliminary* understanding of how silence has been understood in Judaism through the ages. I have thus chosen to limit the scope of the endeavor in two significant ways: I have limited (1) the *number of biblical verses* whose interpretations will be analyzed in the study, and (2) the *number of sources, sages, and thinkers* whose commentaries on those verses are considered.

I have selected the following five biblical verses for the study: **Leviticus 10:3** (Aaron's silent reaction to his sons' death and to Moses' theological explanation); **1 Samuel 1:13**

(Hannah's prayer to God); **1 Kings 19:12** (Elijah's encounter with the "still small voice"[4] at Horeb); **Job 34:29** (Elihu's speech mentioning God's silence); and **Psalm 34:29** (silence as praise to God). These selections emerge from my interest, as mentioned above, in determining whether silence ever bears *religious* significance, i.e., whether there is something to be gained, religiously, through an understanding of silence in our tradition. Thus, I have selected verses which, based on either content or context, appear to have *theological* import and which have inspired a substantial volume of commentary across the ages. My hope is that through studying traditional and modern commentaries on such verses, we might begin to construct a Jewish *theology of silence*—a theology that reflects what our tradition has to say about silence with respect to God and our people's relationship with Him. A Jewish theology of silence might address such questions as:

- Whether silence represents merely the *absence* of religious response or whether, perhaps, it is the *preferred* religious response in some cases;
- Whether one can adequately serve, honor, or converse with God in ways that are not necessarily outwardly expressive;
- What role silence has played in Israel's wrestling with God, and how Israel has related to a silent God, through the centuries;
- How silence relates to faith and/or idolatry; and
- What the major sages and Jewish thinkers of each age hold most sacred.

There are, of course, many other significant biblical verses that mention silence. However, I believe that the commentary on the five particular verses selected may shed important light on the role of silence in the religious understanding of our ancient sages and modern thinkers.

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[4] Ibid.

In choosing which sources, commentators, philosophers, and theologians to include in this study, I have tried to select those representatives of each age without which even a more comprehensive study would be deemed incomplete. Thus, the classic texts and commentators to be referenced include Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, Rashi,[5] Rashbam,[6] Ibn Ezra,[7] Ramban,[8] Sforno,[9] Radak,[10] Saadiah,[11] and Maimonides'[12] *Moreh Nevuchim* and Mishneh Torah. Modern Jewish philosophers and theologians to be included in the completed thesis[13] are Martin Buber,[14] Abraham Joshua Heschel,[15] and Elie Wiesel.[16] The seven chapters of the thesis follow a chronological progression, so that we may trace changes and discern evolution in Jewish thought

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[5] Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040-1105, born in Troyes, France. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.vv. "Rashi," "His Life."

[6] Samuel ben Meir, c. 1080–85–c. 1174, born in Ramerupt (Northern France). *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Samuel ben Meir."

[7] Abraham ibn Ezra, 1089-1164, born in Tudela, Spain. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Abraham Ibn Ezra."

[8] Moses ben Nahman, 1194-1270, born in Gerona, Catalonia (Spain). *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Nahmanides."

[9] Obadiah ben Jacob, c. 1470-c. 1550, born in Cesena (Italy). *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Sforno, Obadiah ben Jacob."

[10] Rabbi David Kimhi, 1160?-1235?, from Narbonne, Provence. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "David Kimhi."

[11] Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon, 882-942, born in Pithom, Egypt. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon."

[12] Moses ben Maimon, or "Rambam," 1135-1204, born in Cordoba, Spain. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.vv. "Moses Maimonides," "Biography."

[13] Though I did, in fact, conduct some research on the following, time and space have not allowed for inclusion in the completed thesis: Hasidic literature (*Tzava'at Ha'Rivash: The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, as well as writings by Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber on Hasidism); Franz Rosenzweig; Richard Rubenstein; Eliezer Berkovits; André Neher; and David Hartman.

[14] 1878-1965, born in Vienna. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Martin Buber."

[15] 1907-1972, lived in Berlin, Poland, London, and America. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Abraham Joshua Heschel."

[16] Born 1928 in Sighet, Rumania. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Elie Wiesel."

and theology over time. The first chapter addresses the rabbinic period and commentary. The second chapter addresses the medieval commentators, with the exception of Maimonides who is treated separately in the third chapter. The fourth chapter brings us into the modern period with the study of Buber. The fifth chapter is on Heschel, the sixth on Wiesel, and the final chapter draws the thesis to a conclusion by assessing what we have uncovered and suggesting areas for further study.

Can we, in fact, construct a Jewish theology of silence? Is there any consistency in how silence is understood in Jewish religious thought throughout the ages? If not, what can we learn from the inconsistencies? These questions underlie and frame the discussion in the chapters that follow. They will help us listen more attentively as silence "speaks" through the generations, i.e., as our sages across the centuries share with us what silence has to say that is relevant to our faith and how we live and express it. The questions will provide us with a raft to grasp onto amid a vast sea of commentary and religious wrestling, as we wade our way toward an understanding of silence in the Jewish tradition.

CHAPTER ONE: Silence in the Rabbinic Literature

Our study begins with the examination of traditional commentary on five biblical verses which (a) mention silence, (b) given their content or context, appear to have theological import, and (c) have inspired a substantial enough volume of rabbinic and medieval commentary that preliminary conclusions may be drawn "toward an understanding of silence in the Jewish tradition." Such rabbinic and medieval commentary is the subject of our first two chapters. The five verses selected—Leviticus 10:3, 1 Samuel 1:13, 1 Kings 19:12, Job 34:29, and Psalm 65:2—are ones which invite commentary on such theological concerns as silence in the face of catastrophe or Divine destruction, silence as a means of communicating with God, silence as a form of Divine revelation, silence as God's absence, and silence as a form of Divine praise, respectively. Do the rabbis and medieval commentators in fact address these and other theological concerns in their exegesis? If so, can we begin to construct with confidence a Jewish theology of silence?

The Rabbinic Literature

Leviticus 10:3 – Aaron's silence

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לֵאמֹר בִּקְרֹבַי אֶקָּדֵשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיִּדֹּם אַהֲרֹן

Leviticus 10:3 is a disturbing verse, set in the context of a disturbing episode, which takes place in *parashat Shemini*. Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, perish in a fire seemingly sent by God, and instead of crying out in response, their father "held his peace"[1]—*vayidom Aharon*. The passage raises many questions of relevance to this study: Why was Aaron silent? What does his silence mean to the rabbis? What does it indicate to them about his theology or relationship with God?

[1] Tanakh.

Perhaps in part because Aaron's silence in Lev. 10:3 is so unfathomable, the rabbis wrestle with the *reason* for his sons' death, portraying the sons in some texts as sinful and in others as pious. Leviticus Rabbah says that "the sons of Aaron died...because they entered the Tent of Meeting drunk with wine."[2] Sifra says that they spoke arrogantly about the day they would assume authority over Israel from Moses and Aaron.[3] Pesikta d'Rav Kahana adds that the sons "presumptuously rendered a legal decision in the presence of Moses [their] master," neglected to wash their hands and feet before entering the sanctuary, failed to dress appropriately, found no wife worthy of them and thus remained childless, brought a "superfluous offering" and an inferior fire to the Tabernacle, "ventur[ed] near to God's presence" by entering the Holy of Holies, and "in a gross way, feast[ed] their eyes boldly on the Presence."[4] However, in these same midrashim, and elsewhere in rabbinic literature, we find redeeming words about Nadav and Avihu. For example, Pesikta d'Rav Kahana counts the sons among the "righteous" biblical characters in expounding upon the biblical verse "all things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked" (Ecc. 9:2) and in its teaching that the "death of the righteous atones for Israel's sins."[5] In addition, one prominent legend, which appears in Leviticus Rabbah and the Talmud, presents Aaron's sons as worthy of great honor: Moses comes to understand the words that God had spoken to him at Sinai, i.e., that "the Tent [of Meeting] shall be sanctified by My glory" (Ex. 29:43). The term *bi'c'vodi*—"by My glory"—Moses explains to Aaron, was to be interpreted as *bi'm'kubadai*—"by My honored ones." Moses continues, "My brother, at Sinai, I was told that I would sanctify this House, and through

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[2] Leviticus Rabbah 12:1.

[3] Sifra (Torat Kohanim) *Miluim Shemini* 21.

[4] Pesikta deRav Kahana, *Piska* 26.6-9.

[5] Ibid., *Piska* 26.11.

a great man would I sanctify it, and I thought that either through me or through you would this House be sanctified, but now [I see that] your two sons are greater than you or I."[6]

These two conflicting views on the character of Aaron's sons shed light on the reasons for—and implications of—Aaron's silence. We are told that Aaron comes to acknowledge the justice of the Divine decree,[7] for he learns that the sons were, in fact, sinful and that God actually spared them the more severe and humiliating punishment that they really deserved. Thus, in Pesikta Rabbati, we read that although Aaron initially protests the unfairness of his sons' death, God responds (through Moses):

> I have shown thee great favor and have granted thee great honor through this…I assigned to thee and thy sons a place nearer to the sanctuary, before all others… I have also decreed that whosoever enters the Tabernacle without having been commanded, he shall be stricken with leprosy. Wouldst thou have wished thy sons, to whom the innermost places had been assigned, to sit as lepers outside the encampment as a penalty for having entered the Holy of Holies?

Upon hearing this, Aaron expresses gratitude to God for His *hesed*, which, he affirms, "is better than life [Ps. 63:4]."[8] While Aaron's expression of gratitude is not in itself silent, it does reflect his transition from a stance of protest to an attitude that is more resigned. So when Moses informs Aaron that God's words at Sinai (in Ex. 29:43) are meant to be understood as *bi'm'kubadai*, Aaron takes solace in the fact that despite their sins, his sons were "honored" by God and (by way of a *gezera shava* linking Ex. 29:43 to Lev. 10:3 through the root כבד) "close" to God. Upon hearing Moses' words of comfort, Aaron falls silent: *vayidom Aharon.*

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[6] Leviticus Rabbah 12:2. See also *B. Zevachim* 115b.

[7] Sifra (Torat Kohanim) *Miluim Shemini* 23.

[8] Pesikta Rabbati, *Piska* 47.

Since the rabbinic literature sometimes portrays Nadav and Avihu as sinful and other times as worthy, Aaron's silence appears to represent the comfort that comes when one either accepts that God is just or acknowledges that God is merciful. To the rabbis, faith in God's justice and mercy is *expressed* through the silence that one keeps in the face of apparent tragedy. At the same time, however, the rabbis acknowledge that exhibiting such faith is difficult, and they consider the ability to "hold one's peace" in such an emotionally challenging situation to be admirable and deserving of reward. Aaron's silence is a sign of his righteousness in Sifra, where he is compared to Abraham, to Jacob, and to David, who were also humble enough to accept upon themselves the justice of the Divine decree (at Sodom, upon reunion with Esau, and in Psalm 38, respectively.)[9] Aaron is rewarded for his silence, we learn in Leviticus Rabbah, by a *direct* address from God, the warning against intoxication that appears in Lev. 10:8-9.[10] Thus, it is difficult to say whether Aaron's silence indicates true comfort and appeasement or simply obedience and submission. What is clear in the midrashim, however, is that Aaron's silence is positive and praiseworthy in the eyes of the rabbis.

Part of what makes Aaron's silence so admirable in the rabbinic literature is that the rabbis fully acknowledge the grievousness of the Nadav and Avihu tragedy. At no point do the rabbis deny that Aaron feels pain and has good reason to cry out. Though perhaps a just fate, the rabbis acknowledge that the sons' death is nonetheless a tremendously *sad* event, not only for Aaron, but even for God Himself. Regarding Aaron's suffering, we read in Leviticus Rabbah that until he received the reward of a "Divine utterance" in Lev. 10:9, Aaron was "sad at heart on account of his sons' death."[11] In Midrash Tanhuma, we read that Aaron and his sons observed a

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[9] Sifra (Torat Kohanim) *Miluim Shemini* 23-24.

[10] Leviticus Rabbah 12:1.

[11] Ibid., 12:3.

period of mourning *in anticipation* of the death of Nadav and Avihu; the family was confined to the Tent of Meeting for seven days before their consecration and the dedication of the Tabernacle—the day of the sons' death—and this period is likened to the seven days of mourning that God observed before the flood that destroyed the earth.[12] Regarding God's sadness over the tragedy, in Numbers Rabbah the rabbis understand the repetition of the statement that Aaron's sons "died before the Lord" (Lev. 10:2 and Num. 3:4) to mean "that the Holy One, blessed be He, is grieved when the children of the righteous depart from this world during the lifetime of their fathers" and "that the grief of the Holy One, blessed be He, was twice as keen as that of their father."[13] In Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, we read that God was present "as a Mourner" when the sons died and that His presence remained in the Tabernacle even after their bodies were taken away.[14] Thus, since the death of Aaron's sons is undeniably—even cosmically—sad in the eyes of the rabbis, we are not to understand Aaron, or his silence, as insensitive or unfeeling. Rather, it is precisely *because* Aaron has every reason to feel tormented that we are to see his silence as exemplary.

The study of Aaron's silence gives us some insight into rabbinic theology in general and enables us to make a few initial conjectures as to whether one can indeed speak of a rabbinic theology of silence, specifically. For example, the midrashim discussed above suggest that God's decrees sometimes cause Him pain, and that therefore one should not assume that God is simply *absent* in times of human tragedy; God is present with Aaron—as a Mourner—as Aaron watches his sons die in the Tabernacle. Indeed Aaron fell silent when he felt a certain closeness to God in the wake of his tragedy, i.e., when God spoke directly to him in Lev. 10:9 and when he

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[12] Tanhuma (Buber) *Parasha Shemini* 1.

[13] Numbers Rabbah 2:24.

[14] Pesikta deRav Kahana, *Piska* 26.4.

grew comforted upon learning that his very own sons were God's "close" or "honored" ones. At the same time, one who, like Aaron, remains silent when he is not feeling consoled and has good reason to cry out is considered admirable, righteous, appropriately humble, and worthy of reward, for in restraining himself he proclaims his faith in the justice of the Divine decree, as well as in God's mercy. Thus, silence appears to represent the controlling of one's emotions, either in deference to or in reconciliation with God. We now turn to the rabbinic writings on other biblical references to silence to see if these or other theological themes appear.

1 Samuel 1:13 – Hannah's Prayer

וְחַנָּה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שְׂפָתֶיהָ נָעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשָּׁמֵעַ וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ עֵלִי לְשִׁכֹּרָה

In 1 Sam. 1:13, Hannah speaks to God in a manner that is evidently so unusual that the priest, Eli, mistakes her prayerful state for a state of drunkenness. Instead of crying out loud for God's attention and help, Hannah "spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard."[15] How do the rabbis understand this silent mode of communication, and what are the theological implications of their commentary on this verse and episode?

First, we must note that the rabbis do not find Hannah's method of communicating with God to be unusual, as Eli did. In fact, they portray Eli as "one who suspects his neighbor of a fault which [s]he has not committed."[16] Thus, while the rabbis use Eli's mistaken assumption to teach that "a drunken person is forbidden to say the *Tefillah*,"[17] they take care to clear Hannah's name and point out that she was indeed praying in the *proper* manner. Indeed it is from Hannah, say the rabbis in tractate Berakhot, that we learn something very important about how one should

[15] Tanakh.

[16] *B. Berakhot* 31b.

[17] Ibid., 31a.

pray the Tefillah: Because in 1 Sam. 1:13 Hannah's lips moved, we learn that one must mouth the words of the Tefillah prayer; yet because in that same verse Hannah's voice was inaudible, we learn that one must not "raise one's voice in the *Tefillah*."[18] Thus, the Samuel verse suggests a volume of speech that ranges somewhere between aloud and silent, as in, perhaps, a whisper. In tractate Yoma, the moderating of one's voice in prayer is linked to the phrase *m'daberet al-libah*, "spoke in her heart": "One does not inquire [of the Urim and Thummim] in a loud voice...[but] neither shall one but think thereof in one's heart...but rather in the manner in which Hannah spoke in her prayer, as it is said: *Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart*" [1 Sam. 1:13].[19] Thus, to speak as Hannah does—*al-libah*—implies a measure of control which the rabbis view as exemplary.

Yet to the rabbis, the term *al-libah* has to do with controlling not only one's voice, but also one's thoughts and emotions. For example, in tractate Berakhot, *m'daberet al-libah* in the Samuel verse means that "one who prays must direct his heart,"[20] suggesting that one must channel one's thoughts appropriately, rather than merely mouthing the words of the Tefillah. In Ecclesiastes Rabbah, *m'daberet al-libah* means that the heart "speaks from out of itself,"[21] suggesting, perhaps, a certain heartfelt sincerity or intentionality that ought to characterize prayer. And in Genesis Rabbah, *al-libah* is associated with controlling one's aggressive emotions, as the rabbis contrast the term with a similar phrase commonly found in Scripture—*b'libo*: The "righteous" in the Bible, such as Hannah, David, and Daniel, who speak "to" (*al*) their hearts are said to "have their hearts under their control," i.e., they literally tell their hearts what to do. In contrast, say the rabbis, the enemies of Israel, such as Esau (Rome), Jeroboam,

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[18] Ibid.

[19] *B. Yoma* 73a.

[20] *B. Berakhot* 31a.

[21] Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:16, Section 1.

and Haman, speak "within" (*b'*) their hearts, i.e., they "stand in subjection to their heart" and to the feelings of "hatred, hostility, and vindictiveness" that they feel "toward him [Jacob]." The rabbis underscore just how admirable it is to have one's heart under control by likening Hannah, David, and Daniel to God Himself, who also speaks "to" His heart: "These are like their Creator, as it says, *And the Lord said to His heart* (Gen. 8:21)."[22]

We must not assume, however, that Hannah's control—of her voice, thought, and emotion—renders her unfeeling in the eyes of the rabbis. Just as the rabbis reassure us that Aaron's silence is not a sign of insensitivity, they also reassure us that Hannah is not passionless. Rather, Hannah's anguish over the unfairness of her situation causes her to pray fervently to God. In fact, by likening Hannah's prayer to that of Elijah and Moses, the rabbis even suggest that Hannah's strong feelings are justified:

> R. Eleazar...said: Hannah spoke insolently toward heaven, as it says, *And Hannah prayed unto* [*al*, i.e., 'upon' or 'against'] *the Lord* [1 Sam. 1:10]. This teaches that she spoke insolently toward heaven. R. Eleazar also said: Elijah spoke insolently toward heaven, as it says, *For Thou didst turn their heart backwards* [1 Kgs.18:37]. R. Samuel b. Isaac said: Whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Elijah right? Because it says, *And whom I [God] have wronged* [Mic. 4:6]....R. Eleazar also said: Moses spoke insolently towards heaven, as it says, *And Moses prayed unto the Lord* [Num. 11:2]. Read not *el* [unto] the Lord, but *al* [upon] the Lord, for so in the school of R. Eliezer *alefs* were pronounced like *ayins* and *ayins* like *alefs*...The school of R. Jannai learnt it from here: And *Di-Zahab* [Deut. 1:1]. What is "*And Di-Zahab*"...Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, the silver and

[22] Genesis Rabbah 67:8. Note that the rabbis interchange אל and על, as will be explained.

gold [*zahab*] which Thou didst shower on Israel until they said, "Enough" [*dai*], that it was which led to their making the [Golden] Calf.[23]

Elijah had the right to address God insolently because God was at fault for implanting within Israel the evil inclination that turned them toward idolatry.[24] Moses had the right to address God insolently because God's own showering of abundance upon Israel led them to sin. Likewise, we are to assume, Hannah had the right to address God insolently. Rather than faulting Hannah for her insolence, the rabbis seem to claim that Hannah had good reason to protest.

As with Aaron, *because* Hannah feels great pain, her self-control—as demonstrated by her silent mode of prayer—is particularly admirable in the eyes of the rabbis. Indeed it is a sign of her *faith*, for in both Genesis Rabbah and Esther Rabbah, Hannah and the righteous who speak *al* ("to") their hearts are contrasted not only with the enemies of Israel, but also with the *naval*, or "fool"[25] of Psalm 14:1, who says *b'libo* that "there is no God."[26] Hannah prays to God *in spite of* her torment; though she has every reason to cry *out* and to turn away from God, instead she channels her emotion into communication with Him. Her prayer may be insolent, but it shows her willingness to remain in relationship with God or, like Aaron, close to God. The literature paints Hannah as one who, in the face of great anguish, is nevertheless able to control her voice, channel her emotion, and express her faith, and, as in the midrashim about Aaron, the rabbis present these abilities as praiseworthy.

Unlike Aaron's silence, though, Hannah's does not connote humility and acceptance. Though she may temper her voice and her emotion, Hannah speaks insolently, i.e., with audacity. The rabbinic literature is less explicit, in Hannah's case, as to whether silence expresses faith *in*

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[23] *B. Berakhot* 31b-32a.

[24] Editor's note to *B. Berakhot* 31b-32a in *The Babylonian Talmud* (Soncino Press).

[25] Tanakh.

[26] Esther Rabbah 10:3. See also Genesis Rabbah 67:8.

Divine justice and mercy. However, as we have seen, her silent prayer *is* an expression of faith in some sense. The fact that Hannah *prays* silently, i.e., that she remains in dialogue and relationship with God through and despite her trauma, affirms that God is present in her life, not absent. Tempering one's voice, thus far in our study, demonstrates an ability or willingness to channel one's thoughts and emotions and turn them Godward, rather than away from God. Hannah's silence, like Aaron's, represents the control of one's emotion for the sake of Heaven.

1 Kings 19:12 – Elijah and the Still, Small Voice
וְאַחַר הָרַעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה

1 Kgs. 19:12 takes place in the context of the prophet Elijah's struggle—and failure—to turn Israel away from its idolatrous ways. After setting up a dramatic display at Mount Carmel to prove that Baal was a false god, Elijah finds himself fleeing for his life and hiding in a cave at Horeb. Upon experiencing a great wind, earthquake, and fire at Horeb, Elijah soon learns that "the LORD was not in the wind…the LORD was not in the earthquake…and…the LORD was not in the fire" (1 Kgs. 19:12-13).[27] We are left to presume that Elijah finally perceives God not in these elements, but in a *kol d'mamah dakah*—"a still small voice"[28] or "a soft murmuring sound"[29]—that immediately follows. What does the rabbinic literature regarding this verse and episode reveal about the relationship between God and silence in the rabbinic mind?

Not surprisingly, since 1 Kgs. 19:12 appears in the context of the struggle against idolatry, the rabbis use the verse to emphasize God's uniqueness and *distinctiveness*. For example, in tractate Berakhot, the Sadducean heretic questions why a blind man, Rav Shesheth, would go out to "see" the king as he passes through town. The story continues,

[27] Tanakh.
[28] Ibid.
[29] JPS Tanakh, 1985 translation.

> The first troop passed by and a shout arose. Said the Sadducean: The king is coming. He is not coming, replied R. Shesheth. A second troop passed by and when a shout arose, the Sadducean said: Now the king is coming. R. Shesheth replied: The king is not coming. A third troop passed by and there was silence. Said R. Shesheth: Now indeed the king is coming. The Sadducean said to him: How did you know this? – He replied: Because the earthly royalty is like the heavenly. For it is written: *Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice* [1 Kgs. 19:11-12].[30]

The Berakhot passage affirms that even a blind man can discern God's presence, because God is distinguishable by His silence, or the silence that surrounds Him. The *kol d'mamah dakah* in 1 Kgs. 19:12 is linked to God's presence and distinctiveness. (It is unclear in this passage whether the Sadducean merely seeks to trick Rav Shesheth by announcing that "the king is coming" or whether he—as representative of *all* heretics—is actually unable to discern God's presence. However, other midrashim suggest that the latter is the case.)

Another passage that uses 1 Kgs. 19:12 to demonstrate that God is distinguishable from His "host" appears in tractate Chagigah, in which Rabbi Akiva ascends to the heavens and descends *b'shalom*, i.e., safely. As this story of Akiva is set in the context of a larger discussion about the heretical *acher*, we presume that Akiva returns *b'shalom* because he is able to distinguish between God and the other divine beings (whereas the *acher* cannot). The rabbis

[30] *B. Berakhot* 58a.

teach that it is Akiva's exegesis of several biblical verses, including 1 Kgs. 19:12, that enables him to discern between God and the heavenly host. Akiva—and the rabbis of the Talmud—know that God is different from wind, earthquake, and fire, because they understand the phrase *v'hinei Adonai over* ("and behold, the Lord passed by") in verse 19:11 as though it *follows* the *kol d'mamah dakah* in verse 19:12, thus: "*the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And behold, the Lord passed by.*"[31] As in the Berakhot passage, the rabbinic understanding here is that God's presence is to be found in silence, which helps distinguish Him from the angels and other elements of the cosmos.

Another passage in which 1 Kgs. 19:12 alludes to God's uniqueness is found in Midrash Tanhuma, in which God sends the four "phenomena"[32] that Elijah witnesses at Horeb to instruct him about the "four worlds through which man must pass." God tells Elijah that the wind represents "this world, which is like the wind that blows," i.e., which is fleeting; the earthquake represents the "day of death," which makes man tremble; the fire represents the judgment in Gehinom; and the *kol d'mamah dakah* represents the "great Day of Judgment" in which "only God shall remain in His world, alone."[33] The scriptural prooftext used to support this final point is from Isaiah 2:11, *v'nisgav Adonai l'vado bayom hahu*—"the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day"—and thus the Tanhuma passage establishes a connection between the "still small voice" and the idea of God's solitude, or uniqueness.

Unlike the two talmudic passages we examined, God distinguishes *Himself* in the Tanhuma midrash, as though He finds it necessary to make clear to Elijah that He is the only

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[31] *B. Chagigah* 15b-16a.

[32] Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 995.

[33] Tanhuma (Vilna) *Parashat Pekudei* 3.

Judge of man. Since Elijah's "zeal for the Lord"[34] is well-known, why might this lesson be necessary? Perhaps because God disapproves of those who, like Elijah, "speak evil of Israel," as the rabbis explain in Song of Songs Rabbah:

> R. Samuel said: The word *rizpah* means *ruz peh* (break the mouth); [break the mouth] of him who has calumniated [M]y sons. Similarly it is written of Elijah: *And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant* (1 Kings 19:14). Said God to him: 'Is it My covenant or thy covenant?' He then said: *They have thrown down thy altars.* Said God to him: Are they My altars or thy altars? He then said, *And slain Thy prophets with the sword.* Said God to him: 'They are My prophets; what concern is it of thine?' He then said: *And I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away.* See now, what is written there: *And he looked, and behold there was at his head a cake baked on the hot stones*—rezafim (ib. 6). What is meant by *rezafim*? R. Samuel b. Nahman said: *Ruz peh* (break the mouth): break the mouths of all who calumniate My sons.[35]

As the rabbis reiterate at the end of the passage, "God is not pleased with the one who calumniates Israel." Elijah, who is zealous for Adonai, might have no trouble distinguishing God from the rest of the heavenly host, but he mistakenly assumes that *along with God* he may judge the people Israel. There is only one Judge, assert the rabbis: God, the One who will stand alone in the silence of the Day of Judgment.

Thus, the rabbinic literature regarding the *kol d'mamah dakah* establishes a relationship between silence and God's uniqueness, or distinctiveness, and this relationship becomes even more apparent when we look beyond verse 1 Kgs. 19:12 to commentary on the Elijah episode as

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[34] JPS Tanakh, 1985 translation.

[35] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:6.

a whole. Exodus Rabbah depicts the showdown on Mount Carmel when the heathen priests try to get their god, Baal, to answer them:

> Elijah...gathered all the heathen priests [1 Kgs. 18:19] and said to them [regarding Baal]: *Cry aloud, for he is a god* (1 Kings 18:27). So what did God do? He silenced the whole world, both those in heaven and those on earth, and the whole world became waste and void, as if no creature was in the world, as it says, *But there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded* (ib. 29). Had He spoken, they would have said: 'Baal has answered us.'[36]

In this passage, silence attests to God's oneness. God silences the world so as to proclaim that there is no other god. Baal is silent because he does not exist or is impotent, and God imposes silence on the world in order to reveal and accentuate this fact. While the silence appears to leave the world "void," we are quickly reminded that God fills—or is present in—the silence, as the passage continues: "How much more natural was it then that when God spoke on Mount Sinai, the whole world became silent, so that all creatures might know that there is none beside Him. Then He said: I AM THE LORD THY GOD."[37] While at Carmel God imposes silence so that there is no mistaking random noises for the voice of Baal, at Sinai God imposes silence so that there is no mistaking other noises for the voice of God. There is only one voice of Revelation—the voice of God Himself.

In a variety of rabbinic texts concerning Elijah, then, silence attests to God's distinctiveness and His oneness. In the Talmud, the *kol d'mamah dakah* of verse 1 Kgs. 19:12 enables Rav Sheshet and Rabbi Akiva to discern God from among the heavenly host. In the midrashim, silence enables Elijah and Israel to perceive God as the one, true Judge and the one

[36] Exodus Rabbah 29:9.
[37] Ibid.

and only voice of Revelation, respectively. In these passages, silence helps eliminate the confusion of the heathen and the idolater and affirm that there is but one God in heaven. Silence enables *perception* of God, so there is a sense in which—as in the case of Aaron and Hannah—silence is associated with faith, with God's presence, and even with God's *closeness*: the King passes before Rav Shesheth; Akiva is deemed "worthy" of drawing near to God's presence, (despite the angels' efforts to "thrust [him] away");[38] and the cave in which Elijah hears the *kol d'mamah dakah* is said to be the same cave in which Moses stood as God's presence passed close by him in Exodus 33:22.[39]

It is worth noting, however, that although Elijah is granted the privilege of an intimate encounter with the Divine, the rabbis disapprove of his failure, in his zeal for Adonai, to recognize that there is only one Judge of man. Unlike Aaron and Hannah, Elijah does *not* succeed in controlling his strong feelings in a way that exalts God. Instead, his passions get the better of him as he rails against Israel—God's children—and this, perhaps in the rabbis' eyes, makes him resemble the heathen who speaks *b'libo*. God uses silence to instruct Elijah that such behavior is inappropriate, as we saw in the midrash about the four worlds through which man must pass, the final of which is the *kol d'mamah dakah*—the Day of Judgment on which God alone remains as the sole Judge of mankind. Thus, again we see a link between silence and the control of one's emotion for the sake of God's glory—in Elijah's case, for the sake of exalting His oneness.

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[38] *B. Chagigah* 15b.

[39] *B. Pesachim* 54a.

Job 34:29 – God's Silence and Hiding

וְהוּא יַשְׁקִט וּמִי יַרְשִׁיעַ וַיַּסְתֵּר פָּנִים וּמִי יְשׁוּרֶנּוּ וְעַל־גּוֹי וְעַל־אָדָם יָחַד

So far in our study, the rabbinic writings do not interpret silence as a sign of God's absence. To the contrary, the rabbis take care to affirm God's presence in—and in spite of—the silence that appears in the biblical verses we have examined. Does this hold true even for their commentary on Job 34:29, a verse from a book in which God's absence is keenly felt by both the reader and the biblical characters themselves? How did the rabbis understand and explain this explicit reference to God's silence in the speech of Job's fourth friend, Elihu? Though Elihu's speech defends God against those like Job, who claims that being "in God's favor" (Job 34:9)[40] is of no benefit, Elihu nonetheless mentions that there are times when God remains silent and hidden: "When He is silent, who will condemn? If He hides His face, who will see Him, Be it nation or man?" (Job 34:29).[41] Elihu holds that God has just reasons for His actions (or inaction), but do the rabbis agree with him? What does it mean, in their eyes, for God to be "silent"?

In interpreting Job 34:29, the rabbis disagree as to how the word *yashkit* should be understood. Both Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah begin with Rabbi Meir's audacious claim that when God keeps His silence, He is "giv[ing] Himself rest from His world" and closing Himself off from what goes on in it. Rabbi Meir sees *v'yaster panim* in the next phrase of the verse as modifying, explaining, or expanding upon the word *yashkit*: "He will hide His face from His world like a judge who draws a curtain from within and does not see what is being done without."[42] Rabbi Meir supports his claim with a *gezera shava* linking *v'yaster* with *seter*

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[40] JPS Tanakh, 1985 translation.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Leviticus Rabbah 5:1. See also Genesis Rabbah 36:1.

("screen" or "covering"[43]) in Job 22:14, which reads "The clouds screen Him so He cannot see As He moves about the circuit of heaven." Perhaps because Rabbi Meir's statement depicting God as disinterested in and ignorant of what goes on in His world is so bold, the Midrash attributes it to the wicked generation of the flood in Noah's time. However, this disclaimer appears only in Leviticus Rabbah; in the Genesis Rabbah rendition of the same passage, we read this as the opinion of Rabbi Meir himself. Regardless, in both versions of the passage, the other rabbis are clearly uncomfortable with the perspective that he presents, so they silence him before he can say anything more and then quickly correct him: *Dayecha Meir, elah…*—"Let that suffice thee, Meir! [Rather, the verse] means…"[44]

After silencing Rabbi Meir, the rabbis go on to explain that the silence referred to in Job 34:29 is different than hiding, and that God is never in the dark as to what goes on in His world. In fact, they argue, God is always in the know and in control. The term *yashkit* refers not to God's state of being withdrawn or a lack of responsiveness, but rather, to the *shalvah*—the peace, prosperity, and comfort—that God *gives* or bestows. To Noah's generation—the wicked generation of the flood—God gives *shalvah* in the form of great fertility and the satisfaction of seeing their offspring established in their lifetime; their wives "become pregnant and give birth" in a matter of days, and they bear children who are instantly self-sufficient.[45] To the Sodomites, God gives *shalvah* in the form of riches and abundance: "The Bar-Hadaya [hawk with exceedingly sharp vision] espies its food from a distance of eighteen miles…Yet when it stood on the trees of Sodom it was unable to see the ground on account of the thickness of the trees. '*The stones thereof are the place of sapphires,*' [Job 28:6]…When one went to a gardener, and

[43] Tanakh.

[44] Leviticus Rabbah 5:1. See also Genesis Rabbah 36:1.

[45] Ibid.

the latter gave him an *issar's*-worth of vegetables, one used to find gold in the dust clinging thereto, as it is written, *It hath dust of gold* [Job 28:6]."[46] To the Ten Tribes of Israel and the idolaters with whom they live, God gives *shalvah* in the form of peace and a leisurely existence: "The nations of the world…dwell in peace, eating, drinking, and becoming drunk, and engaging in lewd converse…[and the] tribe[s] possessed thirteen public baths, [one for each tribe] and one [communal bath that] belonged to all of them."[47] When God bestows such goodness (*yashkit*), ask the rabbis, then who can possibly condemn Him (*u'mi yarshia*)? The rabbis understand Job 34:29 as attesting to God's tremendous generosity or, perhaps, His great patience with the wicked. Who are *we* to criticize God for such gifts and lovingkindness?

Furthermore, argue the rabbis, God does eventually give the wicked their due. How does God punish them? *V'yaster panim*—"He hides His face" from them, meaning that with regard to Noah's generation "He brought the flood upon them,"[48] with regard to Sodom "He made brimstone and fire to rain down on them,"[49] and with regard to the Ten Tribes "He brought Sennacherib up against them."[50] Concerning each punishment, the rabbis ask "*Who then can put Him right*?"[51] understanding the verb *yeshureinu* to mean "set straight," rather than "see" or "gaze upon." In other words, just as we have no right to criticize God for His generosity and patience when He gives *shalvah*, neither do we have right to question the justice of His harsh decree and chastisements when He sees fit to impose them.

Thus, while Rabbi Meir equates God's silence with God's hiding—*yashkit* with *yaster*—the other rabbis, who dominate the argument and get the final word, see the two terms as quite

[46] Leviticus Rabbah 5:2.
[47] Ibid., 5:3.
[48] Ibid., 5:1.
[49] Ibid., 5:2.
[50] Ibid., 5:3.
[51] Ibid., 5:1-3.

opposite from one another: *yashkit* connotes the bestowing of *shalvah* on all mankind, while *yaster* is associated with the chastisements—e.g., flood, destruction, and exile—that occur when God hides His face from the wicked who have sinned. Like Elihu, the rabbis defend God against accusations of injustice and insensitivity; just as Elihu silences Job's argument, so do the rabbis silence Rabbi Meir's. They paint an entirely different picture of God than the insensitive, unconcerned, *absent* Judge that Rabbi Meir describes. God knows what is going on in His world and intervenes as He sees fit, in ways that we cannot criticize.

This theological viewpoint is underscored by the way in which the rabbis *employ* Job 34:29 in the midrashic texts. In both Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah the verse serves as the *petichta* to begin the rabbis' exegesis of *another* verse. In Genesis Rabbah, Job 34:29 helps to unlock the meaning of Genesis 9:18: "And the sons of Noah, that went forth from the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth; and Ham is the father of Canaan."[52] As we have seen, in the eyes of the rabbis, the "a" part of Job 34:29 describes the *shalvah* that God bestows on the *b'nei Noach* and alludes to the flood that destroys them when God "hides His face" from them. The rabbis then explain the "b" part of Job 34:29—*v'al goy v'al adam yachad*—and its connection to the exegetical verse: "*Whether it* [destruction] *be done unto a nation or unto a man, alike… 'Unto a nation'* refers to the generation of the Flood; *'And unto a man,'* to Noah; *'alike'*: for from him [Noah] was the world established, and He can set up His world from a nation, and He can establish His world from a single person, as it is written AND THE SONS OF NOAH, etc. [Gen. 9:18]."[53] Thus, the passage reassures us that in sending the flood, God did not act rashly and without forethought. God knew that the flood would not be the end of all existence. He punished the wicked knowing full well that ultimately the sons of Noah, the one righteous soul in

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[52] Tanakh.

[53] Genesis Rabbah 36:1.

the world, would emerge from the ark and be sufficient to rebuild His world. God is not in the dark, as Rabbi Meir suggests; God has a plan.

In Leviticus Rabbah, Job 34:29 serves as the *petichta* that helps to unlock the meaning of Leviticus 4:3: "If the anointed priest shall sin so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the LORD for a sin-offering."[54] While Job 34:29a again describes the *shalvah* that God bestows upon mankind and the destruction that occurs when He hides His face, the rabbis tie 34:29b to the exegetical verse by explaining that "not like the flesh and blood are the judgments of the Holy One, blessed be He. A king of flesh and blood shows favoritism to a group, and shows no favoritism to an individual. But the Holy One, blessed be He, said: IF THE ANOINTED PRIEST SHALL SIN...THEN LET HIM OFFER FOR HIS SIN...A YOUNG BULLOCK...AND IF THE WHOLE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL ERR...THEN THE ASSEMBLY SHALL OFFER A YOUNG BULLOCK [Lev. 4:3 and 4:13-14]. Thus, the rabbis say, God is fair. An individual who sins must bring the same sin offering as the community that sins, even if that individual is a priest! If Job perceived that there is no benefit to being "in God's favor," that is only because God simply does not play favorites. Sin must be atoned for—or punished—regardless of who commits it. God is ultimately just.

Thus with the exception of Rabbi Meir, whose perspective is quickly discredited, the rabbis view God's supposed silence in Job 34:29 as something *positive*. Silence—when understood as *shalvah*—is not a sort of void, as Meir suggests, but rather, is *filled* with God's gifts and therefore with His presence. Silence does not connote Divine ignorance or insensitivity—an absence of consciousness on God's part. Rather, we can trust that God has a

[54] Tanakh.

plan, is kind, and ultimately gives the wicked their due. As we have seen elsewhere, silence affirms God's justice and mercy. Silence is also positive in the *complimentary* sense. It is admirable, in the eyes of the rabbis, for many of the same reasons that we have seen in previous passages. For example, God is admired here for His great patience with the wicked, just as elsewhere Hannah and Aaron are praised for self-control in the face of their profound agitation. In addition, through silence God gives mankind the benefit of the doubt—bestowing *shalvah* upon all until they sin—just as through silence Aaron gives God the benefit of the doubt, demonstrating his trust in Divine justice and mercy despite painful evidence to the contrary.

While silence may be positive and while those, like Aaron and Hannah, who emulate God through their silence are highly regarded by the rabbis, the passages we have studied thus far also emphasize *deference* to God. Aaron's silence indicates his acceptance of the Divine decree. Hannah's silent prayer suggests faith and self-control despite her anger at God. The still, small voice instructs Elijah that God is the one, true Judge. And silence in the Elihu verse represents a Divine beneficence that we had better not call into question. As the rabbis understand Elihu in Job 34:29, we are not to criticize God's generosity, long-suffering patience, or chastisements, for who are we to "condemn" either God or those to whom He shows mercy or judgment? While it may be admirable to emulate God, we are to do so while also recognizing His uniqueness as the one and only Judge.

Psalm 65:2 – Silence as Praise to God

לְךָ דֳמִיָּה תְהִלָּה אֱלֹהִים בְּצִיּוֹן וּלְךָ יְשֻׁלַּם־נֶדֶר

Unlike the verses we have considered thus far, Psalm 65:2 does not appear in the context of a biblical *story*, or narrative. Nevertheless, the rabbis have much to say about the verse, and their commentary reflects many of the themes we have encountered in our study of other

references to silence. While JPS translates the verse as "Praise waiteth for Thee, O God, in Zion; and unto Thee the vow is performed,"[55] the rabbis interpret the word *dumiah* as a *silent* waiting that exhibits patience, self-restraint, faith, and recognition of God as the one, true Judge. These and other familiar themes appear in three rabbinic texts that discuss the verse: B. Eruvin 19a, Midrash Tehillim, B. Megillah 18a.

Eruvin 19a begins by contrasting man's response to the Divine decree with his response to that of a king of "flesh and blood." When a man is sentenced to death by a human king, "a hook must be placed in his mouth in order that he shall not [be able to] curse the king, but in the relationship with the Holy One, blessed be He, when a man incurs [the penalty of] death for [an offense against] the Omnipresent he keeps silence, as it is said: Towards Thee silence is praise [*l'cha dumiah t'hilah.*]" While man typically protests outwardly the decree of a human judge, he does not express resistance to the *Divine* decree. Why do these "men who transgress the will of the Holy One" remain silent in the face of God's decree? Because, say the rabbis, "they acknowledge the justice of their punishment and declare before Him, 'Lord of the universe, Thou hast judged well, Thou hast condemned well, and well provided Gehenna for the wicked and Paradise for the righteous.'"[56] As in the rabbinic literature on 1 Kgs. 19:12, here too silence plays a role in distinguishing God as the one, true Judge: *she'lo k'midat hakadosh barukh hu midat basar va'dam.*[57] As in the rabbinic commentary on Lev. 10:3 and Job 34:29, here too silence is associated with one's acceptance of that Judge's decree and recognition of His justice.

Acceptance is not easy, however. As in the case of Aaron and of Hannah, the rabbis acknowledge that remaining silent in the face of affliction is difficult, i.e., that affliction is

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[55] Ibid.

[56] *B. Eruvin* 19a.

[57] Ibid.

painful: "he [the one sentenced to death]…regards it [his punishment] as if he offered a sacrifice, for it is said in Scripture: And unto Thee the vow is performed [Ps. 65:2b]."[58] While the sinner may accept God's decree, he nevertheless gives up what is most precious to him: his life. Faced with such a sacrifice, the rabbis tell us, the sinner destined for Gehenna "shed[s] tears."[59] Perhaps because silence in the face of such a fate is so difficult, it is considered a form of praise: "Towards Thee silence is praise [Ps. 65:2]."[60] When we have reason to cry out but instead we control our emotions, we proclaim—silently—that God's judgment takes precedence over our own suffering. In this sense, as we have seen elsewhere in our study, silence exalts God.

In the midrashim on Lev. 10:3, Aaron's silence—indicating his acceptance of the Divine decree—is a sign of his righteousness. However, as we have seen, Eruvin 19a seems to suggest that even sinners accept the Divine decree, as indicated by their silence, or lack of protest. To clear up any confusion, the Eruvin text goes on to state that it is only *Israel's* sinners who accept the Divine decree, while "transgressors among idol worshippers" never do. The *poshei yisrael* accept the Divine decree, repent, and are ultimately rescued from Gehenna by Abraham, while the *poshei ovdei kokhavim* simply "go on rebelling forever."[61] Therefore, holding one's silence, in the sense of accepting God's just decree, remains in the eyes of the rabbis an act of righteousness—one which is associated with a faith that idolaters do not possess and a closeness to God that they cannot achieve. Indeed, in this passage silence—restraint of rebellious emotions—enables Israel's redemption.

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid. Note: Based on wordplay with the word *baca* in a prooftext from Psalm 84:7.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

In Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 65:2, we learn that in holding our silence and restraining our emotions we emulate God. According to the midrash, we must silently accept the Divine decree, in spite of the great pain it causes, because *God Himself* does the same:

> *For Thee silence is praise* (Ps. 65:1-2). These words are to be considered in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere: *I have long time held My peace, I have been silent, and refrained Myself; now will I cry like a travailing woman* (Isa. 42:14), for, as the children of Israel said, *Thy holy cities are become a wilderness, Zion is become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned with fire. Wilt Thou refrain Thyself for these things, O Lord?* (*ibid.* 64:10-11), God replied, *Fury is not in Me* (*ibid.* 27:4), as if to say, "I cannot do anything for you; the measure of justice requires that I refrain." And God went on: *O that I could give [the hostile nations] over to destruction as briers and thorns in flame!* (*ibid.*). By these words, the Holy One, blessed be He, meant: "I could do something against them, but the measure of justice makes Me refrain in silence."[62]

As with Aaron's sons, here too God Himself is subject to His decree of justice in spite of the tremendous suffering it brings upon Him and upon His people. If God endures such suffering with patience and self-restraint for the sake of the Divine decree and of justice, then we must strive to do so as well: "By the words *For Thee silence is praise*, David meant: Thou art silent, and I shall be silent, as is said *Be silent to the Lord, and wait patiently for Him* (Ps. 37:7)."[63]

Just as the theme of emulating God's self-restraint is familiar to us, so are other themes that the rabbis raise in Midrash Tehillim. Here, too, the fact that self-restraint is not *easy*—even for God—renders silence *praiseworthy* in the eyes of the rabbis. The rabbis recognize that

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[62] Midrash Tehillim, Psalm 65.

[63] Ibid.

restraining one's emotions in the face of catastrophe, provocation, and suffering is exceedingly difficult and therefore admirable:

> In saying *For Thee silence is praise*, David implied: All men give Thee praise because Thou couldst remain silent. For Thou wast silent at what they did to Thee *in Zion* (*ibid.*), and at the noise that they made in Thy holy house, as is said, *They have made a noise in the house of the Lord, as in the day of a solemn assembly* (Lam. 2:7). And what was the noise they made? They said, *Our high hand and not the Lord hath done all this* (Deut. 32:37); and they also said, *Where are their gods, their rock in whom they trusted?* (*ibid.* 32:37).

The connection between silence, faith, and exalting God is also familiar. Those who are *not* silent in this passage are those who have desecrated the Temple, who hold themselves in greater esteem than God, and who challenge Israel's faith. In contrast to the "noise" of the idolater, silence is associated with God's supremacy and worthiness of our trust.

In B. Megillah 18a, Psalm 65:2 appears in the context of a discussion about whether one may add blessings and praises when reciting the standard Amidah. The rabbis conclude:

> [A] hundred and twenty elders, among whom were many prophets, drew up the prayers in the proper order…Beyond this it is forbidden to declare the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He. For R. Eleazar said: What is the meaning of the verse, *Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord, or make all his praise to be heard?* For whom is it fitting to express the mighty acts of the Lord? For one who can make all his praise to be heard. Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in the name of R. Johanan: One who descants upon the praises of the Holy One, blessed be He, to excess is uprooted from the world…*Should a man* [try to] *say, surely he would be swallowed up*. R. Judah a man of Kefar Gibboraya…gave the

following homily: What is meant by the verse, *For thee silence is praise?* The best medicine of all is silence. When R. Dimi came, he said: In the West they say: A word is worth a *sela*, silence two *selas*.[64]

In this passage, only one who could recite *all* of God's praises would be permitted to add to the standard blessings. Since such a feat would likely be impossible given how great God is, silence is *preferable* to additional praises and excessive speech concerning God's "mighty acts." Silence is worth *more* than words and, in effect, becomes a form of praise. We praise God more by refraining from speech than by praising Him with words that would only prove insufficient. Thus, as we have seen before, to the rabbis silence is anything but empty and meaningless; rather, it has a positive value. As elsewhere, silence affirms and proclaims God's glory.

The talmudic and midrashic texts on Psalm 65:2 reflect and reiterate many of the themes that we have seen elsewhere in the rabbinic literature, e.g., in texts that discuss the silence in verses Lev. 10:3, 1 Sam. 1:13, 1 Kgs. 19:12, and Job 34:29. Our study of these texts enables us to make some preliminary conclusions as to what might constitute a rabbinic "theology of silence." To the rabbis, silence—whether ours or God's—does not represent Divine absence but, rather, Divine presence. God is not silent because He is impotent, unfeeling, or ignorant of what goes on in the world, but because He is exceedingly patient, in control, and willing to stand behind (and suffer from) His own just decree. When humans are silent in the face of great anguish, we emulate God, draw closer to God, and distinguish ourselves from idolaters, who are associated with noise and a lack of self-control. By controlling our emotions when we have reason to cry out, we exalt God: our silence expresses our faith in God, our praise of God, our

[64] *B. Megillah* 18a. See also *B. Berakhot* 33b.

belief in God's Oneness, and our acceptance of God's decree as altogether just. Silence, in the rabbinic mind, is both a reason to trust in God, as well as a means of demonstrating that trust.

We now turn to the medieval commentaries on the above five verses to see how these aspects of rabbinic theology evolve over time.

CHAPTER TWO: Silence in the Medieval Commentaries

Studying the medieval commentaries surrounding the same five verses discussed in Chapter 1 enables us to determine whether the rabbinic "theology of silence" we have outlined endures and how it evolves. Indeed, many elements of that theology appear in the medieval writings, but so do new concerns that reflect the lived reality of the medieval commentators. Rabbinic ideas that resurface include the association of silence with Divine justice, with self-control, and with God's presence. New elements include a preoccupation with sanctifying God's name and with exile.

Silence and Divine Justice

Like many of the earlier sages, the rabbis of the medieval period hold that the death of Aaron's sons was a *just* decree because the sons had sinned. Rashi, citing earlier midrashim,[1] suggests that the sons were either intoxicated upon entering the sanctuary or overly arrogant in issuing a legal decision in front of their elder and teacher, Moses.[2] Hizkuni[3] says that their sin was disobedience, in that they brought fire to the altar that Moses did not command them to bring.[4] The Ramban says that the sons sinned by directing the fire—and their thoughts—only to God's attribute of justice, rather than to both God's justice *and* God's unity.[5] According to Rashi, the silence of Aaron in Lev. 10:3 as well as that of Aaron's surviving sons, Elazar and Ithamar, in Lev. 11:2[6] indicates that "they accepted the decree of the Omnipresent…with love."[7]

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[1] Leviticus Rabbah 12, *B. Eruvin* 63a, and Sifra (Torat Kohanim) *Miluim Shemini* 32.

[2] Rashi to Lev. 10:2 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[3] Hezekiah ben Manoah, a mid-13th century commentator, apparently from France. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Hezekiah ben Manoah."

[4] Hizkuni to Lev. 10:2 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[5] Ramban to Lev. 10:2, as elucidated by translator Charles Chavel's annotation in *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah*, New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1974.

[6] Rashi to Lev. 11:1 explains that *aleihem* in Lev. 11:1 refers to Elazar and Ithamar (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[7] Rashi to Lev. 11:2 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

Like the rabbis, the medieval commentators, too, associate silence with acknowledgement of God's justice and deference to the one true Judge.

Silence as Self-Control that Honors God

As in the rabbinic commentary, the medieval commentators acknowledge that the *difficulty* in keeping one's silence makes doing so all the more admirable. In his commentary on Lev. 10:19, Ibn Ezra refers to the "*tzarot o da'agot*" (troubles or anxieties) that Aaron suffers on account of his sons' death.[8] Saadiah also speaks of Aaron's *tzarot*.[9] The Ramban suggests that Aaron even "cried aloud" before he fell silent.[10] Rashbam says that Aaron would have mourned and cried had Moses not stopped him, or consoled him.[11] By refraining from protest and the expression of his strong emotions, Aaron acknowledges the justice of the Divine decree, esteeming it above his own needs, and his silence thus honors God. Hannah's silence,[12] too, honors God. According to Rashi, Hannah suffers "grief of heart" that causes her to speak "harshly" to the priest Eli, yet to *God* she speaks—or prays—silently, controlling and channeling her emotions.[13] In addition, though at times we may feel inclined to *praise* God by uttering additional prayers, we honor God more, says Rashi, when we *refrain* from expressing excessive praise: "Silence is praise to You; because there is no end to Your praise, the more one praises, the more one detracts."[14]

Thus, in refraining from expressing emotion when we feel so moved to speak out, we honor God by acknowledging that His just decree is of primary importance or that we could

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[8] Ibn Ezra to Lev. 10:19 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[9] Saadiah to Lev. 10:19 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[10] Ramban to Lev. 10:3, as translated by Charles Chavel.

[11] Rashbam to Lev. 10:2-3 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[12] In 1 Sam. 1:13.

[13] Rashi to 1 Sam. 1:15-16 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

[14] Rashi to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*). See also *B. Megillah* 18a, cited in Chapter One of this thesis, and *B. Berakhot* 33b.

never fully speak His praises. In addition, in our restraint we *emulate* God, for He too displays tremendous self-control, even in the face of great torment, as Rashi's commentary on Psalm 65:2 continues: "To You is silence praise, O God, in Zion—That You were silent and still concerning Your enemies' deeds in Zion is praise to You, for You are able to take revenge, yet You are slow to anger."[15] Holding our peace when we want—and have reason—to cry out is Godly. Like the rabbis, the medieval commentators suggest that "silence," which both honors and emulates God, represents self-control for the sake of Heaven.

God's Presence in Silence

Just as the rabbis see God's presence—not absence—in the "silence" of the texts we have studied, so the medieval commentators tend to affirm this connection, or theology. In his explanation of Lev. 10:3, Ibn Ezra refers to Aaron's sons as *k'rovim elav*—"close to Him"—echoing the rabbinic midrash that attributed Aaron's silence to a sense of comfort that his very own sons were God's close and "honored ones."[16] In his commentary on 1 Kgs. 19:9-12, Rashi links the "still, small voice" to a moment of Divine revelation, identifying the cave where Elijah stood at Horeb as the same "cleft of the rock where Moses stood" when God's *k'vod* passed before him in Exodus 33:22; he explains that there is "silence to the praising" of the angels whenever prophecy occurs.[17] In his commentary on Job 34:29, Rashi understands *yashkit* as God's bestowal of quiet upon the poor, i.e., peace or refuge from their oppressors, just as the rabbis understood *yashkit* as God's bestowal of *shalvah*, or goodness.[18] Just as the rabbis affirm that God is present in silence, the medieval commentators, too, hold that usually when there is

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Rashbam to Lev. 10:2-3 also suggests that the sons were "close" to God, however he notes that this idea is not the *p'shat* meaning of the text and appears to reject that interpretation in favor of the idea that the High Priests are the ones who are close to God, as we will see.

[17] Rashi to 1 Kgs. 19:9-12 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

[18] Rashi to Job 34:29 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

silence, God is not distant, but close at hand—close to those who suffer, close to the prophet, and close to the poor.

New Concerns: Sanctification of God's Name and Exile

While the medieval commentaries echo many of the themes that appear in the rabbinic theology of silence, they also reveal a more pronounced concern with the sanctification of God's name and with *galut*. The sanctification of God's name appears in the commentary of Sforno and especially Rashbam on Aaron's silence in Lev. 10:3. Sforno, for example, comments that Aaron falls silent *she'hitnachem b'kiddush haShem she'nikadesh b'motam*—"because he takes comfort in [the fact] that God's name was sanctified by their [his sons'] death."[19] When we read Rashbam's commentary, however, we see that there is disagreement—or at least conversation—over whether it is specifically *the sons' death* that sanctifies God's name. To be sure, like other commentators both medieval and rabbinic, the Rashbam finds the sons at fault. To Rashbam, the sons sinned by bringing fire to the altar that Moses had not commanded them to bring and, in doing so, missed an opportunity to sanctify God's name: "Moses did not...want them to bring a 'regular' fire, because they were expecting the descent of a divine fire. It would have been inappropriate to bring an alien fire on that specific day; [they should have waited] so that God's Name would be sanctified when everyone would find out that a fire had descended from heaven."[20] However, though Aaron's sons may have been deserving of punishment, in the end it is neither their death nor a miraculous display of "divine fire" that achieves the sanctification of God's name. Rather, in Rashbam's eyes, it is Aaron's "silence."

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[19] Sforno to Lev. 10:3 (*The Torat Chaim Chumash*).

[20] Rashbam to Lev. 10:1-3, as translated by Martin I. Lockshin in *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers: An Annotated Translation* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2001).

Rashbam explains that as soon as Aaron, who was performing a service in the Tabernacle, "heard about their deaths, he wanted to cease performing the service and begin mourning for his sons." However, Moses urged Aaron, "Do not mourn or cry. Do not cease performing the service." Rashbam understands the *k'rovai* in Lev. 10:3—God's "close ones" by whom He will be sanctified—not as Aaron's sons, but as the High Priests, such as Aaron himself, who sanctify God through their service, especially when they continue to perform their service in the face of such grief. According to Rashbam, Moses explains to Aaron:

> "Through those High Priests that are close to Me I wish to be sanctified; I do not want My Name and My service to be desecrated." That is what God said to me (Lev. 21:10-12), "The priest who is greater than his fellows…should not let his hair grow long or tear his clothing [even when a relative of his dies.]…He shall not go out of the sanctuary and profane the sanctuary of his God." This means that if he does *not* go out, he will sanctify…." Accordingly, do not set the service aside…Do not go out and do not desecrate [the service]. Rather let God and His service be sanctified by you….This is God's honor, when a man sees his sons dead and yet sets his mourning aside because of the service of his Creator.

How does Aaron respond to Moses' urging? *Vayidom Aharon*—"Aaron was silent"—and his silence indicates, to Rashbam, that "he did not cry and he did not mourn." Rather, he continued the service he was performing in spite of his anguish, and this, not the death of his sons, sanctifies God's name.[21]

In the commentaries of Sforno and Rashbam on Aaron's silence, we find threads of continuity between medieval and rabbinic ideas. Sforno's view that God is sanctified by those

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[21] Ibid.

close to Him and that this comforts Aaron appears, as we saw in Chapter 1 of this study, in a number of midrashim, including Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta Rabbati. Rashbam's view that Aaron is heroic in his ability and willingness to suppress his own impulses for the sake of God's glorification is rooted in the rabbinic view that Aaron suffers pain and is rewarded for his silence. The idea that Aaron continues his service in the tabernacle echoes an obscure yet powerful statement in Sifra, where Aaron assures Moses that "even if I had also buried my other two sons, I could never treat the Holy Things of the sanctuary in a disrespectful way."[22] Despite these continuities, however, there is something novel in the medieval commentaries: the degree to which *kiddush hashem* is discussed and the association of silence with this ideal. Rashbam appears to take issue with the belief, expressed by Sforno, that God's name is sanctified through the punishment or death of his "close ones,"[23] in effect raising the question: what *does* constitute *kiddush hashem*? Addressing this question seems to be Rashbam's main concern, more so than the rabbinic concern with understanding Aaron's silence, defending his righteousness, and making sense of a seemingly senseless catastrophe.

Another area where we can detect a distinction between rabbinic and medieval concerns is in the commentary to Psalm 65:2. In the rabbinic writings, the silence in Ps. 65:2 symbolizes self-control for the sake of Divine justice, e.g., the sinner facing a death sentence will ultimately be redeemed if he restrains his rebelliousness and accepts God's decree, and God refrains from taking vengeance on those desecrating His "house" for the sake of upholding the "measure of justice." While the medieval commentators *elsewhere* associate silence with justice, acceptance of the Divine decree, and self-control (as we have seen above), their commentaries *on Ps. 65:2* mostly emphasize a connection between silence and patient, faithful waiting for return from

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[22] Sifra (Torat Kohanim) *Parashat Shemini, Parashah 1, Perek* 2:10.

[23] Rashbam to Lev. 10:2-3 and n32 in Lockshin.

exile. According to Radak, Psalm 65 is about *ha'galut*—"the exile"—and *dumiah* in verse 2 refers to *tochelet*—"expectation," "hope," or "anticipation."[24] Both Radak and ibn Ezra see a connection between *dumiah* in Ps. 65:2 and the root דמם in 1 Sam 14:9 and Ps. 62:6, meaning "to keep still"[25] in waiting. Both speak of the praise that awaits God and will be spoken to Him *b'tzion*—"in Zion," i.e., *b'kibbutz galuyot* per Radak[26] and *b'makom ha'aron* per ibn Ezra.[27] In addition, both refer to a vow that will be paid to God[28]—a vow which remains unchanging, Radak explains (noting that the first *segol* in *neder*, though accented, does not change to a *kamatz*), and which will be paid in sacrifices at the Temple *im yashivam ha'El l'tzion*—"if God returns them to Zion."[29] Thus, here the medieval commentators seem primarily concerned with instilling in Israel an attitude of patience and perseverance—of carrying on in one's commitment to God and to the hope for redemption—while residing in exile. Just as Aaron carried on his priestly duties in silence, here too silence—*dumiah*—is linked to maintaining vows and esteem for God under challenging, if not excruciating, circumstances.

Thus, while we find a number of "old," familiar themes in the medieval commentaries, we also find "new" ones, particularly in the commentaries surrounding Lev. 10:3 and Ps. 65:2. In addition to a focus on what constitutes *kiddush hashem* and a proper exilic stance, another notable new element in the medieval commentary is that silence is not always considered something *admirable*. If, in our study thus far, silence tends to represent something positive (e.g., *shalvah* bestowed by God, deference to Divine justice, patience and perseverance amid

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[24] Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, Tel Aviv: Miskal Publishing & Distribution.

[25] W. L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: The Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (BibleWorks for Windows, Version 7.0, 2007), CD-ROM.

[26] Radak to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

[27] Ibn Ezra to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

[28] Radak and ibn Ezra to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

[29] Radak to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

challenging circumstances), in the medieval commentaries to Ps. 65:2 silence *also* takes on a more negative valence. In these commentaries, we hear echoes of Rabbi Meir's view, as expressed *but strongly contradicted in the rabbinic midrashim*,[30] that silence represents distance from God. Just as Rabbi Meir equates silence with God's "hid[ing] His face from His world" and being ignorant of what goes on in it, here silence represents a sort of *muteness* that results from separation between God and the people Israel. *Elohim ha'shochen b'tzion*—"God who dwells in Zion"—as Rashi and Metzudat David[31] describe Him,[32] necessarily dwells *apart* from those living in exile, so the praises and vows that Israel utters cannot be heard or fulfilled, respectively; Israel must await *kibbutz galuyot* to deliver praises and vows to their God who dwells in Zion and, in the meantime, remains impotent to overcome the divide.

A passage in the Zohar speaks to this frustrating situation—this silent divide. Whoever eats of the tree in Breisheet "causes separation," so that when Eve "took of its fruit" she "separated life from death," caused "the menstruation which keeps a woman apart from her husband," and "brought death into the world[, f]or death is attached to this tree." One fatal separation discussed in the passage is that between *kol* and *dibbur*—sound and speech:

> [H]e who separates them becomes dumb, and being bereft of speech, returns to dust. R. Simeon said: "It is written: 'I was dumb with silence, I held my peace…' (Ps. 39:3). This is the exclamation of the Community of Israel in exile; for then Voice [sound] is separated from Utterance [speech], and no word is heard, and therefore Israel is 'dumb

[30] Specifically, the midrashim on Job 34:29, i.e., Leviticus Rabbah 5 and Genesis Rabbah 36, discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

[31] Commentary of David Altschuler, an 18th century biblical exegete from Galicia. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974 ed., s.v. "David Altschuler."

[32] Rashi and Metzudat David to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

with silence, etc.' And Israel further say: 'To thee praise is silent' (Ps. 65:2), i.e., the psalm of David is silent in exile and without voice [sound].[33]

In the Zohar passage, Israel's separation from God in Zion is linked to the separation between life and death, between man and woman, and between speech and sound. The praises Israel utters for God while in exile are muted, leaving Israel helpless to overcome this predicament. The Zohar does offer one hope, however, for Israel's redemption: *faith*. "Eve… brought death into the world…[and] all creatures taste of death save those faithful ones who first entrust their souls to God, so that they are in due course restored to their place."[34] Faith in God, despite His absence, will help Israel overcome their deathly silence, or muteness. In the medieval rabbinic mind, faith, patience, and perseverance constitute the ideal exilic stance while waiting for return to Zion. Silence—here framed in a negative light—helps the medieval commentator build his case for this ideal.

A Medieval Jewish Theology of Silence?

Given the mix of old and new elements, as well as the fact that silence is not consistently framed in a positive light in the medieval commentary, can we nevertheless speak of a coherent medieval Jewish theology of silence? Our study suggests that indeed a few assertions can be made, if we understand some of the inconsistencies we find as a sign of an evolving belief system. What are these assertions, and how is the system evolving?

The medieval Jewish God does not demand the death of His "close ones" in order to glorify Him and sanctify His name. Neither must sanctification come through a display of miracles. Rather, *kiddush hashem* is achieved through perseverance in the face of torment, i.e., carrying on. Silence represents this perseverance, as well as patient waiting and unwavering

[33] The Zohar, Bereshith I:36a.

[34] Ibid., I:36a-b.

(unchanging) hope for return from exile. However, sometimes instead of representing a means of connection with God, silence represents the muteness that *impedes* salvation—a chilling reminder of God's *absence*. This inconsistency may suggest ambivalence with regard to faith in God—a wrestling with, or crisis of, doubt that perhaps the Zohar passage seeks to address. On the other hand, it may simply suggest a rabbinic belief system that is in evolution.

Characteristic of evolution (as opposed to revolution) is the presence of both old and "new" elements, some of which function in concert and others of which may appear at odds with one another. In the medieval commentary we see some rabbinic ideas, which were not particularly pronounced in their own time, brought to the foreground in order to emphasize a medieval ideal. For example, Aaron's inability or unwillingness to mistreat the sanctuary objects despite his loss in Sifra finds fuller expression in Rashbam's idea that continuing one's service in spite of great anguish constitutes *kiddush hashem*. Rabbi Meir's image of God in hiding is more boldly embraced in the medieval idea that God in Zion dwells apart from Israel, who awaits return—patiently, faithfully, and muted—while in exile. Sometimes the medieval commentators make use of elements that *were* prominent in the rabbinic era, such as the view that Aaron's sons had sinned, or the idea that Aaron was greatly pained. Whether incorporating prominent or understated rabbinic ideas, the medieval commentators weave old, rabbinic threads into the fabric of their commentary to help express their medieval concerns and ideals. However, *some* older themes (with which the medieval commentators prove unwilling to part) *clash* with newer ones instead of supporting them. For instance, as mentioned above, sometimes God is present in silence, as He was in the rabbinic literature, but sometimes silence connotes His absence. Sometimes silence is admirable and Godly, as in rabbinic thought, while other times silence represents a fatal separation—something not to be emulated but overcome. The coexistence—

and occasional clash—of the old and the "new" suggests a theological system that is evolving, as those who embrace it respond to their surrounding life circumstances (e.g., geographical dispersion, living in the wake of the Crusades) yet strive to maintain continuity with their past.

Studying Silence

In the exegetical literature of both the rabbinic and medieval periods, silence is a means of demonstrating one's commitment to the community's (or at least that community's religious leaders') highest values: in the rabbinic period silence affirms one's deference to the Divine decree, for instance, while in the medieval period silence is a means for achieving the sanctification of God's name or waiting out exile with the proper attitude. Thus, though not always framed in a positive light, silence helps the commentators express what *is* praiseworthy in their particular era and community. Therefore, studying silence in the rabbinic and medieval literature helps us to identify rabbinic and medieval ideals. Studying silence also helps us to discern the central concerns of each community and to distinguish them from one another. For example, in their midrashim on Lev. 10:3 the rabbis appear concerned with defending the righteousness of the ancient High Priest and asserting that God's harsh decrees are ultimately just, while the Rashbam's concern is with encouraging continued service and perseverance in the wake of catastrophe and hardship.

In addition to helping identify ideals and distinguish core concerns, studying silence helps us to determine the coherence of a theology in a given time period or community. Do the various strains of thought found in the commentaries generally work together, as in the rabbinic period? Or, as in the medieval period, is there some dissonance, shift in emphasis, and evolution? In either case, studying silence helps us see how our ancestors wrestled with such theological issues as what God wants of us, God's role in our suffering, God's oneness and how

to identify idolaters, God and justice, and how we can pull closer to God's presence. Why does the study of silence provide us with so many valuable insights? Perhaps because in the eyes of the rabbis and medieval commentators, silence has valence—whether positive or negative. In our study thus far, silence is never depicted as empty, or neutral, of value. To the commentators, silence is not simply the *absence* of a response; rather, it *expresses* something, even in its muteness. However, precisely *what* silence expresses is open to interpretation, and the biblical silences give the commentators license to impart their most fundamental convictions and address their most pressing concerns. In giving biblical silences a voice, the rabbis and medieval commentators give us insight into the issues and concerns that they consider of ultimate importance.

CHAPTER THREE: Silence in Maimonides

Maimonides, though contemporary with the medieval commentators discussed in the preceding chapter, does not engage in verse-by-verse exegesis of the biblical text as they do. As a philosopher and theologian, his enterprise, so to speak, is not about writing a biblical commentary so much as addressing *particular* issues regarding the conflict between faith and reason. Unlike the traditional commentators, he does not seek to give the biblical silences a voice through story and familiar modes of interpretation. Rather, he brings his own voice to the text in that he is more explicit about what he believes. Determining his theology is less an act of construction on our part because, in effect, he constructs it for us, selecting particular verses to help build his case. Unfortunately, in doing so, Maimonides employs only one of the five verses we have been studying.[1] Nevertheless, examining that verse's treatment in his *Moreh Nevuchim* provides us with an entry point for understanding where silence fits into the context of Maimonides' views about God.

Maimonides' discussion of Psalm 65:2 in *Moreh Nevuchim* I:59 echoes the rabbinic view in B. Meg. 18a that "one who descants upon the praises of the Holy One, blessed be He, to excess is uprooted from the world" and Rashi's opinion that "the more one praises, the more one detracts."[2] However, Maimonides elaborates significantly on why it is that to God, "silence is praise." In Maimonides' eyes, the verse relates to his argument that knowledge of God brings one closer to God and that knowledge of God means knowing what God is *not*, not what God *is*:

> [N]one but Himself comprehends what He is, and…our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him…The idea is best expressed in the book of

[1] Note: In *Moreh Nevuchim* I:37, Maimonides does reference another of our verses, Lev. 10:3, however his discussion concerns only the meaning of the word *p'nei* in the first part of the verse, rather than Aaron's silence (*vayidom Aharon*) in the second.

[2] Rashi to Ps. 65:2 (*Nevi'im u'Khetuvim Nechmad l'Mareh*).

> Psalms, "Silence is praise to Thee" (lxv. 2). It is a very expressive remark on this subject; for whatever we utter with the intention of extolling and of praising Him, contains something that cannot be applied to God, and includes derogatory expressions; it is therefore becoming to be silent, and to be content with intellectual reflection, as has been recommended…in the words "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still" (Ps. iv. 4).[3]

Since we cannot know what God *is*, we cannot—and must not—define or praise God using positive attributes (e.g., "God is X"). Doing so would be "derogatory" because what we consider a descriptor, a praiseworthy attribute, or a "perfection" is "only a perfection in relation to us" and not with respect to *God*, who is of an entirely different nature from us and whose "essence [already] includes all His perfections."[4] A statement about God's nature, however complimentary, is not necessarily flattering *to Him*. Rather, in its inappropriateness and in its suggestion that God's essence is divisible into nameable attributes, such a statement is derogatory. Instead of making derogatory statements about God, cautions Maimonides, we ought to hold our peace.

Further illustrating how Ps. 65:2 relates to his theology, Maimonides introduces a Talmudic text into his discussion in I:59. He quotes, from B. Berakhot 33b:

> A certain person reading prayers in the presence of Rabbi Hanina, said, "God, the great, the valiant and the tremendous, the powerful, the strong, and the mighty."—The rabbi said to him, Have you finished all the praises of your Master? The three epithets, "God, the great, the valiant and the tremendous," we should not have applied to God, had Moses

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[3] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), pt. I, chap. 59.

[4] Ibid.

not mentioned them in the Law, and had not the men of the Great Synagogue come forward subsequently and established their use in the prayer; and you say all this! Let this be illustrated by a parable. There was once an earthly king, possessing millions of gold coin; he was praised for owning millions of silver coin; was this not really dispraise to him?[5]

Maimonides points out that Rabbi Hanina "does not employ any such simile as 'A king who possesses millions of gold denarii…is praised as having hundreds'" because the issue is not one of *quantity*, i.e., one million versus one hundred denarii. What makes excessive praise of God derogatory is not simply that any *number* of praises would fall short. Rather, the issue is one of "gold" versus "silver," because God's "perfections" are not of the same *kind* as our earthly, inferior ones. When we sing God's praises in terms that connote our own idea of perfection, we "imply defects in reference to God… 'For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few' (Ecc. v. 2)."[6] We may intend to praise God but our compliments only insult Him, so we are better off keeping silent.

Even though we may have noble intentions in uttering praises for God, Maimonides sees failure to keep silent as a transgression: "If slander and libel is a great sin, how much greater is the sin of those who speak with looseness of tongue in reference to God, and describe Him by attributes which are far below Him…they not only commit an ordinary sin, but unconsciously at least incur the guilt of profanity and blasphemy." So what *can* we say in our prayers when we wish to praise God? As the Berakhot 33b text suggests, we may use the three words that appear in Torah (from Deut. 10:17): *ha'gadol, ha'gibor v'ha'norah* ("the great, the valiant and the tremendous") because the men of the Great Synagogue fixed these terms as part of the Tefilah

[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

service. However, we may not utter any *additional* words of praise. Beyond reciting these three permitted words of praise, we are "to be content with intellectual reflection," Maimonides says, concluding that "the glorification of God does not consist in *uttering* that which is not to be uttered, but in *reflecting* on that on which man should reflect."[7]

Thus, as in the commentaries we studied in Chapters 1 and 2, silence in Maimonidean thought represents a sort of self-restraint for the sake of Heaven. In Maimonides' view, our silence praises God better than words can, for in keeping silent, we refrain from uttering *human* compliments that would be demeaning to God, unsuitable, and insulting to His true, unified, perfect essence. At the same time, silence is more than simply refraining from doing that which we should not do; silence allows us to glorify God through "intellectual reflection," i.e., there is something that we *do* as we keep silent. As in the classical commentaries, silence is not empty and void. To the contrary, it is part of what Maimonides considers to be the ideal mode of worship, as he elaborates later in *Moreh Nevuchim*.

In *Moreh Nevuchim* III:51, Maimonides describes how "those who have attained a knowledge of God" (that is, "so far as a true knowledge can be attained") ought to worship Him. "The intellect which emanates from God unto us is the link that joins us to God," Maimonides says, so we must seek to "strengthen that bond" as did the exemplary prophet, Moses, by concentrating all our thoughts on Him. This meditative, cerebral act "is the worship peculiar to those who have acquired a knowledge of the highest truths; and the more they reflect on Him, and think of Him, the more are they engaged in His worship." Maimonides calls this type of worship *avodah she'balev*, "a service in the heart, which explanation I understand to mean this: man concentrates all his thoughts on the First Intellect, and is absorbed in these thoughts as much

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[7] Ibid.

as possible…[I]t must be man's aim…to have his heart constantly filled with longing after Him." What enables man to engage in *avodah she'balev*?

> He accomplishes this…by seclusion and retirement. Every pious man should therefore seek retirement and seclusion, and should only in case of necessity associate with others….[Y]ou break the bond between you and God whenever you turn entirely your thoughts to the necessary food or any necessary business; you are then not with God, and He is not with you; for that relation between you and Him is actually interrupted in those moments….[Only] think of worldly matters when you eat, drink, bathe, talk with your wife and little children, or when you converse with other people….[But w]hen you are alone by yourself, when you are awake on your couch, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God…This I consider as the highest perfection wise men can attain.

Maimonides' high esteem for this intellectual, non-verbal form of worship is evident as he refers to it—on two additional and separate occasions in the same chapter—as "the highest kind of worship" and even "the highest aim man can attain."[8]

Thus, to Maimonides, one draws closer to God—and perfection—by thinking, concentrating, contemplating, and meditating, all of which are to take place in solitude and none of which appear to involve speaking. Maimonides associates *talking* and *conversing* with the mundane, rather than with "Divine service"; they are necessary evils, which, instead of elevating a person, serve only to *interrupt* one's communion with God. By engaging in *avodah she'balev*, one ensures that "it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him." One loses the benefit of such protection, however, "[w]hen he does not

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[8] *Guide,* III:51.

meditate on God," because "when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only that intellectual link with God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents."[9] In Maimonides' eyes, the worship that is most appropriate—that bonds a pious person to God, affords him Divine protection, keeps him from transgression, and inches him closer to perfection—all takes place in silence. To Maimonides, silence is very rich indeed.

Concessions from the Ideal

Maimonides appears to recognize that his concept of a silent, contemplative *avodah she'balev* is an ideal, which remains unattainable—even unimaginable—to many. In *Moreh Nevuchim* III:32, he explains why God did not command the ancient Israelites to give up their custom of animal sacrifice for this ideal, but instead took a more moderate approach: "He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner; viz., to build unto Him a Temple…to have the altar erected to His Name…to offer the sacrifices to Him…to bow down to Him and to burn incense before Him."[10] God took this more gradual approach because He was well aware, claims Maimonides, that "it is…according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed"[11] and that therefore commanding an entirely new form of worship would not succeed in turning the people away from idolatry toward "true faith."[12] Because God never changes the nature of man via a miracle,[13] a concession had to be made, so that man could be guided slowly toward a more

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[9] Ibid.
[10] *Guide,* III:32.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

ideal worship practice: the Israelites were permitted to continue worshipping in their own way, so long as they worshipped the right God.

Sacrificial worship was, of course, far from Maimonides' ideal *avodah she'balev*. But commanding the Israelites "to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service" would have been tantamount, he says, to a prophet announcing "at present…that we should not pray to [God], not fast, not seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action."[14] Here, Maimonides appears to suggest that just as the ancient Israelites were not capable of adopting a more ideal mode of worship—prayer—in their day, neither are Maimonides' people capable of adopting a mode even *closer* to the ideal (or, perhaps, the ideal itself) in his day. The "supplications, prayers, and similar kinds of worship" of Maimonides' day may be more likely than the "sacrificial service" to turn people from idolatry to true faith, but they do not constitute the *ideal* form of worship he envisions; they are only "nearer to th[is] primary object."[15] They represent a concession from the purely "intellectual reflection" that, as we have seen, Maimonides considers "the highest kind of worship."

Maimonides' laws of prayer in the Mishneh Torah reflect this concession, rather than his ideal. He begins his *Hilchot Tefilah* by declaring that according to the Sages, the service in the heart—*avodah she'balev*—is the Tefilah,[16] which he then goes on to describe as requiring a degree of verbalization. For instance, the next *halachah* says that the commandment to pray every day includes *uttering* (*magid*) praises of God.[17] *Halakhah* 4 explains that the eighteen benedictions were arranged in order so that everyone could pray in the holy *language*:

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Tefilah* 1:1.

[17] Ibid., 1:2.

> When Israel was exiled…[c]hildren were born to them in these foreign countries and those children's language was confused….Consequently, when someone would pray, he would be limited in his ability to request his needs or to praise the Holy One, blessed be He, in Hebrew…When Ezra and his court saw this, they established eighteen blessings in sequence….Thus, the prayers could be set [lit. arranged] in the mouths of everyone. They could learn them quickly and the prayers of those unable to express themselves [lit. stutterers or stammerers] would be as complete as the prayers of the most eloquent [lit. those of unblemished speech].[18]

The prayer practice described is clearly a *spoken* one; were "intellectual reflection" at issue instead, any language would suffice and the stutterer would not have suffered any disadvantage before Ezra ordered the benedictions. A later section of *Hilchot Tefilah* discusses what *volume* is appropriate for prayer, asserting that one of the eight concerns to which a worshipper must attend is the proper control of his voice: "A person should not raise his voice during his *Amidah*, nor should he pray silently. Rather, he should pronounce the words with his lips, whispering in a tone that he can hear."[19] Thus, while the philosophical *Moreh Nevuchim* may depict Maimonides' ideal mode of worship, the halakhic Mishneh Torah takes a practical, realistic approach, its laws governing our conduct in a world where concessions have been made for human imperfection. The ideal is silent; the world, noisier.

Thus, what emerges from the texts we have studied so far in this chapter is the idea that silence is an ideal and the *spoken* word a concession, at least as far as worship is concerned. Maimonides expresses this preference for silence over speech with regard to other areas as well, such as study and teaching, as we find in the Mishneh Torah's *Hilchot De'ot*:

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[18] Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Tefilah* 1:4.

[19] Ibid., 5:9.

> Rav, the disciple of our saintly teacher, [Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi,] never uttered an idle word in all his days – which is what the conversation of most people consists of. One should not speak at length even about [matters involving one's] physical needs...[O]ur Sages commanded us and said "Whoever speaks at length brings on sin." They also said: "I have found nothing better for one's person than silence." Similarly, when speaking about matters of Torah or knowledge, one's words should be brief, but rich in content. This is what the Sages commanded with their statement: "One should always teach his students with brevity." In contrast, if one's words are many and the content scant, that is foolishness, of which [Ecclesiastes 5:2] states: "The dream comes with a multitude of subjects, and the voice of the fool with a multitude of words." Silence is a safeguard for wisdom. Therefore, one should not hasten to answer, nor speak at length. He should teach his students in calm and tranquility without shouting or wordiness. This is what Solomon stated: "The words of the wise are heard in tranquility" (Ecclesiastes 9:17).[20]

In this passage, Maimonides recognizes that audible speech is, at times, necessary, for one cannot teach Torah or provide for one's own physical needs without such communication. While allowing for this concession, however, Maimonides urges us to keep our words to a minimum when engaging in these activities. Speech may be *necessary,* but it is not *ideal.* In Maimonides' eyes, those who speak a "multitude of words" are fools, while silence, calm, and tranquility characterize the wise. Unfortunately, he suggests, the majority of humankind is foolish and not wise; while a few exemplary individuals like Rav and presumably his "saintly" teacher, Yehudah HaNasi, exercise appropriate self-control, "most people" are inclined to speak excessively. As in *Hilchot Tefilah*, the Mishneh Torah offers legal guidance in recognition of the

[20] Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot De'ot* 2:4-5.

fact that—for most individuals—attaining and upholding the more silent ideal does not come naturally.

God is Not Like Us

Underlying the views of silence and speech discussed in this chapter is Maimonides' conviction that God is wholly *different* from man. We must not speak God's praises because we do not and cannot really know *what God is*. "Silence is praise" because, were we to try naming God's attributes, our words would be inaccurate and derogatory, as would the suggestion that God even *has* attributes (i.e., rather than being of a single, unified, perfect essence). As *Moreh Nevuchim* I:58 explains, "All we understand is the fact that He exists, that He is a Being to whom none of His creatures is similar, who has nothing in common with them…In the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient…and in the endeavor to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure!"[21]

Not only does God differ from us in essence, but also in action. Maimonides notes repeatedly that, just because the Bible uses "human" language to describe God's actions, we must not assume that His actions are anything like our own. In *Moreh Nevuchim* I:65, he cautions: "When we are told that God addressed the Prophets and spoke to them, our minds are merely to receive a notion that there is a Divine knowledge to which the Prophets attain…that the things which the Prophets communicate to us come from the Lord, and are not altogether the products of their own conceptions and ideas….We must not suppose that in speaking God employed voice or sound."[22] In his discussion of Elihu's speech, he explains that "the term management, when applied to God, has not the same meaning which it has when applied to us;

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[21] *Guide,* I:58.

[22] *Guide,* I:65.

and when we say that He rules His creatures we do not mean that He does the same as we do when we rule over other beings....This lesson is the principal object of the whole Book of Job...that we should not fall into the error of imagining his knowledge to be similar to ours, or His intention, providence, and rule similar to ours."[23] Our words and language fall short, because of the vast divide between the nature of God and humankind.

Maimonides' conception of speech and noisy worship practices as *concessions* also points to the great difference he believes exists between us and God. We are permitted to utter three particular words of praise, to whisper the Tefilah benedictions, and to converse regarding our human, physical needs, but these behaviors all constitute departures from a more silent ideal. Whether God allows for departures from the ideal, e.g., by permitting sacrificial worship practices, or Maimonides himself allows for them, e.g., through his rules in the Mishneh Torah, such departures constitute concessions made for our *humanness*—our imperfect, human nature. As such, they serve to establish a link in Maimonides' writing between noisiness and the mundane. Meanwhile, the more silent realm of the intellect represents our "link" to God. Despite the great chasm between us and God in terms of our nature, our actions, and our use of speech, humans *are* able to commune with Him if we concentrate, meditate, and focus our mental energy on Him. We can do this if we seclude ourselves from others and refrain from worldly chatter—if we distance ourselves from our typical human needs and concerns, which are so *distinct* from what Maimonides considers Divine.

According to Maimonides, God is so different from us that our words and language inevitably fail to bridge the divide between us. Words and language constitute a concession—and often a distraction—from what Maimonides imagines as a more ideal form of connection

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[23] *Guide,* III:23.

with the Divine. Speech represents our worldly, earthly, *human* existence, its usage often derogatory and potentially offensive to God. Silence, on the other hand, *honors* the distance between us and God, recognizing God as wholly other in nature. At the same time, silence is a means through which we may draw closer to God, in spite of our difference.

Rabbinic, Medieval, and Maimonidean Silence

Many of the themes that we uncovered in our study of rabbinic and medieval commentaries regarding silence also appear in Maimonides' thought and theology. Other themes are conspicuously absent, while Maimonides introduces a few new concepts into our study of what constitutes a Jewish theology of silence. Though he comments on only one of our five biblical verses at length, Maimonides—like the other sages and commentators we have studied—uses silence to help convey the values, theological convictions, and concerns that he considers of ultimate importance.

What are some of the similarities between Maimonidean, rabbinic, and medieval theological conceptions of silence? First, like the other commentators, Maimonides understands silence as something more than mere emptiness or muteness. According to Maimonides, by refraining from uttering God's praises in worship, we avoid insulting Him and His true essence, but our silent worship also allows for the all-important "intellectual reflection" and concentration that establishes connection with the Divine. Something *happens* in silence because, like Aaron in Rashbam's commentary for instance, we *do* something in our silence. There is meaning in silence. Second, like the rabbis who spoke of God's silence in Job 34:29 as His bestowal of *shalvah*, Maimonides speaks of Divine protection that surrounds the worshipper who is intellectually linked to God during his silent *avodah she'balev*. There is a sense of God's presence and providence in silence. Third, as in the rabbinic commentary on 1 Kgs. 19:12,

silence is contrasted with idolatrous noise. According to Maimonides, silence keeps us from naming attributes of God, i.e., from suggesting that He is like man and not of a single, unified essence. "Positive attributes imply polytheism,"[24] so refraining from uttering them honors God's Oneness. In contrast, speech, in Maimonides' eyes, relates to the mundane; it is a noisy concession to worldly, human needs, and it distracts us from concentrating fully on God. Finally, like the rabbinic and other medieval commentators, Maimonides frames silence as self-control for the sake of Heaven. Like Hannah and others in the midrash who "have their hearts under their control," we are to direct our full attention in worship, says Maimonides, setting aside our other needs and concentrating all our thoughts on God. In addition, we are to acknowledge—like Rashi and the rabbinic sages—that silence, rather than expression, better honors the distinction between us and the Divine. To God, "silence is praise."

Absent from Maimonides' theology of silence, as compared to the rabbis', is the idea that by keeping silent we emulate God. This idea was most pronounced in Midrash Tehillim on Ps. 65:2, so its absence from the *Moreh Nevuchim* material we have studied is notable. The midrash interpreted "Silence is praise to Thee" as implying that God's patience, or silence, in the face of the Temple's destruction was praiseworthy and that, like God, we too should be patient and silent, in deference to "the measure of justice." While Maimonides encourages us to develop our knowledge of God (or, rather, of what God is not) and to strengthen the intellectual bond between ourselves and God, nowhere does he seem to recommend that we actually *emulate* God, either through silence or any other means. Perhaps this is because of an unwillingness to claim that God *is* silent, since then he would be applying a positive attribute to God. Perhaps

[24] *Guide*, I:58.

Maimonides believes that we cannot possibly emulate God, because we cannot even comprehend what God *is* in the first place.

Also curiously absent, given that Maimonides lives in the same period as the other medieval commentators we have discussed, is the relation of silence to *kiddush hashem* (i.e., the question of martyrdom) and *galut*. Silence, in Maimonidean thought, does not seem to be about *perseverance* for the sake of glorifying God's name or about patiently and faithfully awaiting return from exile. Rather, as the medieval exegetes introduce ideas that reflect their particular core concerns, Maimonides introduces ideas and concerns of his own, while grounding his ideas, as they did, in the words of the sages and of Scripture. One of these ideas, as we have seen, is the connection between silence and wisdom: "Silence is a safeguard for wisdom" (thus also preserving our connection to God, to whom Maimonides believes we are bound through our intellect), while excessive wordiness of little substance "is foolishness." Another of his concerns is emphasizing the distinction between man and God—a distinction that is best honored, he believes, through silence; we must refrain from naming attributes and uttering excessive praises of God, because human "perfections" could not possibly apply to God's essence. It is not that the concerns of the medieval exegetes are unimportant to Maimonides, e.g., in works such as his *Hilchot Yesodei haTorah* in the Mishneh Torah, as well as his *Iggeret haShemad*, Maimonides addresses issues pertaining to *kiddush hashem*. His discussion of *silence*, however, is reserved for other matters.

That these "other matters" all interrelate to form part of Maimonides' larger philosophical and theological *system* speaks to the value of studying "silence in the Jewish tradition." As we suggested at the end of Chapter 2, silence invites Jewish commentators and thinkers to impart their most fundamental convictions and weigh in on the issues and concerns that they consider to

be of ultimate importance. Maimonides' views on silence reflect his reverence for wisdom and his staunch belief in an incorporeal God that we cannot ever truly know but to whom we are bound through our intellect. By studying "silence in Maimonides," we see how he addresses the same theological issues with which the rabbis and medieval exegetes wrestle in their commentaries: regarding God's oneness, Maimonides holds that His essence is indivisible into discrete, nameable, human attributes; regarding God's role in our suffering, Maimonides claims we are vulnerable to "chance" when idle chatter and worldly concerns sever our communion with God; regarding what God wants of man, Maimonides holds "true faith" as the ideal which God is willing to help us attain through concessions; regarding how we might draw closer to God's presence, Maimonides urges us to strengthen our intellect, while reminding us not to expect God to speak or interact with us in ways that are human. While some of Maimonides' ideas and concepts may be novel with respect to the tradition's previous conversation about silence, the fundamental theological questions he addresses are familiar. The study of silence thus enables us to both distinguish our sages from one another, as well as to detect threads of continuity between them.

CHAPTER FOUR: Silence in Buber

Our study now turns to the modern period, as we consider the role of silence in the writings of Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Eli Wiesel. Do any of the themes we have uncovered in Chapters 1-3 reemerge in the thought of these modern philosophers and theologians, who live in such distant places and times from our ancient and medieval sages? What insights does the study of silence offer regarding their ultimate values, pressing concerns, and understanding(s) of God? We begin by studying silence in the writings of Buber.

Like Maimonides, Buber does not engage in verse-by-verse exegesis of the biblical text. However, he does engage in commentary on select chapters of the Bible in his work, *On the Bible*, and through his commentary on those chapters we begin to gain an understanding of his philosophy and theology. None of the chapters in *On the Bible* addresses directly any of the five verses with which we began our study, but one of them does happen to refer to 1 Kings 19:12. Though the verse is mentioned only briefly, there is much we can glean from its usage and context. The mention of this verse serves as a useful point of entry for understanding the role of silence in Buberian thought.

Buber mentions 1 Kgs. 19:12 in his chapter of *On the Bible* called "False Prophets," which discusses Jeremiah 28. In Jeremiah 28, the "prophet" Hananiah removes (and breaks) the wooden bar from Jeremiah's neck and announces that, likewise, God would soon "break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, from off the neck of the nations" (Jer. 28:11). Since Jeremiah had laid the wooden bar across his own neck in the first place "in response to God's command," Buber says, and "as a sign that in this historical juncture it was God's will that the nations be subject to Nebuchadnezzar,"[1] Jeremiah's silent response to Hananiah's brazen act and

[1] Martin Buber, "False Prophets (Jeremiah 28)," in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 166.

prophecy is a bit surprising: *vayelech Yirmiahu haNavi l'darko*—"and the prophet Jeremiah went on his way." Why does Jeremiah simply exit the scene without uttering words of protest? Buber explains:

> In spite of all this, he was silent when the bar was broken and went his way. He went in order to listen for God's word…because…there were still things he did not know. Hananiah had spoken like a man who "knows it all"…but there were still things Jeremiah himself did not know…and knew that he did not know…The voice that instructed Jeremiah told him what he was to do and say. If one hears Hananiah's voice, and cannot hear the voice of God, perhaps because "the still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) can be drowned out by that of the Hananiahs, it is best to go one's way and to listen.[2]

Jeremiah's silent departure indicates his willingness to listen for new instruction from God—for prophecy and direction in the face of an unexpected twist in the unfolding of history. His silence makes space for (revised) revelation in the form of a *kol d'mamah dakah.*

Jeremiah's silence—his willingness to listen for the *kol d'mamah dakah*—is admirable in Buber's eyes and marks him as a "true prophet,"[3] for true prophets recognize that God "is a living God" and that, while His word must be obeyed, it "must not be hung up like a placard." True prophets repeatedly seek out the word of the living God, as that God responds to the events of history and to changes in the will of man: "God wills this or that for mankind, but He has endowed mankind with a will of its own…[M]ankind can change its will from one hour to the next, and God, who is deeply concerned about mankind and its will…can, when that will changes, change His plan for mankind…One must not rely on one's knowledge. One must go one's way and listen all over again." In Jeremiah 28, Jeremiah "went his way in silence"

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[2] Ibid., 167.

[3] Ibid., 170.

because although "God had, indeed, spoken to him only an hour before…this was another hour. History is a dynamic process, and… one hour is never like the one that has gone before. God operates in history, and God is not a machine which, once it has been wound up, keeps on running until it runs down…God has truth, but He does not have a system."[4]

The *kol d'mamah dakah* contains God's truth, but all too often, warns Buber, its truth is "drowned out" by the noise of the *false* prophet, who speaks as though God and His word are *static* rather than dynamic and living. In contrast to the true prophet, the false prophet is never inclined to go his way and listen, because he assumes that there is nothing new for him to hear! For instance, according to Buber, the false prophet Hananiah merely

> parrots Isaiah…[who] proclaimed God's will to break the yoke of Asshur from off the necks of His people (Isa. 10:27). From this Hananiah concluded that God had promised to break the yoke of Babylon, for the situation seemed the same. But the situation was *not* the same… As far as he was concerned, God was a man faithful to His principles, who had tied himself down by the promise He had given Isaiah…[but] Hananiah did not know that there was such a thing as a different historical juncture…He did not know that history is a dynamic process.[5]

Thus, while silence "speaks" to the true prophet, enabling him to hear the *kol d'mamah dakah*—God's ongoing revelation—the false prophet does not allow silence to have its say. The false prophet speaks over the silence, drowning out God's truth with his bluster. Hananiah "told what truth he knew," says Buber, "[b]ut the unfortunate thing was that he did not know any truth and could not know any because he never understood what it meant to go one's way and listen."[6]

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[4] Ibid., 167.

[5] Ibid., 168-69.

[6] Ibid., 167-68.

Buber explains that once Jeremiah "went his way in silence," God's word came to him. "Not until God sent him to Hananiah with a message did Jeremiah go to him and say what he had to say,"[7] correcting Hananiah's false prophecy and proclaiming him a liar. Shortly thereafter, Hananiah died. But Hananiahs abound in our world today, Buber laments, while the true prophets—those who go their way in silence to listen for God's truth before claiming to speak it—are in short supply: "We have no Jeremiah at this juncture…But at every street corner you are likely to run into Hananiah."[8] Prophets like Hananiah deliver false prophecy because they worship false gods: "They adore the god of 'success.' They themselves are in constant need of success and achieve it by promising it to the people…The craving for success governs their hearts and determines what rises from them."[9] When we encounter the modern day false prophet, Buber advises, we should "[l]ook him straight in the eye, as though to say 'I know you!' [so that]…the next time he dreams his dream, he will remember how you looked at him, and be startled out of his fantasies. And the next time he tells his dream as if it were the word of God, perhaps he will trip over a phrase and pause. No more than an instant, but these instants of incipient reflection are important."[10] We must, in a sense, become the Jeremiahs of our day, suggests Buber, staring down those who fill all silence with their misguided bluster instead of with the true word of God. When we cause the false prophet to stumble on his words, we allow for a moment of silence amid the bluster—a moment of silence in which the will, guidance, and revelation of the true, living God might be heard.

Though Buber mentions 1 Kgs. 19:12 only fleetingly in his analysis of Jeremiah 28, his understanding of silence and the *kol d'mamah dakah* appears to echo much of the rabbinic and

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[7] Ibid., 166.
[8] Ibid., 171.
[9] Ibid., 170.
[10] Ibid., 171.

medieval commentary regarding the verse. As in the traditional commentaries, the *kol d'mamah dakah* is the voice of revelation, which is heard when idolatrous noise is silenced, as when God silences the world before His revelation at Sinai in Exodus Rabbah or when, in Rashi's commentary, the angels fall silent as prophecy occurs. However, for Buber, silence in relation to the *kol d'mamah dakah* also represents a certain *humility*. Jeremiah went his way in silence, because he "knew that he did not know"; he was aware that he needed Divine guidance, and he acknowledged that one cannot know God's will at all times and must remain open to new revelations as history unfolds. Unlike Hananiah, whose pride and desire for popular success got the better of him, and who assumed that he already knew all that God could possibly have to say on the matter at hand, Jeremiah was willing to exit the scene without protest, in apparent defeat, for the sake of finding some silence in which he could listen for God and discover that which he "knew that he did not know."

Jeremiah's humility is lacking—if not completely absent—in the modern age, suggests Buber in his series of 1951 lectures preserved in the book, *Eclipse of God*. Such humility is linked to a sort of relationship with the Divine that has virtually disappeared from our time: the relationship of an I to a Thou. Generally, modern man "relates" to the world as an It: man is the subject and the world is his object, i.e., to conquer, to know, and to use. So accustomed to this state of being, man has gradually lost his "power to relate,"[11] i.e., to meet his fellow man—or his God—as a true being (or Being) and a true other (or Other). In *Eclipse of God*, Buber elaborates:

> In our age the I-It relation, gigantically swollen, has usurped, practically uncontested, the mastery and the rule. The I of this relation, an I that possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all, this I that is unable to say Thou, unable to meet a being essentially, is the lord of

[11] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 92.

> the hour. This selfhood that has become omnipotent, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute which manifests itself to men as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven.[12]

Buber's description of the I in the "I-It relation" fits Hananiah, who shuts himself and others off from heaven by failing to listen for and meet God in a true prophetic relationship. In his inability to meet God as a Thou, Hananiah silences God, assuming that there is no guidance to be heard in the *kol d'mamah dakah* and proclaiming, instead, his own "truth" to the people he hopes to win over. The Hananiahs of the world can be found "at every street corner"; they exist "practically uncontested" because those endowed with Jeremiah's humility—with Jeremiah's willingness to acknowledge God, to seek Divine guidance, and to be an I to a Thou—are so rare in our age.

The Idolatry and Danger in Silencing God

Buber sees danger in a world that shuts out God—that silences God—in the way that Hananiah does. When Buber speaks of false prophets in *On the Bible*, he uses language that connotes a link between the Hananiahs of the world and idolatry: false prophets deliver false prophecy because they worship false gods (e.g., the god of success) and, in their failure to listen for Divine guidance, the voice of God is drowned out by their idolatrous noise. Likewise, in *Eclipse of God*, Buber speaks of the I-It relation in idolatrous terms: the I of I-It is "lord of the hour," "has usurped…the mastery and the rule," is unable to acknowledge God, and "steps in between" humanity and "the light of heaven." Idolatry—associated with Hananiah and the I of the I-It relation—silences God, and idolatry is *dangerous* because, according to Buber, when God is silenced, so are His values. When "God is silent…nothing is said to one that is

[12] Martin Buber, "God and the Spirit of Man," trans. Maurice S. Friedman, in *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 129.

unconditional or unconditionally binding…[N]o universal morality can tell us what to do…[and] all possibility of discovering absolute values has disappeared with God." When man fails to recognize absolute—or Absolute—values, Buber warns, he regards himself as "free" to create his own values, meaning, and standard of morality: "since man…is at last free, is indeed freedom itself, it is for him to determine values."[13] Man's unwillingness to listen for—and engage in genuine dialogue with—an Other who can, in such a relationship, impart values and direction causes Buber great concern:

> One can believe in and accept a meaning or value, one can set it as a guiding light over one's life if one has discovered it, not if one has invented it. It can be for me an illuminating meaning, a direction-giving value only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with Being, not if I have freely chosen it for myself from among the existing possibilities and perhaps have in addition decided with some fellow-creatures: This shall be valid from now on.[14]

Living in an age that has seen two world wars and the birth of the atom bomb, Buber has good reason to be skeptical of the values and direction that man, along with his "fellow-creatures," has "chosen" or "invented." Now, modern man faces "an unrepeatable decision between extinction and rebirth. War has not produced this crisis; it is, rather, the crisis of man which has brought forth the total war and the unreal peace which followed."[15] We find ourselves in this predicament because of a breakdown in communication not only between God and man, but between man and man: "During the First World War it became clear to me that a process was

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[13] Martin Buber, "Religion and Modern Thinking," trans. Maurice S. Friedman, in *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 69.

[14] Buber, "Modern," *Eclipse*, 70.

[15] Martin Buber, "The Word," trans. Maurice Friedman, in *The Way of Response*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 123.

going on which before then I had only surmised. This was the growing difficulty of genuine dialogue, and most especially of genuine dialogue between men of different kinds and convictions...the abysses between man and man threaten ever more pitilessly to become unbridgeable."[16] Like the silencing of God, the silencing of relations between man and man—our inability to meet one another as anything but an objectified "It"—is dangerous. Buber laments that "in primitive warfare fighting begins where speech has ceased; that is, where men are no longer able to discuss with one another the subjects under dispute or submit them to mediation, but flee from speech with one another, and in the speechlessness of slaughter seek what they suppose to be a decision, a judgment of God. War soon conquers speech and enslaves it in the service of its battle cries."[17] It is the silence that allows for I-Thou relations—the silence of Jeremiah's humility and willingness to listen for guidance, values, and morality—that is so desperately needed if we are to rise above the deadly silence of "primitive warfare" and "the speechlessness of slaughter" that the Hananiahs of the world impose.

A Hopeful Stance

Buber maintains hope that we can indeed bring about a much-needed "pause" in the idolatrous noise of our day. In *Eclipse of God*, he criticizes those who claim that God is "dead," and he argues instead that God is merely temporarily *eclipsed*. Of Sartre, he writes:

> "God is dead," [Sartre] says, "he spoke to us and now is silent...." [But] Sartre has started from the "silence" of God without asking himself what part our not hearing and our not having heard has played in that silence. From the silence he has concluded that God does not exist, at any rate not for us, for a god whose object I am without his being

[16] Martin Buber, "The Central Question," trans. Maurice Friedman, in *The Way of Response*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 109.
[17] Buber, "Word," *The Way*, 123.

mine does not concern me. This conclusion is possible for Sartre because he holds the subject-object relation to be the primary and exclusive relation between two beings.[18] Indeed, God may not be a reality for those who cannot conceive of an I-Thou relationship, Buber is saying. However, *we* are responsible for such a situation, because "our not hearing" is what silences God.[19] "Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God—such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But…[a]n eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself."[20] God is still present, even in silence. We can still experience the *living* God in our day, if we silence *ourselves* and hear Him—if we find the humility to open ourselves up to an I-Thou relationship with Him. Given that in Buber's view God is not dead, man has free will, and history is a dynamic process, we have the potential to move from "the age of such a concealment, such a divine silence," back to an age of Divine revelation.

We also have the potential to move from "the speechlessness of slaughter" to an age when we not only hear God's revelation—His guidance, direction, and absolute values—but also hear one another. "War has always had an adversary," writes Buber, "This adversary is speech…the speech of genuine conversation in which men understand one another and come to a mutual understanding."[21] Man must change how he relates not only to his God, but to his fellow man. Silence, to Buber, often represents a breakdown of communication—whether between man

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[18] Buber, "Modern," *Eclipse,* 66-69.

[19] Buber's idea of a God who is concealed, or eclipsed, through the result of man's actions appears to be rooted in the older concept of *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face or providence. As we saw in the rabbinic interpretations of Job 34:29 (see Chapter One of this thesis), sometimes we know why God hides His face, e.g., when He brings suffering upon those who sin, and other times we do not, e.g., when the wicked are given *shalvah*. Either way, say the rabbis, it is not our place to judge God. And either way, they and Buber affirm, God is still present.

[20] Martin Buber, "Religion and Reality," trans. Norbert Guterman, in *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 23.

[21] Buber, "Word," *The Way*, 123.

and God or man and man—but silence can also be salvific. Just as silence allows the *kol d'mamah dakah* to be heard, so does it allow for dialogue between men to emerge. Again, we must silence ourselves and listen to the "other," for "the future of man as man," claims Buber, "depends upon a rebirth of dialogue."[22]

Though Buber is deeply dismayed by the modern state of affairs, we find much in his writing to suggest that he maintains hope for the world's—and God's—"rebirth." As we have seen, Buber speaks of modern man's predicament—the overabundance of Hananiahs, I-It relations, unenlightened decision-making, and war—as an "historic hour through which the world is passing." But this is *only* an hour, in a historical process that Buber understands as dynamic. We are not on an irreversible trajectory, suggests Buber. Rather, man has choices and alternatives and, as Jeremiah recognized, must determine how to best rise to the "task of the hour."[23] Buber elaborates on this perspective in his discussion about prophecy versus apocalyptic in *On the Bible* (immediately following his chapter on Jeremiah 28). The Bible presents two different outlooks: the prophetic and the apocalyptic. The latter presents the future "as being established from the beginning."[24] Buber explains that for the "apocalyptic writer…[t]here exists…no possibility of a change in the direction of historical destiny that could proceed from man, or be effected or coeffected by man…[A] turning on the part of the community is no longer even thought of."[25] Prophecy, on the other hand, is all about turning and possibility! "The future is not fixed," and the true prophet acknowledges that man "is created to be a center of surprise in creation. Because and so long as man exists, factual change of

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[22] Buber, "Question," *The Way*, 109.

[23] Buber, "False Prophets," *On the Bible*, 168.

[24] Martin Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour," in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 179.

[25] Ibid., 182.

direction can take place toward salvation as well as toward disaster, starting from the world in each hour, no matter how late."[26] The role of the "genuine prophet was not to predict but to confront man with the alternatives of decision....to place before [man] the stern alternatives of the hour....[T]he apocalyptics and their associates proceeded to disclose that there is no turning and no new direction in the destiny of the world...But the depths of history, which are continually at work to rejuvenate creation, are in league with the prophets."[27]

Such rejuvenation will occur when we, like the true prophets, open ourselves up to Divine direction and engage again in dialogue with God and with our fellow man. For Buber, there is a connection between dialogue and the prophetic outlook as he understands it: "wherever a living historical dialogue of divine and human actions breaks through, there persists...a bond with the prophecy of Israel."[28] And such breakthroughs *are* possible in our day, Buber assures us in *Eclipse of God*. Buber is optimistic, even though we are living through an age in which God is silenced and concealed: "Such is the nature of this hour. But what of the next? It is a modern superstition that the character of an age acts as fate for the next...[T]he I-Thou relation has gone into the catacombs—[but] who can say with how much greater power it will step forth!" Like the true prophets whom he admires, Buber recognizes human responsibility and poses alternatives, ending the final chapter of *Eclipse of God* with a charge and a *nechemta*: "The most important events in the history of that embodied possibility called man are the occasionally occurring beginnings of new epochs...Each age is...a continuation of the preceding one, but a continuation can be a confirmation and it can be a refutation....The eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even to-morrow that which has stepped in between may give way." Whether we

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[26] Ibid., 178.

[27] Ibid., 177-87.

[28] Ibid., 183.

choose to silence—or to go our way in silence and listen for—the *kol d'mamah dakah* is up to us. Whether we choose the "speechlessness of slaughter" or the silence that allows for dialogue with one another is also up to us. Silence can be lethal or salvific, and the fate of the world depends on which type of silence man will choose.

Confirmations and Refutations

How does Buber's theology of silence reflect—or diverge from—that of ages and sages past? How is his a "confirmation" and a "refutation" of that which came before? Which rabbinic, medieval, and Maimonidean elements reemerge, and what new themes appear? Perhaps it is best to begin our analysis with a summary of "silence in Buber."

Silence in Buber has either a positive or negative valence, depending on whether man is silencing himself or silencing God. That is, silence can represent humility and a willingness to listen for Divine guidance, or it can represent the inclination—more common in our age—to drown out God's revelation with the sound of our own misguided bluster. Our bluster is misguided because it does not emerge from I-Thou relations with an absolute Other who imparts absolute values but, rather, from our infatuation with idols, such as the false god of "success." Our inability to meet God as a Thou is dangerous, because modernity is desperately in need of God's values, guidance, morality, and revelation. Modern man has also lost the ability to relate appropriately to his fellow man, which has resulted in another negative form of silence: the speechlessness of "slaughter" and war. God may not be able to reverse this deadly direction in which man has taken history, but since He is a *living* God, He has guidance to offer in every age and at every "historical juncture." God is always *present*, even when silenced, but whether He gets a say in history depends on man, who either chooses to listen for God's truth or to conceal and silence it with his own, idolatrous noise. Buber sees mankind at a critical juncture. Whether

the world experiences extinction or rejuvenation depends upon how man responds to the task of the hour and the alternatives before him, i.e., whether he chooses a salvific or a destructive silence.

Because Buber sees man at a crossroads and history as a dynamic process (as opposed to predestined), his thinking is in line with what he sees as the Bible's prophetic (as opposed to apocalyptic) outlook. It follows, then, that many of the elements found in the rabbinic and medieval commentaries on 1 Samuel 1:13 and 1 Kings 19:12 reemerge in Buber's theology of silence, while many elements found in the commentaries on our other, non-prophetic verses—Leviticus 10:3, Job 34:29, and Psalm 65:2—are absent. The sages spoke of Hannah's silent prayer in 1 Sam. 1:13 as a sign of self-control in the face of great agony. Despite Hannah's troubles, she controls her voice when she talks to God; in silencing herself, she channels her emotions into *conversation* with God. Hannah's silence and willingness to engage in dialogue with God demonstrate her continued faith in God and God's presence in her life. The sages contrast Hannah, who speaks *al-libah,* with the "fool" who speaks *b'libo* and believes that "there is no God." Buber echoes many of these themes found in the discussion of Hannah's silence. Like Hannah, Jeremiah silences himself for the sake of communicating with God. His silence allows him to remain in dialogue and relationship with God and thus to maintain God's presence in his life despite the torment going on in his world. His is the silence of faith, rather than the silence of the *naval* who believes, like Sartre, that God does not exist.

Silence is also associated with faith, God's presence, and communing with the Divine in the rabbinic and medieval commentaries on 1 Kgs. 19:12: it is the heretic and the *acher* who cannot discern God from His host,[29] while the faithful Rav Shesheth and Rabbi Akiva easily

[29] *B. Chagigah* 15b-16a. See Chapter One of this thesis.

detect God's presence in the *kol d'mamah dakah*;[30] the cave at which Elijah stands when he hears the *kol d'mamah dakah* is said to be the same cleft in the rock where Moses stood when God revealed His presence to him in Exodus;[31] the angels fall silent whenever prophecy occurs,[32] and at Sinai God silences the world so that His is the only voice heard.[33] In each case, silence surrounds Divine revelation and presence. Noise is associated with idolatry and an inability to discern God. Likewise, in Buber God is present to the faithful who commune with Him—to the Jeremiahs who seek Him out in silence—while the *kol d'mamah dakah* cannot be heard over the noisy voices of the false prophets who worship false gods. Humility is another theme associated with silence that appears both in the midrashim about Elijah and in Buber. In the midrashim, the silence surrounding the *kol d'mamah dakah* is what distinguishes God as the One and ultimate Judge, and the rabbis fault Elijah for not recognizing God as such; God has to silence Elijah's zeal and put him in his place.[34] Similarly, in Buber humility—our willingness to be an I to a Thou—makes for healthier, more appropriate relations both between man and his fellow man, and between man and his God.

Absent from Buber's theology of silence are a number of elements that were prominent in the rabbinic and medieval commentaries on Lev. 10:3, Job 34:29, and Ps. 65:2. With regard to Lev. 10:3, in the eyes of the rabbis Aaron's silence represents his deference to God's just decree. Aaron's *deference*, however, is quite different from Jeremiah's *humility*. While Aaron resigns himself to his fate (and that of his sons), Jeremiah seeks Divine direction to help him understand the "task of the hour" and his alternatives. History is dynamic, according to Buber, not

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[30] *B. Berakhot* 58a. See Chapter One of this thesis.

[31] Rashi to 1 Kgs. 19:9-12. See Chapter Two of this thesis.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Exodus Rabbah 29:9. See Chapter One of this thesis.

[34] Song of Songs Rabbah 1:6. See Chapter One of this thesis.

predestined. God responds, rather than decrees, and by way of silence man receives God's guidance. In the eyes of the medieval commentators (e.g., Rashbam), Aaron's silence symbolizes perseverance in the face of anguish for the sake of glorifying God's name. Buber, on the other hand, does not seem to share this medieval concern with *kiddush hashem* and the type of action required (or not required) to achieve it.

Regarding Job 34:29, the rabbinic view holds that silence represents *shalvah*, the goodness that God bestows upon mankind. Silence does not indicate God's absence or mean that God is "hiding" from man and ignorant of what goes on in the world. To the contrary, the rabbis emphasize that God is in control and has a plan.[35] Buber's conception differs from this rabbinic line of thinking. While Buber would agree that God is not absent, he holds that God "does not have a system." Man has free will, so history is a dynamic process, a trajectory that changes all the time as man makes decisions. God does not bestow goodness, but rather, imparts guidance that enlightens our decisions so that *we* may make for goodness. If we go our way in silence to hear the *kol d'mamah dakah*, our decisions are enlightened by our relationship with God. If we silence God, our decisions are unenlightened and lead to the precarious state in which we find our modern world.

Regarding Ps. 65:2, the rabbinic view holds that silence represents controlling one's emotions for the sake of upholding God's just decree. In Midrash Tehillim, God refrains from attacking His enemies, in spite of His torment, for the sake of His decree, and we are called upon to emulate God's Self-restraint. In Eruvin 19a, those sentenced to death for sins against God remain silent because they "acknowledge the justice of their punishment." *Emulating* God's silence and acknowledging Divine *justice* do not appear to play much of a role in Buber's

[35] Genesis Rabbah 36:1. See Chapter One of this thesis. It is okay for God to destroy the world, because He knows that He can always reestablish it from a single person, Noah.

theology of silence, and upholding a Divine *decree* does not accord with Buber's idea that human action impacts the trajectory of history. Our situation is not a punishment from God, but something we have brought upon ourselves. One might even say that in Buber, *God* defers to *man's* decree! Though the rabbinic thinking on Ps. 65:2 does not necessarily find expression in Buber, the medieval ideas of God's muteness (first expressed by Rabbi Meir but discredited by the rabbis) and our separation from God appear to be present. Silence indicates that something has come between us and God. However, in the medieval mind it is Israel and her vows and praises that cannot be heard across the divide, whereas in Buber it is God who is muted—silenced and concealed. Moreover, in Buber we are more directly responsible for our separation from God; again, our situation—our exile—is not a punishment imposed by God, but a result of *our* unwillingness to remain in relationship with Him. *We*, in a sense, have exiled *God.*

Which elements of Maimonides' philosophy find expression in Buber's theology of silence, and where do the two thinkers diverge? In Buber, as in Maimonides, silence is not about *emulating* but *relating to* God. Perhaps this is because for both Buber and Maimonides, God is absolute Other; He is *distinct* from us. One cannot emulate a Being so different, but one can commune with Him in some way. For Maimonides, silence praises God because words fall short, and intellectual reflection connects us to Him. For Buber, silencing our selves and the Hananiahs in our midst enables us to enter into I-Thou relations with God and receive His guidance. Thus, for both thinkers, silence allows us to draw closer to God in spite of our differentness. Similarly, both associate noise with idolatry and emphasize the need to distance ourselves from the world (like Jeremiah) or from worldly concerns, in order to find some silence in which to commune with the Divine. The silence in which that communion occurs is salvific: for Maimonides, man is protected from chance when he is engaged in *avodah she'balev*, while

for Buber, one who goes his way in silence receives the Divine guidance that helps him chart a more enlightened course and make for a safer world.

In spite of these similarities, there are important differences between Maimonides and Buber, reflective, perhaps, of a difference in ideals: Maimonides is ultimately concerned with wisdom, Buber with prophecy. For example, the two differ in what they believe links us to God: Maimonides holds that we are joined to God through our intellect, while for Buber our connection is through the I-Thou relationship. We cultivate this connection, therefore, through different means: Maimonides says we are to engage in intellectual reflection and meditation *on* God—while Buber suggests that we must open ourselves to hearing *God* speak to *us*. These differences also may reflect different aims. Maimonides' *avodah she'balev* results in protection only for the individual who engages in it; such a "silence" leads to personal salvation. Buber, on the other hand, is after communal—or universal—salvation; like the prophet, he knows that society is in trouble and reminds us that we can change the destructive course of history, providing that we silence or retreat from the idolatrous noise around us.

Thus, when we compare Buber's theology of silence with those that came before and consider which earlier elements are present in or absent from his thought, we bring Buber's fundamental convictions, core concerns, ultimate values, and aims into relief. A core concern of Buber is to bring people back into relationship with God through dialogue—to get them to silence themselves for the sake of communicating with God, as Hannah did. To Buber, this sort of I-Thou relationship requires faith and humility, traits lauded in the midrashim on 1 Kgs. 19:12 but hard to find in a modern world so full of I-It relations. Nevertheless, Buber maintains hope that this ideal of his can be achieved, in part because of his fundamental belief, shared by the sages, that God remains *present,* even in silence; we can always turn back to Him. Buber's hope

is also grounded in his firm belief in history as a dynamic process and in human agency or responsibility; man is not locked into an unalterable fate. Here Buber diverges from the sages. Rather than speaking of God's plan, as in the Job 34:29 commentaries, or man's deference (e.g., Aaron's) to an unchanging Divine decree, Buber emphasizes man's free will and ability to impact the course of history. In this theological scheme, "God has truth, but He does not have a system." Buber's God is a *living* God, who offers *ongoing* revelation as history changes. Those willing to listen for God's revelation—for the *kol d'mamah dakah*—are more likely to reach enlightened decisions that make for goodness in the world. Those who do not silence themselves and listen make decisions that endanger the world. God does not bestow *shalvah*—goodness—nor inflict punishment. Our situation is our own doing, our future shaped by our own actions, our salvation dependent on our own decisions. The salvation Buber envisions is achieved not through our intellect and attainment of wisdom, as Maimonides would have it, but through our willingness to enter into true relationship—with God and with our fellow human beings. Buber's endeavor is not about personal redemption so much as the redemption of all humanity. That redemption depends on whether we continue to silence God or choose, instead, to silence ourselves—and the false prophets among us—and listen for God's truth.

Studying Buber's theology of silence in light of what came before helps us better understand his particular goals, beliefs, and concerns. But likewise, studying silence in Buber helps us see the ancient and medieval worldview in a new light. For instance, while the rabbis and medieval commentators share with Buber a certain optimism—that God remains present even when silent, that His silence does not mean He is dead, and that the silent divide between God and man can indeed be overcome—they do not tend to share Buber's sense of urgency, nor his regard for the power of man. That is, while one senses in Buber a push toward revolution

rather than evolution, the rabbinic theme of deference to Divine decree and the medieval themes of perseverance, carrying on through adversity, and patient, faithful waiting in exile represent a more *resigned* mindset and approach to the world's woes. Perhaps this is because unlike Buber, who believes so strongly in human agency, the sages have little regard for mankind. In the rabbinic mind, God doles out *shalvah* or punishment, *u'mi yarshia*—"and who can condemn (Job 34:29)?"[36] In the medieval mind, man is impotent, his praises and vows falling on deaf ears as he waits out God's decree of exile. In Maimonides' view, man's inability to change necessitates concessions from God, and there is no lofty talk of man bringing about universal redemption, only his own salvation (and this, only if he is an exceptional individual). Whereas Buber places much stock in man's power and potential to bring about revolutionary change, our sages seem to take a much longer, more passive view of history. Perhaps they did not feel that quite so much was at stake, or perhaps they simply believed in a God who was more in charge.

Once again, we have seen how studying silence can shed light on issues of ultimate concern. Through his discussion of silence, Buber addresses: the nature of God (as Other, living, and relational); the nature of revelation (ongoing, offering guidance, containing truth); the ideal Divine-human relationship (I-Thou, versus the I-It or subject-object relation of Sartre); what makes for salvation (humility, dialogue, proper relations with God and with one's fellow man); the dangers of idolatry (warfare, extinction); and God's role in history (Source of truth and guidance as man faces alternatives). For Buber, silence may be positive or negative in valence, but it is never empty; something *happens* in it. Silence in Buber, as in Maimonides and in rabbinic and medieval commentary, has much to say—much that is of supreme import.

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[36] Leviticus Rabbah 5:3. See Chapter One of this thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE: Silence in Heschel

Part of Abraham Joshua Heschel's legacy to us is a tremendous volume of writing, which can be challenging to navigate. Thankfully, Heschel does refer to two of our biblical verses—Psalm 65:2 and 1 Kings 19:12—in substantive ways, and his comments provide a raft to grasp onto in a vast sea of material. As we attempt to construct a Heschelian theology of silence amid this sea, we find many parallels between Heschel's thought and Buber's, including a focus on human responsibility, a belief in a living—but silenced—God, and a sense that man must find the humility to remove himself from the center of his universe. We also see reflected in Heschel Maimonides' insistence on the inadequacy of language, as well as a number of other medieval and rabbinic elements. At the same time, Heschel lends his unique voice to the conversation on silence—a voice that is more urgent and activist than we have experienced thus far in our study.

Heschel uses Ps. 65:2 and 1 Kgs. 19:12 to emphasize the limitations of human language when it comes to expressing "ultimate ideas,"[1] such as God's grandeur, God's essence, or the nature of God's revelation. In *Man's Quest for God*, Heschel says that "the grandeur of God...resists description and surpasses all expression,"[2] so those who wish to worship Him must recognize "the impotence of human expression"[3] and resort to silence. Heschel explains through a Hasidic teaching that

> [t]hose who reach the lowest stage of piety are called the upright; their worship is expressed through the mouth. Higher than these are the righteous; their worship is not expressed through the mouth but in the mere movement of the lips. Higher than these are the faithful; their worship is on the tongue; it does not even pass the lips. The highest

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 123.
[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (Santa Fe: Aurora Press, 1954), 41-44.
[3] Ibid., 41.

kind is the holy men; their worship is hidden and concealed within them and is apparent only to Him who knows all secrets.[4]

To Heschel, those who are the most pious realize that God's praises cannot be expressed "through the mouth," because they perceive that God's greatness is beyond words: "Arriving at his highest understanding," Heschel concludes, "man is reduced to stillness. *To Thee silence is praise* [Psalms 65:2]."[5]

Though man may perceive or sense God's grandeur, he cannot fully *comprehend* it, says Heschel in *God in Search of Man.* Man cannot grasp what God really is, so any words that he uses to describe God's *essence* are necessarily inaccurate and inadequate. Heschel's understanding is in line with Maimonides, whom he quotes,[6] saying: "our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him....The idea is best expressed in the book of Psalms: *Silence is praise to Thee* (65:2)...for whatever we utter with the intention of extolling and praising Him, contains something that cannot be applied to God...It is, therefore, more becoming to be silent."[7] One cannot possibly comprehend God's essence well enough to translate it into human language and capture it in words without misstatement, so the best praise that one can offer God—the best way to honor Him—is to keep one's peace. Heschel elaborates: "assertions that intend to convey the essence of reality or the aspect of mystery and grandeur are always understatements; inadequacy is their distinct feature. Thus we have no adequate words or symbols to describe God or the mystery of existence." There is so much mystery surrounding

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[4] Ibid., 42. Heschel attributes the Hasidic teaching to Rabbi Nahman of Kobryn's explanation of the Talmudic question (which he does not cite) of why, in Kings 4:8, the Shunamite woman "needed a sign that Elisha was a holy man" (i.e., because Elisha's holiness was "hidden and concealed").

[5] Heschel, *Quest*, 42.

[6] Heschel's thinking, as described in this paragraph, is also in line with some of the rabbinic ideas discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, yet Heschel cites only Maimonides.

[7] Heschel, *Search*, 123. From *Guide* I:59. See Chapter Three of this thesis.

God that His full grandeur and true essence—the reality of God—are beyond our comprehension and thus beyond our expression. "[A]ll language is inaccurate"[8] when it comes to these ultimate ideas, so "silence is preferable to speech."[9]

Thus, through Heschel's use of Ps. 65:2 we learn that he associates silence with God's indescribability—with something Divine that is so far beyond our understanding that we cannot, and ought not, put it into words. Heschel's use of 1 Kgs. 19:12 also supports this theology of silence. Along with God's grandeur and God's essence, another "ultimate" idea that is inexpressible through language is God's revelation. In *God in Search of Man*, Heschel refers to Elijah's encounter with the *kol d'mamah dakah* in 1 Kgs. 19:12 as "[p]erhaps the oldest example of negative theology," explaining that "[r]evelation can only be described as *via negationis*; we can only say what it is not."[10] It is not wind, earthquake, or fire, but rather "*a voice of silence*"[11]—something we cannot explain in words. We must be particularly careful, Heschel warns, to avoid expressing revelation in human, anthropomorphic terms. Like Maimonides, Heschel holds that we must take care "not to imagine that God speaks, or that a sound is produced by Him through organs of speech."[12] Heschel elaborates:

> To imagine revelation…to conceive it as if it were a psychic or physical process, is to pervert its essence and to wreck its mystery. It is just as improper…as it is to conceive God as a corporeal being….However subtle and noble our concepts may be, as soon as they become descriptive, namely, definite, they confine Him and force Him into the triteness of our minds. Never is our mind so inadequate as in trying to describe God.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Heschel, *Search*, 186.

[11] Heschel's translation, in *Search*, 186.

[12] Heschel, *Search*, 187. Heschel quotes Maimonides' *Guide* (I:65) in this passage as well, saying: "We must not suppose that in speaking God employed voice or sound." See Chapter Three of this thesis.

The same applies to the idea of revelation. When defined, described, it completely eludes us.[13]

Thus, the indescribable nature of revelation reflects the indescribable nature of God. Neither can be expressed in human language. When we try to capture the "ultimate" in words, we demean it and grow more distant from it. To Heschel the *kol d'mamah dakah*—the "voice of silence," as he calls it here—represents, in a sense, God's *differentness* from man, a concept that was particularly pronounced in Maimonides' theology. The silent "voice" that Elijah experienced is an indication that "God who created the world is unlike the world."[14] Words only serve to accentuate the essential difference between God and man; silence honors it.

In Heschel's *Man is Not Alone*, the *kol d'mamah dakah* points not only to God's differentness, but to His mysteriousness. We cannot fully understand God *and* hints of His mysteriousness are everywhere, even in the smallest and subtlest of things, one of which is the *kol d'mamah dakah*. Something of reality will always elude man and remain a mystery to him, and Heschel refers to that mystery as "silence," perhaps to accentuate how unfathomable it is: "what is intelligible to our mind is but a thin surface of the profoundly undisclosed, a ripple of inveterate silence that remains immune to curiosity and inquisitiveness."[15] That Heschel sees something of *God* in that "inveterate silence" is evident earlier in the passage, where he speaks of "the stillness that crowds the world in spite of our noise…a never-ending secret: A glimpse of God? Kinship with the spirit of being? An eternal flash of a will?"[16] In both *Man is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*, Heschel refers to this mystery that lies beyond our understanding—

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), 6.
[16] Ibid., 5.

this inveterate silence and stillness—as "the sublime,"[17] which he then goes on to describe as "that which our words, our forms, our categories can never reach."[18] Though transcendent in this sense, however, the sublime is also immanent, as opportunities for sensing, encountering, or experiencing it abound. The sublime is beyond our full comprehension, yet evidenced in "the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike. Some people sense this quality…in extraordinary events; others sense it in the ordinary events."[19] Further, Heschel says, "the sublime…is not necessarily related to the vast and the overwhelming in size. It may be sensed in every grain of sand, in every drop of water."[20] The smallest things can allude to the vast mystery of the sublime. Describing his understanding relative to Immanuel Kant's in the philosopher's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Heschel affirms that the sublime is found not only in the "fearful….not only…in the 'bold, overhanging…threatening rocks,' but also in the pebbles on the road...not only in the 'clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals,' but also in God's causing the rain…[and] not only in 'the hurricanes with their track of devastation,' but also in 'the still small voice' (1 Kings 19:12)."[21]

Thus, through his use of Ps. 65:2 and 1 Kgs. 19:12, Heschel says that ultimate ideas—e.g., God's grandeur, essence, and revelation—cannot be captured in words or accurately expressed through human language. The *kol d'mamah dakah* offers a "glimpse" of God's grandeur, a hint of His essence, and a sense of His revelation, but it also indicates how much remains unseen, unknowable, sublime and indefinable. "Silence is praise" to God because it acknowledges that we cannot comprehend all of reality and it honors the mystery—or Mystery—

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[17] Heschel, *Alone* 4; *Search* 39.
[18] Heschel, *Search*, 39.
[19] Heschel, *Alone*, 5.
[20] Heschel, *Search*, 39.
[21] Ibid., 38-41.

that cannot be contained by our words. The ultimate remains "ineffable."[22] Our words merely point, or *allude*, to something beyond our comprehension—something much greater, and indescribable. Silence in Heschel is associated with God's differentness, mysteriousness, and pervasiveness—the ineffable "which is but cannot be put into words."[23] We honor this ultimate, inveterate silence best through our own silence, because our words only serve to demean and misrepresent it.

Our "Noise"

More often than not though, Heschel laments, we fail to honor that ultimate, inveterate silence. Though its "stillness" is omnipresent and "crowds the world," it does so, Heschel says, only "in spite of our noise."[24] What is this noise to which Heschel refers? In *Man is Not Alone*, Heschel suggests that this noise is mankind's lack of attunement—our insensitivity to the immanence of the sublime and lack of receptiveness to its mystery. If we are to "hear" the stillness and detect the sublime in the ordinary, such as "a piece of paper, a morsel of bread, a word, a sigh,"[25] says Heschel, we must

> part company with preconceived notions, suppress your leaning to…know in advance of your seeing, try to see the world for the first time with eyes not dimmed by memory or volition…[Then y]our pretense of being acquainted with the world is quickly abandoned….Intelligence inquires into the nature of reality, and…takes those phenomena that appear to fit its categories as answers to its inquiry. Yet, when trying to hold an interview with reality face to face, without the aid of either words or concepts, we realize

[22] Heschel, *Alone*, 5.
[23] Ibid., 4.
[24] Ibid., 5.
[25] Ibid.

that what is intelligible to our mind is but a thin surface of the profoundly undisclosed, a ripple of inveterate silence.[26]

There is something of great import beyond our usual awareness and understanding, but we must silence our "noise" in order to hear it. The ultimate is present—even if only in glimpses—but our noise obscures it. This noise consists of our usual ways of relating to the world: approaching all of life and experience with "preconceived notions," only seeing things through the lens of our intellect or "intelligence," and attempting to capture all of reality in words. All of these ways are *limiting*. If we want to encounter the ultimate that lies beyond our human categories, concepts, and words, we must learn to approach the world differently.

It is in speaking of this different approach that Heschel distinguishes himself from Maimonides and begins to sound more like his own contemporary, Martin Buber. As much as Maimonides esteems intellect, reason, and thought—tools with which man makes sense of his world—Heschel values experience, wonder, and receptiveness. Maimonides meditates *on* God in silence, while Heschel listens *for* God in the still, small voice. Maimonides sees the intellect as man's connection to God, while Heschel sees the mind as an impediment to detecting the sublime and experiencing God. What is of primary importance to Maimonides is "noise" to Heschel. To Heschel, our "intelligence" is associated with our need to fit all of reality—including ultimate reality—into our human categories and pre-established concepts, and when it comes to God and ultimate ideas, Heschel finds these categories and concepts as limiting as words and language.

Thus, while Heschel and Maimonides may agree as to the limitations of human language and expression, there is a fundamental difference in the way they each relate to the world and to

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[26] Ibid., 5-6.

the Divine. This difference is particularly evident in how the two arrive at belief in God in the first place. Whereas Maimonides uses logic, reasoning, and thought to arrive at or prove God's existence, Heschel holds that

> the certainty of the realness of God does not come about as a corollary of logical premises, as a leap from the realm of logic to the realm of ontology…It is, on the contrary, a transition from an immediate apprehension to a thought, from a preconceptual awareness to a definite assurance, from being overwhelmed by the presence of God to an awareness of His existence….In formulating a creed, in asserting: God is, we merely bring down overpowering reality to the level of thought. Our thought is but an after-belief….our belief in His reality is not a leap over a missing link in a syllogism, but rather… questioning the self and all its cognitive pretentions….This, then, is the order in our thinking and existence: The ultimate or God comes first and our reasoning about Him second. Metaphysical speculation has reversed the order.[27]

In Heschel's view, when we turn off the "noise" of logic and reason, we open ourselves up to an *experience* of God, i.e., to being "overwhelmed" by an "overpowering reality." In this experience, we may never *comprehend* God, but we do *apprehend* Him and become certain of His existence. Experience is primary; we do not arrive at true apprehension of God through intellectual reflection. Connection to the Divine occurs not through thought, but when thought is suspended.

To Heschel, it is only once we *apprehend* God that we attempt to *comprehend* Him by analyzing—intellectually—what we have experienced. Only after achieving a "preconceptual" awareness of God do we "bring down overpowering reality to the level of thought" and

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[27] Heschel, *Search*, 121.

understanding. Yet here, already, something is lost in transmission, for, as we have seen, Heschel does not believe that we can fully comprehend the God we experience. Like Maimonides, Heschel proclaims the inaccuracy of language in describing the ultimate, but here he also seems to proclaim the inadequacy of *thought*, as compared to experience. Just as there "is a profound disparity…between experience and expression," says Heschel, so is there a disparity "between awareness and conception, between mind and mystery." We do not draw closer to God through intellectual exercise, but through what we experience when we silence our intellectual tendencies and set aside the tools of logic and reason, with which we typically try to grasp and explain reality. If, in a sense, Maimonides associates the intellect, logic, and reason with "the ultimate," Heschel sees these as merely penultimate. Thought and cognition are as human—and as noisy—as words and language, and encounter with God can occur only when all of these are silenced. Only then are we attuned to the inveterate, ineffable stillness that pervades all things.

In his call for man's attunement to God, Heschel resembles Buber. Like Buber, Heschel preaches a certain humility—a willingness to bend from our usual way of relating to the world and remove ourselves from its center, for the sake of encountering God. For Buber, our usual way of relating to the world is via the I-It relationship in which man, the I, "possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all…[and] is unable to say Thou, unable to meet a being essentially."[28] Our interactions with all we encounter are characterized by a desire for control, rather than receptiveness, and this approach prevents us from hearing the word of God in the *kol d'mamah dakah*. Likewise, for Heschel, our "preconceived notions"—our limited words, our fixed concepts, and our "intelligence" that relentlessly strives to order and categorize the world—

[28] Buber, "Spirit," *Eclipse*, 129. See Chapter Four of this thesis.

obscure the sound of that inveterate silence that is present in the still small voice. If we are to encounter God, we must, in a sense, silence our selves and become more sensitive and attentive listeners: "hearts are hungry for the voice of God," Heschel says, "[b]ut the voice has been stifled. To recapture the echo, we must be honest in our willingness to listen, we must be unprejudiced in our readiness to understand."[29] We must become more like Jeremiah, who had the humility to go his way in silence and listen for God, and less like Hananiah, who filled the world with his own noisy bluster.

Salvation and Human Responsibility

When we fail to "tune in" and welcome or invite God into our world as Jeremiah did, the consequences are disastrous for both God and man alike. Like Buber, Heschel holds that man has silenced, concealed, or exiled God by failing to listen for God and act according to what he hears. Although "the spirit of God is present whenever we are willing to accept it," Heschel says, "God is hiding His face in our time…He is hiding because we are evading Him."[30] We have, in effect, shut God out, as Heschel laments: "God who created the world is not at home in the world, in its dark alleys of misery, callousness and defiance….God is a stranger in the world. The *Shechinah*, the presence of God, is in exile."[31]

The more we reject God and cause Him to retreat from our world, warns Heschel, the more miserable life on earth becomes for mankind: "God is not silent. He has been silenced….We have trifled with the name of God. We have taken ideals in vain, preached and eluded Him, praised and defied Him. Now we reap the fruits of failure. Through centuries His voice cried in the wilderness…Now we behold how it gradually withdraws, abandoning one

[29] Heschel, *Quest*, xiii.
[30] Ibid., xiv.
[31] Heschel, *Search*, 156.

people after another."[32] Describing the horrors caused by God's retreat, Heschel, writing in 1951, reminds us that we are

> contemporaries and survivors of history's most terrible horrors....Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain on the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God. There has never been so much distress, agony and terror...At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood....The taste for goodness has all but gone from the earth....We have witnessed in history how often a man, a group or a nation, lost from the sight of God, acts and succeeds, strives and achieves, but is given up by Him....They are left alone, neither molested by punishment nor assured by indication of help. The divine does not interfere with their actions nor intervene in their conscience.[33]

Like Buber, Heschel recognizes that man has endangered the world by shutting out, or silencing, God. Our miserable state of affairs is our own doing, not God's, for Heschel's God, like Buber's, is a living God, whose guidance and morality remain available to us if we would but seek Him and become receptive to Him. God may be wholly different from man and utterly indefinable, but He *is* present. He is not a punishing God, but a muted one, who cannot impact our "actions" or "conscience" unless we invite Him into our lives and allow ourselves to genuinely encounter Him.

The good news is that just as man is responsible for God's exile, so can he take responsibility for God's return. Man may have silenced God, but he is also capable of drawing God back out of His silence, and indeed, says Heschel, this is our duty: "Our task is to bring God

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[32] Heschel, *Alone*, 152.

[33] Ibid., 151-53. A segment of this passage also appeared in Heschel's HUC Bulletin article entitled "The Meaning of This War" in March 1943, as noted in Edward Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 46.

back into the world."[34] Like Buber, Heschel believes in man's ability to change the course of history by inviting God's presence back into his life. In encouraging us to quiet our "noise" and listen for the "echo" of God's voice, Heschel affirms that "[w]hat goes on in the depth of our lives has a profound effect upon the international situation…Power corrupts, and it is only the acceptance of the spirit of God that saves, that prevents disaster."[35] Like Buber, Heschel seems to believe that universal salvation is possible if man opens himself up to relationship with God: "To worship is to expand the presence of God in the world," Heschel says, and "[t]o have faith in God is to reveal what is concealed."[36] Heschel's thinking here resembles Buber's "eclipse of God" theology and belief in human agency: God's silent exile is only temporary, for man holds the ability to remedy the situation.

How can man return God from His silent exile, change the course of history, and bring salvation to a world in need? Silencing the "noise" of our limiting words, concepts, and intellectual filters, i.e., silencing the self and becoming more attuned to God's immanent presence, is key in Heschel's view, as we have seen. However, Heschel demands more of man than simply tuning in to the Divine; to Heschel, relationship with God involves both a call and a response. That is, salvation requires more activism on the part of both God and man, and here Heschel distinguishes himself from Buber. In writing about the "eclipse" of God, Buber does not describe God as reaching out for mankind or ever striving to break His silence, yet Heschel assures us that God occasionally cries out and calls us to action. "God is not indifferent to man's quest of Him," says Heschel, "He is in need of man."[37] Sometimes God breaks His silence only subtly, calling to us through the unfolding of our personal life experiences: "We feel at times as

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[34] Heschel, *Search*, 156-57.
[35] Heschel, *Quest*, xiii.
[36] Heschel, *Search*, 156-57.
[37] Ibid., 156.

if the echo of an echo of a voice were piercing the silence, trying in vain to reach our attention....In our own lives the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time...Learning how to spell the meaning of life-experiences backwards, some of us discover how the scattered syllables form a single phrase."[38] At other times, God's voice is earth-shattering, trying in vain to rouse us from our moral slumber, as during the Vietnam War: "The agony of God in Vietnam, the infamy of man in Vietnam! God's voice is shaking heaven and earth, and man does not hear the faintest sound. The Lord roars like a lion. His word is like fire, like hammer breaking rocks to pieces, and people go about unmoved, undisturbed, unaware."[39] God also makes His voice heard in moments when we feel awe: "God is not always silent...There are moments in which...[s]ome of us have...experienced the momentous realness of God...[and] have at least caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace, and power...There may come a moment like a thunder in the soul, when man is...not only guided by God's mysterious hand, but also taught how to aid, how to guide other beings."[40] In addition, Heschel believes, God speaks to us through His commandments: "The most important fact is that God speaks...The supreme concern is how to understand God's speech, God's expression. The *mitzvoth* are words of God which we try to understand, to articulate....Jewish observance [is] *a response to God.*"[41]

Thus, while Heschel's discussion of the *kol d'mamah dakah* warns against imagining that God "speaks" in any sort of human, physical way, Heschel affirms that God does communicate with man in *some* way and that our religious and moral duty goes beyond mere listening. More than an indifferent Source of truth, morality, and guidance, Heschel's God longs for man to

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[38] Heschel, *Search*, 174.

[39] From Heschel's speech to a CALCAV (Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam) plenary, as quoted in Edward K. Kaplan's *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 321.

[40] Heschel, *Search*, 138.

[41] Heschel, *Quest*, 135-36.

respond. We respond to God's "voice" by making meaning of our lives' events, by taking action against war and violence, by aiding and guiding "other beings," and by observing God's *mitzvot*, which "express the will of God."[42] When we respond to God, we draw Him out of His silent exile and back into our world, so that it might be rescued from its present, wretched state.

Drawing God Out of His Silence

What Heschel finds tragic is when man fails to respond to God's cries—when "people go about unmoved, undisturbed, unaware." While man's "silence" is desirable when it comes to attuning himself to God's immanent presence, his silence in response to God's call, command, and cry is reprehensible and inexcusable to Heschel. Throughout his years in America, Heschel calls repeatedly on man to *raise his voice* against injustice and on behalf of the oppressed. In his essay published in 1973, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," Heschel laments that "there is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor."[43] In his 1964 "Declaration of Conscience," Heschel argued that we must speak on behalf of Russian Jewry:

> The Russian Jews are...deprived of the right to speak of their being in distress...We must speak, because the Jews of Russia have no voice....We American Jews must utter their cry, must serve as their voice. We shall not be quiet. We shall not keep our peace until we pierce the crust of the world's conscience....I do not want future generations to spit on our graves, saying: "Here lies a community which living in comfort and prosperity, kept silent while millions of their brothers were exposed to spiritual extermination."[44]

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[42] Ibid., 135.

[43] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1996), 224.

[44] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "A Declaration of Conscience," in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Applied Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 283.

Time and time again, Heschel lends his own voice on behalf of the voiceless and urges us to do the same. In 1964, heartened by the power of the human voice to effect social change during the Civil Rights Movement, Heschel writes that "what is happening in our own days in America proves beyond doubt that a strong voice, ringing with force and dignity, has the power to pierce the iron shield of dormant conscience."[45]

Heschel believes that man has a responsibility beyond simply attuning himself to God. True relationship with the Divine, in Heschel's view, involves response to God's call. When God "roars like a lion" in Vietnam, our indifference is a disgrace. When we feel a sense of awe, we must not only *be* guided by God but also "aid" and "guide other beings." When we witness the "spiritual extermination" of a people, we must speak out and penetrate the world's conscience. When God calls, silence does not constitute a response, but a shirking of responsibility. Man must give voice to—or speak on behalf of—those who are voiceless and muted in our society, *including God Himself!* In doing so, man brings God out of His silent exile and into our world. This key aspect of Heschel's theology of silence is captured in the very title of Heschel's first published work, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man.* Man, through his voice and actions, enunciates the Ineffable, attesting to God's enduring presence and making God manifest in our world.

Thus, we see a distinction in Heschel between man's "noise" and man's "voice." Noise is made up of words and concepts that fail to capture the true essence and grandeur of God. It is the intellect that interferes with experience. Noise is undesirable, and even idolatrous, in that it represents our lack of humility and distances us from God, placing *us* at the center of our universe. While noise obscures God from our view and our world, though, *voice* constitutes a

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[45] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Plight of Russian Jews," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1996), 215.

response to God's call, will, and longing for us, and therefore attests to the reality and presence of God. When we respond to God through our voice and our actions, we make space for God in our universe and draw closer to Him. In speaking about why we should respond to God's commandments, Heschel states that "the goal of religion is not primarily to help us to express ourselves, but to bring us closer to God…[H]e who knows that God speaks cannot regard his own need for speaking and self-expression as being of supreme concern."[46] Man's task on earth is not to make himself heard above the sublime—this constitutes "noise"—but to make the sublime manifest and bring God out of His silent exile—to give God voice. As Heschel concludes in his 1958 essay, *The Task of the Hazzan*, "it is the task of man to reveal what is concealed; to be the voice of the glory, to sing its silence, to utter, so to speak, what is in the heart of all things. The glory is here, invisible and silent. Man is the voice; his task is to be the song….To sing means to sense and to affirm that the spirit is real and that its glory is present."[47]

Heschel's Voice

Though we find countless references to silence in Heschel's writings and speeches, Heschel does not understand silence in one single, consistent way. Silence in Heschel is *multi*valent. Sometimes silence represents the sublime that is both *beyond* all human constructs and language and, at the same time, *immanent* in the smallest of things. Sometimes silence indicates how different we are from God (whose essence, grandeur, and revelation remain ineffable) while also suggesting how we might encounter God in spite of that difference, e.g., by silencing the self and becoming better attuned. Sometimes silence connotes God's distance from our world—His muted, exiled status—while also alluding to the voicelessness of the oppressed and "plundered poor" within our midst. Most of these connotations of silence are somewhat

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[46] Heschel, *Quest*, 135.

[47] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Task of the Hazzan," *Conservative Judaism* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1958): 3.

familiar to us. For instance, like the sages of the rabbinic and medieval period, as well as Maimonides and Buber, Heschel: maintains a belief that God is present in, or in spite of, silence; sees silence as a way of honoring God and the difference between ourselves and the Divine, i.e., as a form of self-restraint for the sake of Heaven; associates silence with humility and contrasts it with the idolatrous noise that God abhors; and sees silence as connoting, or enabling, communion with God. Where Heschel adds a *new* dimension to our construction of a Jewish theology of silence is in his critique of man's silence in response to God's call. For Heschel, silence plays a key role in a larger conversation about *activism.*

Heschel's discussion of silence reveals a more explicitly activist stance than we see in the writings of the sages, Maimonides, or even Buber. Unlike the rabbinic and medieval sages, Heschel does not speak of a God who issues an immutable decree to which we must silently assent, nor does he preach silent, patient waiting for the end of our exile from God. Our misfortune and our distance from God is our own doing, Heschel says, and we have the ability—indeed the obligation—to bridge that distance, i.e., to draw God out of His silence and back into our lives and our world. In discussing the silence that brings us back into communion with God, Heschel does not speak, as Maimonides does, of retirement and seclusion from worldly concerns for the sake of intellectual reflection and meditation. Rather, he urges us to attune ourselves to God's urgent *call*; we are not excused from engaging in the world and responding to its desperate needs. Unlike the more passive Source of truth and moral guidance that Buber envisions, Heschel's God is a *commanding* God, who is not indifferent to our silent failure to respond. Turning to God—going our way in silence to listen for God, as Buber would have it—is only part of our task; we must also enunciate what we have heard, giving voice to God's will through

our actions. We must speak on behalf of those who are voiceless in our world, including the God whom we have silenced.

Despite his fundamental belief in the inexpressibility of "ultimate ideas," Heschel's written legacy is anything but silent! He has left us with a daunting array of writings that discuss, as we have seen, his ideas about God, revelation, the "goal of religion," the "task of man," salvation, and other issues of "ultimate" concern. Studying silence in Heschel provides us with an entrée into his thinking on these issues and—perhaps most importantly—conveys to us his profound sense of urgency. Heschel's theology of silence is an activist theology in that it *demands* something of us. Heschel, like his God, cries out to us, passionately urging us to become more attuned and attentive to Him, and then to act on what we "hear" and experience. He calls on us to silence the self yet speak on behalf of the mute—to quiet our "noise" and raise our "voice." We must find the humility to remove ourselves from the center of our universe, yet also believe in our power to bring salvation to an aching world. God is present and longs for us to return Him from His silent exile. Heschel's writings on silence challenge us to rise to this pressing task.

CHAPTER SIX: Silence in Wiesel

One of the most fundamental theological questions that the Holocaust evokes—*where was God?*—is often expressed in terms of silence, i.e., *how could God remain silent?* Elie Wiesel, one of the most prolific and best known survivors, wrestles with God's silence in the face of the viciousness and agony of the Holocaust and, in the course of doing so, also discusses the silence of the victim, the survivor, and the spectator. Wiesel is, as he says, "obsessed"[1] with silence because of both the inadequacy of language and the need for "voice"—themes previously encountered in our study, particularly in the writing of Heschel. But as Heschel's theology of silence is one of activism, Wiesel's is one of accountability, framed in terms of a legal trial, emphasizing interrogation and questioning. In order to hold God and man accountable for their silence during the Holocaust, survivors are forced to bear witness to the atrocities and speak out on behalf of silent victims, even as their words can never express the reality of the Holocaust or capture the true essence of its horrors. Like the rabbis, medieval commentators, Maimonides, Buber, and Heschel, Wiesel maintains faith in spite of silence, but his is what he calls a "broken faith":[2] God's presence in silence is hardly a comfort to Wiesel, but a cause for deep disturbance and probing inquiry.

In the face an abundance of works spanning many genres, a useful place to begin studying "silence in Wiesel" is his commentary on Aaron's silence in Leviticus 10:3, the only verse of our five which Wiesel discusses at length. This commentary appears in his French work entitled *Célébration prophétique: portraits et légendes* and begins with Wiesel's own admission

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[1] Elie Wiesel, Colloquium of Scholars lecture, California Lutheran College, Thousand Oaks, California, April 27, 1977, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:110.

[2] Elie Wiesel, Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, Westchester Reform Temple, Scarsdale, New York, December 4, 1975, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:145.

that he does not, and never will, understand the episode nor its "*protagonistes*."[3] Wiesel describes the story of the death of Nadav and Avihu as "*[s]ecrète*" and "*impénétrable*,"[4] but nevertheless walks us through his "*exploration*" (investigation)[5] of the text, beginning with a search for why the sons suffer a death so seemingly "*injuste*"[6] and then exploring the mystifying silent response of their father. In doing so, Wiesel employs the vocabulary and approach of a legal trial, dividing his interrogation into four parts, including the attempt to determine: "the basis of the sons' transgression"; "the basis of the sons' punishment"; "what one could say in the sons' defense"; and, finally, "what was the reaction of the sons' relatives."[7] Wiesel's inquiry raises more questions than it answers—questions that pervade Wiesel's other writings and ruminations on the Holocaust, which he calls in his investigation "a fire so much more immense and devastating" that consumed "so many descendents of Moses and of Aaron."[8]

In examining scriptural, aggadic, and medieval texts, Wiesel fails to arrive at a satisfying conclusion as to why Nadav and Avihu had to die such a terrible and premature death. To Scripture's explanation that the sons brought into the sanctuary alien fire that God had not demanded, Wiesel responds with the question: "Is that which God does not demand forbidden because it is foreign, and in religion is every innovation, original idea, and unusual project viewed upon and judged from above as evil?"[9] To Rashi's explanation that the sons sinned by entering the sanctuary intoxicated, Wiesel, pointing out that they were not "not in possession of all their faculties," responds with the question: "Since when does one condemn – to death! – a

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[3] Elie Wiesel, *Célébration prophétique: Portraits et legendes* (Paris: *Éditions du Seuil*, 1998), 107.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 110. All English renderings are my own, using the online dictionary at http://dictionary.reverso.net for those words with which I was unfamiliar.
[6] Ibid., 107.
[7] Ibid., 110.
[8] Ibid., 121.
[9] Ibid., 110.

man for an involuntary sin, even for an offense or a crime?" To the midrashic explanation that the sons were spared an even worse fate—leprosy and slow, humiliating death in exile, the usual punishment for entering the Tabernacle without permission—Wiesel recounts the protest of Rabbi Akha ben Zeira who questions why others (Korach and Titus), whose intentions were so much worse, either suffered the same fate as the sons or exited "in peace, unhurt."[10] In essence, to each explanation—each accusation brought against Nadav and Avihu—Wiesel consistently responds with the question: "Where is the justice?"[11] In Wiesel's eyes, even if the sons are guilty, the punishment does not seem to fit the crime, and moreover, he points out, Judaism teaches that "to question the dead is a grave sin."[12]

Wiesel finds similarly problematic those texts which present Aaron's sons as innocent or which speak of redemption that comes from the death of the righteous. The argument that the sons died because they were close to God and the death of God's "close ones" sanctifies His name is troubling to Wiesel:

> Nadav and Avihu were not at all at fault. Thus it is for love of God, and for the immeasurable love of God towards them, that they made sacrifice of their life. Their death was therefore an act of *kiddush hashem*: in dying, they sanctified His name. So that, according to Rashi, it was to reward Aaron for his dignified attitude and trust that God, several verses later, addressed Himself directly to him. Might I say, with all the respect that I owe to our tradition, that these hypotheses disturb me?[13]

Similarly disturbing to Wiesel is the Zohar's idea that "one who cries in reading of the death of Aaron's two sons will not know the same fate; he will not see his children die young" and Rabbi

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[10] Ibid., 119.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 120.
[13] Ibid., 117.

Abha bar Avina's statement that "the death of the just serves as expiation for their contemporaries."[14] To these attempts to wrest a blessing from the story—and from the horrible death of the sons—Wiesel, again, responds with probing questions: "Could there be a useful and fertile element in the death of innocents? This is difficult to conceive of. Is not the Jewish tradition opposed to death? Are we not taught for generation upon generation that only life is sacred, that death is always impure, that it is incumbent upon us to choose life?"[15]

Thus, Wiesel finds no satisfaction in explanations for the sons' death, whether they are found "*coupables*" (guilty) or righteous. He does take some solace in the fact that Scripture recognizes the human need for justification: "The fact that the text stresses the reason for the punishment is in itself interesting. This is common in Scripture...nothing is worse than doubt. Nothing is more overwhelming than the unknown. This explains why the text reveals to us for what reason Aaron's sons were punished by death."[16] However, the reasons given by Scripture and by the tradition only raise more questions for Wiesel. Furthermore, whereas in the rabbinic and medieval commentary explanations for the sons' death shed light on and justify Aaron's silent response, in Wiesel's "investigation" these explanations only serve to underscore that an injustice has occurred—a great injustice that demanded an outcry but was met with silence. Therefore, the legal proceedings continue, as Wiesel now interrogates both Aaron and God.

Interestingly, Wiesel begins his inquiry into Aaron's silence by recounting what midrash says about his wife Elisheba's response to the death of Nadav and Avihu: "There, Elisheba cries. And she laments. This is natural. The wife of the High Priest is also a mother. In the face of the sudden death of her two sons, she cannot remain stoic. When the heart is torn, it howls. When

[14] Ibid., 120.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

the grief is too heavy to bear, it explodes."[17] Such an outburst of emotion is what one expects of a bereaved parent regardless of that parent's role in society, says Wiesel, yet Aaron responds with silence—*Vayidom Aharon.* Indeed some commentaries, such as Ramban's, depict Aaron as having an initial outburst, but they explain that he is then calmed and quieted by Moses' reassurance that the sons were close to God or that their death sanctified God's name.[18] But Wiesel finds Aaron's easy acceptance unfathomable and, indeed, inexcusable: "A father, whatever be his role, whatever be his public functions, cannot, must not, accept calmly, in faith and resignation, the sudden death of his two sons!"[19] Wiesel questions why, if Abraham could protest the punishment of the innocent along with the guilty, Aaron could not muster the courage to protest the injustice that befell his own sons, and he does not find Aaron's reputation as a peacemaker to be a satisfying explanation for his silent deference:

> If Abraham could protest against the equal punishment inflicted on the just and the godless, why could Aaron not echo him? How could a father tolerate the tragedy that brings down his close family? Is it because, man of social peace, outstanding mediator, gentleness and harmony-made-man, he feared to enter into conflict with the Lord? In this case, his attitude remains an enigma. If to seek peace means choosing submission, submission at all costs, does one not risk falling into the humiliation that leads to servitude?[20]

Thus, Wiesel contrasts Elisheba's extroverted reaction with Aaron's silent stoicism, passivity, or resignation and finds hers to be a more fitting response to such an unthinkable and horrific tragedy. Their death, like a war that causes parents to bury their children, Wiesel says,

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[17] Ibid., 116.

[18] Ramban to Lev. 10:3. See also Sforno to Lev. 10:3 and Chapter Two of this thesis.

[19] *Célébration*, 117.

[20] Ibid.

should feel unbearable and *unnatural* to Aaron: "Is there for a man or woman a greater misfortune than to bury his children? This is against nature…Why is war the worst of the troubles? Because it denies the laws of nature."[21] Yet Aaron's silent response is similarly unnatural, because he fails to respond as the human being and father that he is.

Wiesel finds some gratification in those midrashim that attempt to redeem Aaron by showing glimpses of his humanness. Had the Ramban not portrayed Aaron as bursting into tears like Elisheba (albeit before being calmed by Moses), "Aaron would have been an inhuman father."[22] Wiesel is particularly fond of one midrash that paints Aaron not as the High Priest possessing a "a tranquil, or easy, faith, trust and acceptance," but as an outraged father who protests against God:

> Aaron, in shock, exclaimed with incomprehension and distress: "All the children of Israel saw You, Lord, during the passage of the Red Sea, then they saw You again at Sinai, and none of them suffered; but my sons, was it not You who ordered them to enter the Tabernacle or the Sanctuary—a place in which no non-priest can enter and leave alive? And why did they enter? To see Your glory and Your power! And yet they left their life there!" I admit that I like this explosion of chagrin and despair in Aaron. There, the father is stronger than the High Priest…That which he asks of God, he has a right to ask for.[23]

Wiesel approves of the tears, emotion, and "explosion" of chagrin and protest that represent signs of Aaron's humanity. In contrast, Wiesel finds something chillingly inhuman in Aaron's silence. When Aaron is silent, he becomes his *role*, the High Priest whose ultimate loyalty is to

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[21] Ibid., 119.
[22] Ibid., 117.
[23] Ibid., 118.

God and not to man—even when that "man" is his own offspring. In silence, Aaron, in a sense, becomes complicit; he becomes a silent accomplice to the unjust fate that the God whom he serves imposes upon—or at least allows to befall—his sons. In protest, however, Aaron becomes human, exercising his voice and his right to hold God accountable.

Indeed, accountability—a reckoning, of sorts—is what Wiesel is after. He does not excuse Aaron for his silent loyalty in the Bible to a God who allows such tragedy to befall those who revere and serve Him. *Nor does he excuse God Himself.* Wiesel questions why the God who showed mercy in sparing the sons a miserable, leprous death did not save them altogether:

> Something in me keeps me from serenely recounting this story of two young brothers who...would test the irresistible desire to overcome traps and obstacles in order to approach the Creator...And to love Him. Isaac also went to die by the fire; but God saved him. Nadav and Avihu were not saved. Why? Why did the God of charity not save so many descendents of Moses and of Aaron from a fire so much more immense and devastating? To bring them closer to Him, He snatched them from us. Why?[24]

Wiesel's questioning of God's motives is similarly present in Aaron's outcry about the children of Israel who were permitted to view God and emerge unscathed. His protest against God's injustice is evident in Rabbi Akha ben Zeira's question about Korach and Titus. His rage against God's seeming indifference is found in his astute observation that Lev. 10 ends without much fanfare, as life goes on: "the chapter ends with the two words: *Vayitav be'enav* – Moses was satisfied. And, no doubt, God too....Me, I am part of those who are not."[25] Wiesel's

[24] Ibid., 121.
[25] Ibid., 108.

"*exploration*" is an investigation of Aaron the father and of God the Father, who both remained silent. "*Vayidom Aharon.* And Aaron the father remained silent. Like God. For God."[26]

Wiesel draws connections between the events of Lev. 10—the sons' death, God's failure to save them, Aaron's silent response—and the tragedies of the Holocaust. "This tragedy of Nadav and Avihu, one incorporates with others equally overwhelming, personal and collective," Wiesel says.[27] Both this biblical tragedy and our own are one. Thus, we share a certain shame and guilt along with Aaron, as Wiesel suggests in the final line of his analysis: "Aaron was silent....And all that we, his disciples, can do is join our silence to his, or better yet: faced with a silence born of such a tragedy, of such a sum of sufferings, we cannot but interrogate ourselves in interrogating him."[28] Silence—whether Aaron's, God's, or our own—must be questioned because it suggests that one is not only overwhelmed by tragedy but perhaps even complicit. Next in the line-up for interrogation—after the sons, Aaron, and God—is ourselves, and here Wiesel's "*exploration*" ends, causing us to wonder whether we, like Aaron, have acted "*inhumain*" and whether the silent God we worship is really just, merciful, and worthy of our loyalty, submissive deference, and emulation.

Silence and the Holocaust

Wiesel's investigative approach to Lev. 10:3 and the Nadav and Avihu episode reflects his approach to understanding the Holocaust and its *protagonistes.* Like his "*exploration,*" Wiesel's writings that address the Holocaust more explicitly also examine the silence of victims, survivors, spectators, and God in a search for accountability. Silence, in Wiesel's view, invites investigation because, as we have seen elsewhere in both ancient and modern Jewish thought,

[26] Ibid., 121.
[27] Ibid., 120.
[28] Ibid., 121.

silence is never empty but, rather, laden with meaning, bearing consequences and implications. "For silence does not necessarily mean absence of communication," writes Wiesel in his book, *Somewhere a Master: Hasidic Portraits and Legends*. "For the poet, the artist, the mystic and the survivor, silence has many facets, zones and shades. Silence has its own texture…its own contradictions as well. The silence of the victim is one thing, that of the killer, another. And that of the spectator, still another."[29] We continue our attempt to discern a theology of silence in Wiesel's thought by examining what he has to say about the silence of each party that he interrogates regarding the Holocaust—the crime that has defined his life, yet defies all words.

Giving Voice to Silent Victims

Just as the interrogation of Aaron's sons has little bearing for Wiesel on Aaron's culpability, so Wiesel finds the interrogation of the Holocaust victims inappropriate and essentially irrelevant to the question, "Where is the justice?" No crime could have merited a punishment (so to speak) so horrific as the Holocaust nor excused the silence of the spectator. So, for example, in response to the accusations that victims "went to their deaths like sheep" or acted as "incompetent children," Wiesel replies, "The world kept silent while the Jews were being massacred…[and] reduced to the state of objects good for the fire; let the world at least have the decency to keep silent now as well."[30] Incriminating victims after death, here as in the *exploration*, does not release from accountability the other parties on trial and, moreover, is "a grave sin." Wiesel, therefore, includes the Holocaust victims in his investigation not to incriminate but to defend them, i.e., to give the silent a voice, so that blame is not misplaced.

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[29] Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master: Hasidic Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 200-201.

[30] Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, ed. *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 53.

Giving voice to the silent victim is a challenge, however, because what the victims experienced will forever be inexpressible. For Wiesel, there is truth about the Holocaust that can never be told; some truths died with the victims, other truths simply cannot be captured in words.

> You may have read facts and figures and documentary narratives and autobiographies or autobiographical novels…All this will not have brought you closer to the experience. For the ultimate mystery of the Holocaust is that whatever happened took place in the soul….What any Jewish child felt when he faced the executioner or when he witnessed the death of his father is in itself a mystery never to be revealed, for he alone, the child, the orphan, could speak about it, and he remains silent….[W]hat happened goes beyond words…To make words of it would be blasphemous. Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk said that truth can sometimes be communicated by words, though there is a level of truth so deep it can be conveyed only by silence.[31]

Our language is powerless to describe the truth of the crimes committed in the Holocaust. Even if the victims themselves could speak today, they would be unable to express the true extent or depth of the suffering that they experienced. Wiesel despairs of the impotency of words. Words, language, and even voice all fail to fully express the truth and, therefore, distort it. The Holocaust, Wiesel says, is "the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery,"[32] and just as for Heschel the "ultimate" remains ineffable, for Wiesel the Holocaust "defies language…[and] is beyond

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[31] Elie Wiesel, Herbert R. Abeles Memorial Address, 39th General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, Kansas City, Missouri, November 14, 1970, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:239.

[32] Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1978, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:12.

imagination… [W]hatever we say is not the full truth. It is only a mutilated truth, a fragment of truth."[33]

Sadly, though, language and words are impotent in another, more tragic way: the words of the victims—their cries for help—failed to move either God or man. "[E]ndless nocturnal processions of men and women and children…went to meet their executioners and death—and God—silently whispering age-old prayers, the Kaddish, the *Viddui*, the *Sh'ma Israel*, and nothing else, as though they too had despaired of language….[I]t is the silence of the victims that is haunting us—and will haunt us forever."[34] Haunted by this deafening silence of the dead and fearful that their inability to speak their truths—or at least try—will result in distortions and blasphemous accusations (e.g., of being "like sheep"), Wiesel commits himself to speaking out on their behalf. Just as Heschel seeks to bring the Ineffable into the world, so Wiesel feels compelled, as a survivor and witness, to bring a silent, unspeakable truth to the world's attention. Though he knows that efforts to convey the truths of the Holocaust may be futile, Wiesel sees no acceptable alternative. Just as he is witness to the "*impenetrable*" story of Nadav and Avihu, so must he bear witness to the unfathomable tragedy that befell those of his own generation.

How does Wiesel give voice to the silent victim when he is so painfully aware of the limitations of words and language? In essence, he strives to make room in his writings for silence itself to "speak." He aims to give voice to the victims' silence by making space for it, protecting it from being corrupted by blasphemy, and constantly reminding us that it alone holds the truth. What does it mean, or look like, for silence to have a voice in one's writing, or testimony? Sometimes Wiesel merely alludes to "the elephant in the room," so to speak, without

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[33] Elie Wiesel, "The Gates of the Holocaust," adapted from "The Holocaust and the Future," in *The Holocaust: Its Meaning for Christians and Jews* (St. Louis: National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1976) as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:12.

[34] *Somewhere*, 201.

mentioning it by name. For example, in his *exploration* of the Nadav and Avihu episode, Wiesel never refers to the Holocaust by name, but he draws unmistakable parallels between its victims and Aaron's sons. Sometimes Wiesel allows silence to "speak" by defending it against attempts to impose inaccurate or deceptive meaning, such as when he interrogates the midrashic explanations for Aaron's sons' fate and refutes the suggestion that their death had some redemptive value. Sometimes Wiesel gives silence a voice by raising piercing questions without answering them, and sometimes Wiesel's silences speak loudest when he stops writing altogether, as when, after interrogating all other parties, he suggests that we must also question ourselves and then abruptly ends his *exploration*. Through these and other techniques, Wiesel shows his keen awareness of both the vulnerability and the power of silence. In a sense, Wiesel strives to empower silence. "For every word we communicate, we know there are ten or fifteen or one that will never be communicated,"[35] he says, and this can work to the advantage or detriment of what is unspoken. So Wiesel approaches his writing with great care and attention to the use of both language and silence: "If you want to bring back at least a certain fragment of the truth, you must be responsible not only for the words but for the white space between the words...not only for the language but for the silence."[36]

Thus, Wiesel uses words to accentuate the white spaces between them—to make room for silence and make it speak more loudly. Through his writing—his testimony—Wiesel tries to carve a space for the victims' silence; this is how he, as a survivor, bears witness to an unspeakable crime and tragedy. Silence may speak louder than words, but only if we give it a "hearing." As a survivor, Wiesel sees this as his task.

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[35] Elie Wiesel, in David M. Szonyi and Bennet Zurofsky's "Tales Change People," *Rutgers Daily Targum, Critiques*, 3 Dec. 1970, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:57.

[36] Elie Wiesel, "Are we Worthy of the Story?" Lecture, Temple Beth Israel, Phoenix, Ariz., 24 April 1973, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:56.

Criminal Silence of the Spectator

Wiesel finds himself, like many survivors, in a difficult tension. On one hand, he believes that there is a truth that only silence can convey. He knows that when he speaks about the Holocaust, he risks distorting that truth, e.g., understating—because of the limitations of language—the Holocaust's atrocities and the true trauma they caused the victims. On the other hand, he wishes to protect the voiceless victim from insidious accusations that incriminate and acquit the wrong parties. If the survivors do not fill in the silence, others will. Wiesel resolves this "survivor's tension," so to speak, by giving silence a voice in his writings—by making space for silence and empowering it to speak more loudly than words. Silence, then, at least with regard to victims and survivors, can be powerful or vulnerable, depending on how one engages it. For instance, if allowed to "speak," silence resembles "the sublime" in Heschel's thought, i.e., a truth that can never be known, only alluded to, but whose enormity is overwhelming and unfathomable. If not given a voice, silence allows truth to be tainted by inaccurate words and corrupted by those who impose false meaning. Silence, in a sense *malleable*, becomes Wiesel's defense against those who misuse it or engage it in ways that obstruct the truth.

Thus, silence becomes a tool in Wiesel's investigation and search for accountability with regard to the Holocaust. It is a defense against those who use silence in ways that *obstruct* truth. Among those who misuse silence, in Wiesel's opinion, are those who engage in a "conspiracy of silence" against witnesses like himself. In an essay entitled "The Authority of Silence in Elie Wiesel's Art," Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres explains that often survivors are forced to retreat into silence not simply because they realize that "the truth of Auschwitz can never be communicated," but also because they have learned that "a guilt-ridden world prefers to ignore this kind of truth. There is, as Wiesel notes, a 'conspiracy of silence' against the testimony of

survivors, in which the survivors themselves, through a socially induced guilt and through their own sense of having failed to make the world listen, are forced to join."[37] This conspiracy of silence is, in large part, what drives Wiesel to speak out as a witness. "Wiesel's commitment to silence," says Des Pres, "is countered by his commitment as a witness...Wiesel believes that unless the world's guilt is openly acknowledged and the implications of Auschwitz made an active part of general consciousness...if this unacknowledged guilt is not faced, the trauma it generates will grow until nothing less than nuclear war will suffice as atonement."[38]

In squelching the testimony of those who would attempt to speak the truth, the conspiracy of silence is, in effect, criminal. This use of silence is a sinister one, resulting from an even more inexcusable silence that took place during the Holocaust itself. Regarding the world's lack of responsiveness during the Holocaust, Wiesel writes: "I do not understand why the world was silent when we needed its outcry. I always come back to that problem. Where were the humanists, the leaders, the liberals, the spokesmen for mankind? The victims needed them. If they had spoken up, the killers would not have killed, or would have killed less. If they had spoken up, the slaughterer would not have succeeded in his task."[39] As Wiesel suggests in his "*exploration*" of Aaron's silence, in failing to protest a crime, one becomes an accomplice. In addition, in failing to cry out upon witnessing the death of one's flesh and blood, e.g., in the face of a war that is "*contre nature*," one becomes "*inhumain*" (inhuman): "Here you have a people that day after day lost its children and its sages and its princes and its beggars, and yet the world

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[37] *Confronting*, 53.

[38] Ibid., 53-54.

[39] Elie Wiesel, Colloquium of Scholars lecture (see note 1 in Chapter Six of this thesis), as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:110.

remained silent."[40] Instead of keeping his silence, the spectator could and should have chosen to express outrage. Like the midrash depicting Aaron raging against God and injustice, Wiesel would have written the story differently, with man choosing accountability over complicity, outburst over deference, truth over conspiracy, human response over inhuman indifference, voice over silence.

The conspiracy of silence and its progenitor, the silence of the world during the Holocaust, are powerful silences indeed. Both enable man to impact his fellow man—and history—in astoundingly consequential ways, as Des Pres writes: "In *One Generation After* [Wiesel] has one of his *personae* say: 'In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me.'"[41] Wiesel's writing—his "shout," "scream," or testimony, in which he strives to let the silence of victims and of truth speak—is, perhaps, an attempt to *reclaim* silence and its power, i.e., to place the power of silence at the service of his central concern, accountability, rather than at the service of the killer.

God, The Ultimate Silent Spectator?

In the *exploration* of the Nadav and Avihu episode, Wiesel's investigation does not end with Aaron, for if Aaron's silence makes him complicit, we must then ask, *with whom*—or *Whom*—did he comply? Wiesel therefore goes on to raise a number of inquiries regarding another silent "party" in the story: God. Wiesel questions why God could not save the sons as He saved Isaac, why God would allow those who loved Him to suffer such a horrendous death, and why the righteous would meet a worse fate than the wicked. His inquiry reflects many of the

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[40] Elie Wiesel, in Bonnie Remsberg's "Before the End of History—and After," *Some of My Best Friends*, Chicago, Ill., Channel 5-TV, 28 June 1981, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:54.

[41] *Confronting*, 54.

same questions that he has regarding God's inaction in the Holocaust. Wiesel writes: "The magnitude of the catastrophe, the absurdity of the tragedy, the silence of the world, the responsibility of the accomplices, the very fact that it could have happened, and...could have been avoided—all these elements make it into...a religious mystery, with theological implications."[42] The question at the heart of this "religious mystery, with theological implications" is, naturally, "How can *God* be silent?"[43] In a 1975 University of Oregon interview, Wiesel elaborates:

> The problem of God's inaction in history, to me, has been more baffling, more puzzling, more tormenting than man's action in history. When I was a child and I discovered what was going on...I was not really that surprised by man's action. But coming from a religious background, I could not understand God's silence. I still do not. My disputation with God still goes on. To me it was an injustice on a theological scale, on a universal scale. God was silent, and therefore His silence was unjust.[44]

Through his questioning, Wiesel, in effect, puts God on trial; his "disputation" with God is about accountability. To be sure, Wiesel stops short of holding God *solely* accountable for history's tragic events: "[T]o say that God alone is on trial is hypocritical,"[45] for "man failed as bitterly as God, if not more. Auschwitz was man's idea, man's work."[46] Nevertheless, says Wiesel,

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[42] Elie Wiesel, in Harry James Cargas's *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:31.

[43] Elie Wiesel, in "Question and Quest," Transcript, *The Eternal Light*, Chapter 1159, 12 May 1974, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:31.

[44] Elie Wiesel, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, April 10, 1975, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 3:228-229.

[45] Elie Wiesel, "The Trial of Man," Lecture, Loyola University, Chicago, Ill., 12 April 1980, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:32.

[46] Elie Wiesel, Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture (see note 2 in Chapter Six of this thesis), as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:144.

"[m]an's betrayal matches God's silence."[47] The latter, like the former, has borne devastating consequences and calls for investigation.

Among the dangers of God's silence—His inaction—are not only that murderous acts go unstopped, but also that man, whether perpetrator, victim, survivor, or spectator, begins to believe that God *condones* what is happening and to see God's silence as something that he is permitted to *emulate*. With regard to God's "unjust" silence mentioned in the University of Oregon interview, Wiesel asks: "But then, what is one to do with it? To give in? To say, 'Since You are unjust, I may be unjust too. After all, I am created in Your image'? That can be a solution. Some people have chosen it. I believe that it is the wrong solution."[48] One ought not to take one's cue from God and remain silent in the face of injustice, argues Wiesel. Neither should God's silence make one feel entirely impotent against injustice as, Wiesel laments, is sometimes the case: "The nineteenth century witnessed new bloodshed...[as] the world was preparing the abyss for...Hasidim and their Masters. New wars were erupting, preparing the way for the most cruel of all. And God was silent? Satan howled and God did not respond? Evil spread throughout creation and the Creator said nothing? Since He remained silent, what could man possibly do?"[49] The danger in God's silence—at least in part— is that it makes man choose silence too. Spectators choose silence because there is no consequence to choosing otherwise and because history—and therefore God—seems to favor the crime and perpetrator and not the victim. Tragically, righteous victims and survivors also come to believe that God is not on their side and they, too, decide to hold their peace: "Reb Mendel was singing the Haggada...when he stopped in the middle...and then he whispered...'there exist in this world

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Elie Wiesel, University of Oregon (see note 44 in Chapter Six of this thesis), as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 3:229.

[49] *Somewhere*, 199.

Tzaddikim, Just Men, who possess the powers to bring the Messiah. But they choose not to use their powers. Why? I shall tell you why: Since God is silent, they choose to remain silent too.' When divine silence is answered by human silence, it is tragic for both."[50]

Thus, as Wiesel sees it, God's silence should be neither emulated nor excused. Wiesel's view stands in contrast to that of the rabbis, as presented in Chapter 1 of this study. For instance, whereas the rabbis, in Midrash Tehillim to Psalm 65:2, *praise and admire* God for His Self-restraint upon witnessing the desecration and destruction of His Temple, Wiesel *questions* God for not taking action to stop the catastrophe of his own day. Whereas the rabbis see God's Self-restraint as upholding His own just decree, Wiesel sees no justice in what befell the victims of the Holocaust. Whereas the rabbis depict the exemplary David pledging silence in emulation of God, Wiesel, as we have seen, warns against the dangers of following God's silent lead. In their commentary to Job 34:29, the rabbis reframe God's lack of intervention as the giving of *shalvah* (graciousness), whereas Wiesel sees God's inaction as complicity with a crime. The rabbis *discourage* us from judging God for the *shalvah* that He bestows upon the wicked (*u'mi yarshia*—"who can condemn Him?"),[51] while Wiesel holds that we are *entitled* to judge, dispute, interrogate, try, and investigate God, just as we would all other parties to a crime. "Since God dwells in silence," observes Wiesel, "why not seek Him out there? Why not challenge Him there?"[52] And indeed, in contrast to the rabbis, Wiesel seeks not to defend but to challenge God in His silence.

Despite stark differences between his and the rabbinic approach, Wiesel does not consider his investigation of God's silence to be heretical. Rather, he sees it as an expression of

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[50] Ibid., 200.

[51] Leviticus Rabbah 5:3 and Genesis Rabbah 36:1-2 on Job 34:29. See Chapter One of this thesis.

[52] *Somewhere*, 199.

the only type of faith that is possible in a post-Holocaust world: a "broken faith."[53] "He who says today that he is at peace with himself and with God is estranged from both," says Wiesel. "Today the protester, the angry believer, and perhaps the angry non-believer may be called the true believers."[54] While the rabbis are concerned with upholding God's omnipotence, justice, and beneficence, Wiesel recognizes that *his* generation finds these ideas highly problematic, finds simple answers about God's silence unsatisfying, and views human authority—including rabbinic authority on issues of faith—with much skepticism. Today, one who believes that God is present in history must *necessarily* undertake to question God, and Wiesel affirms that "in doing so one remains within certain limits and within a certain tradition, namely the Jewish tradition, the only one that allows and indeed *commands* man to say no to God, provided he remains *in* God and *for* man."[55]

What does it mean to remain "in" God? Perhaps it simply means remaining in relationship, dialogue, or disputation with God, i.e., recognizing God as a presence in one's life, even if only a troubling one. "Moses, Abraham, Job, the Hasidic masters—all protested against the Almighty,"[56] Wiesel says, yet they all protested from within a certain relationship and "within a certain tradition." Likewise, Wiesel reminds us, even some *rabbinic* texts seem to embrace this theology of protest and interrogation: "From the School of Rabbi Ishmael came the outcry: 'Who is as silent as You are, O God, for You witness the humiliation of Your children and You keep silent?'"[57] Wiesel's stance is reminiscent of the rabbinic commentary on 1 Sam. 1:13. Wiesel himself does not reference Hannah's silent prayer, but in much the same way that

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[53] Elie Wiesel, Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture (see note 2 in Chapter Six of this thesis), as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:145.
[54] Ibid., 144-145.
[55] Ibid., 144.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

the rabbis defend Hannah's right to speak "insolently toward heaven,"[58] Wiesel defends our right to interrogate God: "As far as belief in God is concerned, I would simply suggest to question Him and go on questioning Him *through* such belief." Despite her intense anger and grief, Hannah does not turn away from God, but instead channels her emotions into dialogue with God, i.e., into prayer. Likewise, Wiesel suggests that we should take up our grievances with God, if only to hold God accountable. Indeed, Wiesel is forthright about his own efforts and struggles in relationship with God: "If I were to tell you that I believe in God the way I believed when I was a child, I would lie to you. If I would tell you I do not believe at all, I would lie, too. I'm still searching, searching for a possibility, for an answer."[59] For Wiesel, God may indeed be present in silence, but being present and silent in the face of the injustice and tragedy of the Holocaust demands inquiry. It is this inquiry, born of immense disappointment in God and an unwillingness to release God—from his life or from accountability—that Wiesel believes keeps him within the bounds of the Jewish faith. "Mine is a tragic faith,"[60] Wiesel concludes, but it is a faith nonetheless.

A Survivor's Theology of Silence

While Wiesel may indeed be within the bounds of Jewish faith and tradition, the theology that emerges from his views on silence is quite different than what we have seen thus far in our study. Man's silence and God's silence—both unexplainable—have allowed an immense and criminal injustice to occur, and thus, like the silent human spectator who may be deemed an accomplice to a crime, God too is suspect. With a suspect God at the heart of his "tragic faith,"

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[58] *B. Berakhot* 31b-32a. See Chapter One of this thesis.

[59] Elie Wiesel, in Abraham Peck's "Still Searching for an Answer," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 31 Dec. 1978, Views, 4, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:32.

[60] Elie Wiesel, in Morton A. Reichek's "Out of the Night," *Present Tense*, Spring 1976, 46, as quoted in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against the Silence* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 1:32.

Wiesel's theology of silence is much darker and less reverent than that of the rabbis, commentators, and other thinkers we have studied. For instance, in contrast to the (seemingly predominant) rabbinic view, the silence of a *suspect* God is *not* above human questioning. God's decree is not necessarily just nor worthy of man's silent deference. Control of our emotions for the sake of heaven is not admirable but inhuman, dangerous, and—if indeed God is at fault—criminal. God may be present in silence, but if so, His presence is highly problematic. In contrast to the medieval view, there is nothing *redeeming* in either the death of the victims or the spectator's silent, continued service to God, since God is suspect. While *kiddush hashem* may be a noble value in an era when God is considered beyond reproach, being "close," devoted, or loyal to a God who is *under investigation* is not so admirable. Also, while the medieval commentators encourage *dumiah*, i.e., faithful, patient waiting, for an end to human misery, Wiesel believes that the appropriate response to catastrophe is *outcry*—raising one's voice and raging against injustice, rather than quietly accepting it as the will or decree of God. In an era when, among His other traditional qualities, God's *goodness* is in question, man must be vigilant and vocal lest he become a silent accomplice to a crime against humanity, whoever the perpetrator.

Wiesel's call for "voice" is reminiscent of Heschel, yet his theology of silence is not *activist* in the way that Heschel's is. Here, too, his view is a darker one, for sadly, with respect to the tragedy that has defined Wiesel's life and that of other Holocaust survivors, it is too late for activism. Indeed, there *was* a time and place for voice—for the spectator's protest and outcry and for the victim's testimony and prayers. But the former failed to speak out, and the latter's cries fell on deaf ears. Thus, while one detects *hope* in Heschel's call to action—hope that there is a future for the silent oppressed, hope for justice, and hope for universal salvation—one hears

in Wiesel mainly *despair* that irreversible damage has already been done. In the face of such an immense injustice, there is no hope that justice can possibly still be served. What remains to be redeemed is only *truth*, which is best expressed through silence. Wiesel's is a theology of accountability, more than of activism; it is not about speaking on behalf of a *silenced* God who loves justice, but about questioning a God whose *suspect silence* allowed for a great injustice. It is about giving voice to those who have been *irreparably* wronged, by allowing their silence to speak its truth. Expressing the ineffable, to Wiesel, is not about bringing God into a world in need, but about bringing truth into it, regardless of where God stands with respect to that truth.

One familiar, age-old element that we find in Wiesel's thought is the idea that there is some truth to which only silence can attest. Like the rabbinic sages, Rashi, Maimonides, and Heschel, Wiesel acknowledges the impotence of words and the limitations of language. Yet here again, Wiesel's thinking proves to be rather dark in comparison. While the others speak of language's inability to express the Awesome, Wiesel speaks of its inability to express the awful. Wiesel is not concerned with singing God's praises, but with making known truth, regardless of how the truth reflects upon God. Since words fail to express truth, Wiesel strives through his writings and testimony to make silence itself speak.

Thus, God's silence in the face of such an enormous and irreparable injustice as the Holocaust renders Him suspect. Wiesel is unique among the thinkers we have studied—both ancient and modern—in that he does not assume that God is beyond reproach and man the only party at fault. Wiesel's works, such as his "*exploration*" of Aaron's silence, model for us the importance of pursuing truth and accountability, for if man does not investigate and inquire—if he chooses instead to take part in a conspiracy of silence—then he becomes complicit with whomever or Whomever was behind the crime. Engaging in investigation and inquiry does not

render one a heretic, in Wiesel's view, but may in fact attest to one's faith in God, even though that faith may be a "broken" or "tragic" one like his own. With a suspect God at the center of his faith, it is not surprising that Wiesel's theology is more focused on disturbing questions than on reassuring answers, as compared to the others we have studied. Neither is it surprising that his outlook is darker and more despairing. It is notable that Wiesel does not seem to discuss salvation in connection with silence, as others do. Perhaps this is because what was lost simply is not salvageable, in his eyes. Countless lives have been destroyed, and with them, a measure of truth. Other truths, even those of the survivor, are inexpressible. The best that one can do—and the project to which Wiesel has devoted his life's work—is to give the silence of the victims and survivors a hearing, to give their silence the floor, and to let their silence speak its truth to those who will listen.

Conclusions

In Wiesel's writings that either allude to or explicitly concern the Holocaust, silence has many meanings and implications, depending on who is silent and under what circumstances. The silence of the victim, for instance, is associated sometimes with his vulnerability to false accusations, sometimes with the chilling reality or truth of his experience, which he can never tell but which drives others to testify on his behalf, and sometimes with despair, as when his cries and prayers go unheard. The silence of the spectator can represent: complacency or complicity, as during the Holocaust itself; an unnatural or inhuman response, as when one is more loyal to one's role than to one's family; or unbearable guilt which leads one to engage in a "conspiracy of silence." The silence of the survivor can indicate resignation or defeat, as when one gives up trying to express an indescribable experience, realizes that the world prefers to ignore his truth, or begins to believe that God and history are against him. The silence of God

suggests indifference to suffering and injustice, inaction in the face of catastrophe, lack of involvement in or control over history, or Divine sanction of atrocity and crime.

Thus, as in Heschel's writings, silence in Wiesel is multivalent. For example, silence can be incriminating, as when it represents a difficult truth. It can be sinister and dangerous, as when people follow God's silent lead and fail to speak out against injustice and killing. Or it can be redeeming, as when Wiesel carves a space in his works for the victim's silence to "speak." However, one senses that Wiesel's approach to silence is more intentional than Heschel's. Perhaps more than anyone else we have studied, Wiesel is conscious that silence is never neutral or empty, but always laden with meaning and implication. He is keenly aware of both the power and the *malleability* of silence, i.e., the ability to shape and *use* silence to further one's purpose. He recognizes that just as silence can be used to *obstruct* truth, e.g., when one engages in a conspiracy of silence or makes false accusations against which silent victims can never defend themselves, so can it be used in his own writings to *convey* truth. Silence is a central theme in Wiesel's writing because it plays a key role in his theology and his enterprise. By giving silence a voice in his testimony, Wiesel reclaims silence, empowers it, and places it at the service of *accountability.*

CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion

Our study began with the question of whether silence has a place—and bears religious significance—in Judaism. Indeed, in the eyes of the sages, commentators, and thinkers whom we have studied in the preceding six chapters, silence does have much to "say" with regard to Jewish religious and theological concerns. Silence has a place in the Jewish tradition, for it plays a role in the religious understanding of those whom our people considers to be among its most esteemed interpreters of our sacred text. In their works, silence is never lacking in meaning or valence, whether positive or negative. It does not merely constitute dead space, so to speak, between active, outward expressions of religion; it expresses something religious in its own right. Silence *represents* something of theological importance.

Exactly *what* silence represents in the religious understanding of our rabbis, exegetes, philosophers, and theologians differs from period to period and thinker to thinker. We commenced our study by considering the role of silence in rabbinic thought. In the rabbinic period, silence largely represents the control of one's strong emotions for the sake of Heaven. Keeping one's peace in the face of great torment expresses deference to God's decree, gratitude for God's mercy and beneficence, recognition of God as the one true Judge, faith in God's presence, comfort in God's closeness, belief that God is in control and has a plan, and praise for God's distinctiveness and His justice. Our silence acknowledges that exalting God takes precedence over even our greatest suffering, and therefore silence is considered admirable and deserving of reward. The ultimate exemplar of such silent self-restraint is God Himself, for in spite of His own torment, God silently defers to His own just decree. The rabbis urge us not to judge but to *praise* God for His patience with the wicked. God's silence is just and worthy of emulation.

As in the rabbinic period, silence in the medieval period represents a sort of self-control that honors God and *is* Godly. Again, silence in the face of anguish is admirable because it shows deference to God's just decree, and God is praised for His own Self-restraint, which we are to emulate. Also reminiscent of the rabbinic period, silence represents the goodness (*shalvah*) that God bestows upon the poor, and silence frequently indicates a certain closeness with God. In some instances, however, the medieval commentators depart from the view of the ancient sages, as silence comes to play a role in two central concerns of the era—*kiddush hashem* and *galut*—and as silence sometimes takes on a *negative* valence, which we did not see in the rabbinic period (with the exception of Rabbi Meir's opinion that was quickly tabled). In the medieval conversation, silence comes to represent perseverance in the face of adversity, e.g., Aaron's continued service as High Priest is what sanctifies God's name, and patient, unwavering faith is deemed to be the proper exilic stance while awaiting return to Zion. In both cases, silence is considered praiseworthy and positive. However, the discussion about exile also results in a different, negative view of silence, in which silence represents Israel's separation from God, i.e., God's *absence* and the muteness that impedes Israel's salvation because her vows cannot be heard.

In Maimonides, silence once again represents a sort of self-restraint for the sake of Heaven. We glorify God when we refrain from uttering too many praises, for our silence honors the vast difference between God and man, i.e., we cannot possibly name God's attributes, and we risk insulting Him if we try. While honoring God's differentness, silence also represents the means through which we draw closer to God in spite of that difference, for silent reflection is, to Maimonides, an ideal mode of worship. Because man is joined to God via the intellect, *avodah she'balev*—silent, contemplative worship and intellectual meditation on God—is what brings us

into God's presence and affords us Divine protection, or salvation. The connection in Maimonides between silence and intellect, or wisdom, is an element that was not pronounced in either rabbinic or medieval exegetical commentary.

In Buber, silence represents the willingness, or humility, to enter into I-Thou relations with God and to listen for His revelation, direction, truth, and absolute values. Thus, silence acknowledges a *living* God who has guidance for every age and historical juncture, if we but silence ourselves so we can hear Him. Unfortunately, Buber says, there is also a negative form of silence, which predominates in the modern era: the silence that represents our unwillingness to relate to God and our fellow man as "Thou." When we fail to listen for God's truth and guidance, we conceal—or silence—God. When we fail to enter into proper dialogue with one another, silence leads to war and slaughter. These negative silences are destructive, yet in spite of them, God—and hope for the world's salvation—remains present if we seek His direction anew. In Buber, silence can be fatal or salvific, depending on whether we choose to silence God or silence ourselves.

In Heschel, silence represents God's differentness, mysteriousness, and unfathomable pervasiveness. Silence is how we honor God, because such "ultimate ideas" as God's true grandeur, essence, and revelation are "ineffable," i.e., our words and language serve only to misrepresent and demean them. Silence is also how we encounter God, for we need to silence the "noise" of our intellect, logic, and reason, as well as our words, if we wish to experience—and thus draw closer to—God. Silence represents a tuning-in to the sublime and the Awesome. But silence is not always positive in Heschel. Heschel finds the silence of the voiceless and oppressed in our society agonizing, and man's silent response to their suffering tragic. Man, through his lack of attunement to God and failure to respond to God's call, *silences God*, forcing

Him into exile from our world. We draw God back into our world by becoming a voice for those who are muted and voiceless, including God Himself.

In Wiesel, silence bears different meanings depending on who is silent and in what capacity. The silence of victims and survivors represents a truth that is impossible to convey, or a voicelessness that renders one vulnerable to false accusation. Silence on the part of other parties to a crime can connote complacency or complicity, an unnatural or inhuman response to atrocity and cries for help, submissive deference and loyalty to the perpetrator, or unbearable guilt that leads to the repression and obstruction of truth. God's silence suggests Divine indifference and inaction in the face of injustice, as well as Divine sanction for criminal acts and for a conspiracy of silence in the aftermath of such acts. Thus, silence is multivalent in Wiesel, e.g., it can be incriminating, suspect, sinister, dangerous, or redeeming. What silence represents in Wiesel is, in a sense, malleable. It holds the potential to be powerful or vulnerable—to convey or obscure an enormous and deeply consequential truth—depending on how it is used. Silence plays a central role in the "religious mystery with theological implications" that has shaped Wiesel's life and thought.

Thus, in the view of some of our tradition's most important sages, exegetes, and thinkers, silence indeed bears religious significance. In the six chapters of this thesis, studying the interpretation of biblical silence and what it represents has drawn us into discussion about such religious concerns as: how one should honor, praise, and relate to God; what makes for salvation; what God wants of man; human responsibility or agency; man's most pressing task; truth, faith, and idolatry; and God's omnipotence, oneness, presence, absence, justice, and goodness. But given the diversity of views we have uncovered regarding these concerns, and given such a wide range of meanings ascribed to silence over the centuries, can we, in fact, speak of a single,

coherent, consistent *theology* of silence that runs through our tradition? Do our findings constitute the building blocks for constructing such a theology?

To establish the existence of a Jewish theology of silence that spans the ages, and to identify and state with confidence the core pillars of that theology, one would need to complete a vastly more comprehensive study, investigating a much broader range of biblical references to silence, of commentaries, and of thinkers. This *preliminary* study is, nevertheless, of value, for its findings suggest that even a more comprehensive study is unlikely to yield a clearly defined, coherent, consistent theology of silence. That is, even within the narrow scope of our work, we find little consistency from era to era and thinker to thinker.

To be sure, we find a few threads of continuity between the various commentators and thinkers we have studied. For instance, as we have seen, each holds that silence is never empty, but has implications and bears consequences, i.e., that something *happens* in silence, or that we *do* something in silence. In addition, each seems to view silence as a form of self-restraint for the sake of Heaven, for better or—as in Wiesel's view of Aaron—for worse. Each struggles to understand a silent *God*, believing that God is somehow *present* in silence. Each finds words, noise, and language to be deficient—often associated with blasphemy and idolatry—and recognizes that there is some truth to which only silence can attest. However, even the common threads begin to fray when stretched too far. For instance, while silence may never be empty, there is no single opinion throughout the ages as to the emotion or sentiment that fills it, nor to the meaning that it conveys. Neither, for that matter, do we find an entirely consistent belief about what words and language symbolize; in modern thought we even see a distinction between "noise" and "voice," with the latter actually viewed as a *positive* religious response.

Other common threads fray upon closer inspection as well. While silent self-restraint for the sake of Heaven may demonstrate admirable deference to a just God in the rabbinic period, by the post-Holocaust period it suggests dangerous, submissive loyalty to or complicity with a suspect perpetrator (or Perpetrator) of crime. God's own silence or Self-restraint, deemed worthy of emulation in the rabbinic and medieval periods, is *remediable* to Buber and Heschel and highly questionable, if not inexcusable, to Wiesel. The idea that God is still present in and in spite of silence is a source of comfort to the rabbis, cause for activism in Heschel, and deeply disturbing to Wiesel. While our people has wrestled over the centuries with both man's silence and God's, we do not appear to have arrived at a single system of belief surrounding silence that rings true in every age.

Nevertheless, our study of silence in Judaism does enable us to detect some noteworthy theological *trends* and to draw some meaningful conclusions about the impact of modernity on Jewish views of God, man, history, and religious responsibility. One trend over time is a shift in the perception of who controls history. In the rabbinic and medieval period, God controls history by making decrees (to which even He is subject), by doling out punishment or *shalvah*, and by choosing whether or not to take vengeance on His and Israel's enemies. In the modern period, however, man comes into his own: by making space for God in the world, say Buber and Heschel, man can impact his fate, for history is not predetermined or, we might say, pre-decreed. In fact, because (according to Buber and Heschel) man has the power to silence God, *God* is—in a sense—subject to *man's* decree, rather than the other way around. Thus over time we see a shift in the perception of God's omnipotence and man's impotence. That is, in the rabbinic and medieval period, the sages take a longer, more passive, view of history, believing that God is in charge and has a plan—a plan to which the righteous defer and which man has no right to

question. In the modern period, though, God "does not have a system." He is present, but man must seek Him out in order for His truth and direction to enter our lives, says Buber. He calls, but man must respond if the Ineffable is to become manifest in our world, says Heschel. He remained silent and inactive in the Holocaust, and man is entitled to question why, says Wiesel. In the modern world, if there is, perhaps, less trust in God's justice, there is almost certainly less faith in His ability to enforce it. Meanwhile, man has risen in power with respect to God and has gained the ability to control his fate.

Although in the modern view man may be perceived as more powerful than he was in rabbinic, medieval, and Maimonidean thought, he is not perceived as any more noble or trustworthy. To the contrary, he has proven himself capable of building a bomb that threatens to annihilate all of humanity, of waging two world wars, of tremendous brutality in Vietnam, and of unspeakable atrocity and genocide in the Holocaust. Consequently (and perhaps also due to other influences, such as the Enlightenment), another trend we see in the modern period is an emphasis on the need for salvation—specifically, *universal* salvation, rather than personal or Jewish communal salvation. Bringing about this universal salvation becomes a pressing religious task for man in modern Jewish thought. Sadly, optimism that man will ultimately choose salvation over destruction seems to wane over the course of the modern period. Buber maintains a fairly hopeful stance that the dangerous trajectory of history can be reversed by "that embodied possibility called man." Heschel takes a more urgent and activist approach—speaking with great dismay and disgust over man's silent response to God's calls. And Wiesel laments that victims have already been claimed and despairs over the irreversible damage done, finding little that is, in fact, salvageable.

Thus, through the study of silence in the Jewish tradition, we have gained insight regarding theological trends and the impact of modernity on Jewish thought. Our study suggests that over time the Jewish perception of man's power relative to God's has shifted, and that this shift has been accompanied by new understandings of man's religious responsibility and, interestingly, by a diminishing hope for salvation. As we have observed in previous chapters, the study of silence has also enabled us to identify the central concerns, fundamental beliefs, and core religious values of our sages, philosophers, and thinkers, from the rabbinic to the modern period. The rabbis, for instance, felt it imperative to affirm God's omnipotence and justice, the medieval commentators to define *kiddush hashem* and encourage faith and perseverance, Maimonides to proclaim God's differentness, Buber to revive I-Thou relations, Heschel to make the Ineffable manifest, and Wiesel to seek accountability. Studying silence has also helped us to detect threads of continuity between the different ages and sages and to discern nuances in thought between them. For example, Heschel quotes *Moreh Nevuchim* with respect to the limitations of language, but he differs from Maimonides in viewing the intellect as an equally noisy distraction from Divine encounter. He echoes Buber in his emphasis on attunement and his view of a God in exile, but unlike Buber he envisions a God who often breaks His silence and reaches toward man. Like Wiesel, he recognizes the potential power of man's "voice," but in contrast to Wiesel, he does not believe it is too late for that voice to make a difference. The study of silence has shown how even sages and thinkers who live in different epochs and hold divergent views from one another nonetheless engage in conversation with each other, as each affirms the religious value of silence and wrestles with the one, silent, Jewish God.

While a more complete study of silence in the Jewish tradition may never result in a single, coherent theology of silence, such a study holds the potential to confirm and expand upon

the broader trends identified above and to shed light on additional meanings of silence in our religion. Such a study might entail the examination of: commentary on an expanded repertoire of biblical verses; commentary by a broader range of rabbinic and medieval commentators; the legal implications of silence as explained in halakhic and post-talmudic halakhic literature; the history and laws of "silent" prayer and of *nichum aveilim*; silence in Hasidic and Jewish mystical thought; silence in the writings of additional modern thinkers, such as Franz Rosenzweig, Joseph Soloveitchik, Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, David Hartman, and Eugene Borowitz; silence in Jewish feminist thought; and the role of silence in the Jewish Renewal movement. In the absence of such a study, perhaps the most definitive theological statement we can make with regard to silence is that the Jewish God is a silent God, silence has profound religious implications, and all the rest is commentary—commentary that is well worth studying if one wishes to learn what our ancient and modern sages hold sacred and what they deem to be our most pressing religious task.

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