



# TMI

## THE MIDDOS INITIATIVE

A CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM INSPIRED BY THE SEFER CHESHBON HANEFESH

חֶשְׁוֹן  
CHESHVAN  
שתיקה - SILENCE

# WELCOME TO TMI



## IN A WORLD OF WAZE AND OTHER NAVIGATION APPS,

roadmaps seem outdated. Who would carry around a messy, folded, and bewildering picture of lines and colors when there is an easier, more accessible option right on your phone? Roadmaps include a myriad of crisscrossing lines most of which are not relevant for your journey or to get you to your specific destination. They have keys, pictures, and numbers that can be confusing and difficult to decipher. Roadmaps do not predict problems that may arise on the way to your destination. There are no traffic alerts and there are certainly no warnings of police cars that loom ahead. In all likelihood, most of you have probably never even held a roadmap.

The Torah is similar to a roadmap. It is a beautiful and intricate guide that marks points towards a relationship with, and emulation of, Hashem. Along the way, we are supposed to pick up values and integrate them into our lives. Inevitably, we get lost in all of the details and find it difficult to access them as we navigate toward the specific destination we are trying to reach.

Sometimes, we do not even look down at our roadmap. We wander aimlessly along the highways of our lives without paying attention to which way we should be going. We know that there is a destination and that we should be striving to get there, but we become distracted by the sights and the scenes along the way. How many people, if they were stopped in the street, would have answers to questions like: In what way are you working toward self-improvement? How are you trying to emulate Hashem today? Are you focused on taking steps for change? Are you mindful of your destination and how it should permeate every moment of your life?

Indeed, what are the steps to get us closer to Hashem? This may be too broad of a question with too many potential avenues to travel down. This is where Middah comes in. We need to work on one character trait at a time. The Torah teaches us how to do that, but sometimes it is hard to find the compass that will help us embark on the right journey.

Based on the book Cheshbon HaNefesh, we present a systematic approach to character development, a Waze to becoming a better person. We provide a method for thoughtful change and growth that we hope will yield personal and religious success. Each month we will be working on a different middah, with many different touch points to help inculcate the middah into our lives. This will include daily check-ins, weekly challenges, monthly contests, and more. Each participant will receive a journal with which to track their own personal progress. This will serve as your personal navigation app, throughout the month.

Fit for anyone at any stage in life, this program is structured to reinforce the importance and relevance of middos, while remaining a personalized journey of growth.

We all want to be better. Growth is magnified when it takes place as part of a larger community. Join a group in your own neighborhood, or participate in our global endeavor at

**[NCSY.ORG/MIDDOS](https://ncsy.org/middos)**. Let's do this together.

**For more information about TMI please contact Alexa Szegedi, [alexa@ncsy.org](mailto:alexa@ncsy.org), or Josh Fagin, [faginj@ncsy.org](mailto:faginj@ncsy.org)**

# חדש שחשון

שתיקה - SILENCE

# INTRODUCTION TO SHTIKA

## SHHH, LISTEN CLOSELY. LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS

of silence as it permeates and slices. It could be shocking and tragic or deep and profound. It could be with a best friend or with a total stranger. When we are at our best or our worst, there are simply no words. There is only the sound of silence.

If we find ourselves in a house of mourning, we talk without speaking. We watch as our greatest teachers pass us by and learn from their simplest of movements. We learn what to do and how to be. We look at nature and hear God calling us. We hear without listening. We grasp at the sounds of silence.

And sometimes we run away from the silence. We look for God in our lives only in all the noises around us. We look for the loud miraculous motions or big openings for His presence. But in the end of the day, God is not found in the noise. God is found only in the silence, Kol Dammama Daka, in the smallest and most consistent of sounds. (Kings 1 19:12)

This month we will be working on the Middah of Silence. We will work to silence the noises of the world around us. And more importantly, the world inside of us. There is so much noise in our lives. But we will learn to appreciate the still and silent noise. Noise can be so disruptive to inner peace and our relationship to God. Our goal is to return ourselves to God, who is only found in silence, by working on being silent. To be silent is to be Godly.

Chana taught us that the best way to have a personal conversation with God, the master of silence is to be silent as well. When we pray, we are not supposed to gyrate and swing our bodies uncontrollably. But we are supposed to be like Chana, standing silently, speaking in a hushed

whisper, and silencing the world around us to focus with all of her might on God and that relationship. Prayer is the worship of silence, the song of still.

But sometimes becoming this mute is too much of a switch for us when we are enthralled by the world of noise. Accordingly, we will begin with only a brief moment of silence. We will start by simply thinking before we act and speak. We will think about the times before we have to break our silence and interact with the world around us. Is there a purpose to what we are doing or saying? Will we hurt people around us by speaking or will we inspire them? Are we adding to creation or detracting? Can we use silence to make our lives louder and more impactful?

From there, like the other Middos that we work on, we will attempt to make Silence an integral part of our Weltanschauung. We will hear the ways that silence is supposed to affect every facet of our being.

# TMI:

## AT A GLANCE

**ELUL**  
**SEDER**  
ORDER

**TISHREI**  
**EMES**  
SINCERITY

**CHESHVAN**  
**SHTIKA**  
SILENCE

**KISLEV**  
**CHARITZTUS**  
DECISIVENESS

**TEVET**  
**ZERIZUS**  
INDUSTRIOUS

**SHEVET**  
**SAYLANUS**  
PATIENCE

**ADAR**  
**KAVOD**  
HONOR

**NISSAN**  
**MENUCHA**  
TRANQUILITY

**IYAR**  
**KIMUTZ**  
FRUGALITY

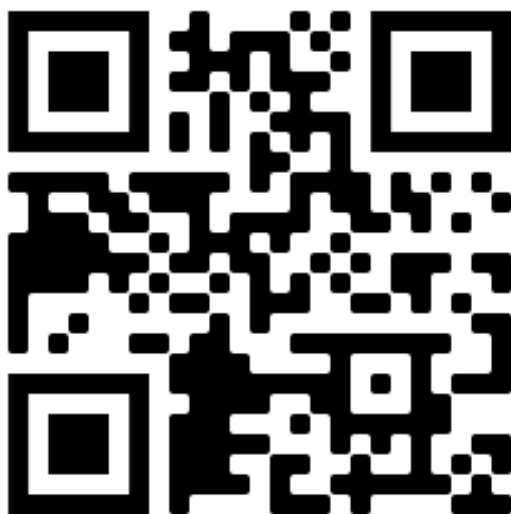
**SIVAN**  
**ANAVA**  
HUMILITY

**TAMUZ**  
**TZEDEK**  
JUSTICE

**AV**  
**NACHAS**  
GENTLENESS

# MONTHLY CHALLENGE:

Submit a picture to show how Silence is  
present in your life this month



Scan QR code to upload.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2022

**TISHREI 5783**

| SUNDAY         | MONDAY         | TUESDAY        | WEDNESDAY   |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
|                |                |                | 26 October  |
| 30 October 5   | 31 October 6   | 1 November 7   | 2 November  |
| 6 November 12  | 7 November 13  | 8 November 14  | 9 November  |
| 13 November 19 | 14 November 20 | 15 November 21 | 16 November |
| 20 November 26 | 21 November 27 | 22 November 28 | 23 November |



## WEEKLY CHALLENGES

**WEEK 1** Did I put my phone away during dinner?

**WEEK 2** Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?

**WEEK 3** Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?

**WEEK 4** Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?

| WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY       | FRIDAY         | SHABBAT                       |
|-----------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1         | 27 October 2   | 28 October 3   | 29 October<br>Noach 4         |
| 8         | 3 November 9   | 4 November 10  | 5 November<br>Lech Lecha 11   |
| 15        | 10 November 16 | 11 November 17 | 12 November<br>Vayeira 18     |
| 22        | 17 November 23 | 18 November 24 | 19 November<br>Chayei Sara 25 |
| 29        | 24 November 30 |                |                               |

## CHESHVAN 1 | OCTOBER 26

# WEDNESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?

Feel free to journal  
on these lines



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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something you are good at?

*Say* – How you feel when you excel and whether this thing is a part of who you are.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 1** There is a concept in Jewish Law known as שתיקה כהודאה - when if someone claims something against you, and you remain silent, you are really in agreement. Why would that be? What does that teach us about silence in general?

## CHESHVAN 2 | OCTOBER 27

# THURSDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something you are not good at?

*Say* – Whether this is hard for you and whether it causes you to compare yourself to others. What could you do?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 2** The רמב"ם (פ"ה"מ אבות א:יז) says that there are different categories of speech. Sometimes when we speak it is a Mitzvah, sometimes when we speak it is a sin, and other less extreme types of speech. The Rambam says that the benefit of silence is only in bad types of speech. But speaking positively is always encouraged. Silence, according to Rambam, is supposed to be an assumption until you have to speak. Then once you speak in those times when it is necessary, it becomes of the utmost importance. Why does silence live in such extremes?

## CHESHVAN 3 | OCTOBER 28

# FRIDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something that you regret in your life?

*Say* – Whether that regret is something that weighs you down and whether it should be let go of.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 3** The Gemara in Brachos (33b) says sometimes we have to be silent when we praise Hashem. That we should use the language of the prayerbook. According to the Ritva, we can never make sense of praising Hashem—we cannot fathom what it means. So we stick to the script. Sometimes silence can be a tool to show humility and admit our unawareness.

## CHESHVAN 4 | OCTOBER 29

# SHABBOS

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What did you give to someone else today and how did that make you feel?

*Say* – How we feel and how it helps us develop as a person to give to others.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 4** In Pirkei Avot (3:17) we learn that the (only) fence for wisdom is silence. Why would that be the case? What type of silence is that Mishnah referring to and what would it have to do with wisdom?

## CHESHVAN 5 | OCTOBER 30

# SUNDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What troubles, worries or unhappiness did you cause others by acting too rashly?

*Say* – How to slow things down to ensure that we think before we act.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 5** There is a general rule in Judaism called, “שומע בעונה”. This means that when you listen to someone say a Bracha, and you don’t speak, but instead listen intently, it is as if you too have said the Bracha. How could listening carefully and remaining silent be equivalent to speaking? What message is this law trying to impart?

## CHESHVAN 6 | OCTOBER 31

# MONDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something you working towards?

*Say* – How that should impact the way you act.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 6** In the Sefer Cheshbon HaNefesh, the more appropriate definition of שתיקה is contemplation. Before something transfers from the world of thought to the world of action, we need to stop and think about what we will let into the world. Why would this be the case?

## CHESHVAN 7 | NOVEMBER 1

# TUESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I put my phone away during dinner?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – about something you admire about your parent.

*Say* – How you want to express that admiration.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 7** Rav Avigdor Nevenzhal has said that the silence of Shabbos is the part of Shabbos that allows for Hashem's honor to be exposed and most clear. I understand if this would be true because of the song, or the Mitzvos, but why would it be the silence from work? How does tapping into the silence of Shabbos allow you to feel the silent touch of Hashem?



## CHESHVAN 8 | NOVEMBER 2

# WEDNESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – about something you admire about your friend.

*Say* – How to express that admiration.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 8** There is a common practice among חסידים to go to a place of solitude and practice meditation, or just being alone with the quiet and your own thoughts. To be able to properly speak to Hashem. There's an idea that one should try to find time every day to contemplate their life in silence and solitude. Why is this so healthy and important to try to do every day, both religiously and mentally?

## CHESHVAN 9 | NOVEMBER 3

# THURSDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something nice you said to someone in the last 24 hours?

*Say* – How could you be more sensitive and try to uplift the people around you?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 9** Someone who refrains from responding when they are insulted is praised by the Gemara. The strength of remaining silent in the face of insult is unparalleled—it is understandably a hard time to refrain from interjecting. According to the Chida, it is even our nature to specifically respond at a time like that. How else could we use silence in our every day to strengthen ourselves and make ourselves better people?

## CESHVAN 10 | NOVEMBER 4

# FRIDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something that upset you. Can it be let go?.

*Say* – How a sense of internal calm could be helpful for every part of life.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 10** What is the difference between being silent and being mute?

## CHESHVAN 11 | NOVEMBER 5

# SHABBOS

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something you are thankful for?

*Say* – How you chose to express it.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 11** This month is Mar Cheshvan, referred to as bitter because there are no holidays this month. It is a month of silence. What is the goal of having holidays spread out through the year? What do they serve as nowadays, but especially what did they serve as in the time of the Beis HaMikdash? What could we do during this time that could make the month of bitterness a little bit sweeter?

## CHESHVAN 12 | NOVEMBER 6

# SUNDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What makes you happy?

*Say* – How you chose to express it.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 12** It is interesting to point out that there are many different Hebrew words to describe silence.

- a. שתיקה - (See יונה א:יא-יב)
- b. ויקרא יג - (See דימה)
- c. חרש - Like a deaf person & (ד:יד אסתר)

What is the significance and differences in these words and how do they reflect different facets of silence?

## CHESHVAN 13 | NOVEMBER 7

# MONDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What makes you feel fulfilled?

*Say* – How you chose to express it.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 13** When it comes to laws of brachot, an important area to learn about is the laws of interruption. What this means is that when someone says a bracha on a food, we must be silent until we eat from that food. (It can make for some very awkward moments after the blessing of the bread at the Shabbos table.) Not even grunts are allowed at this time. Complete silence is required, and if not, it is considered an interruption. Why would this be necessary?

## CHESHVAN 14 | NOVEMBER 8

# TUESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I refrain from thinking about my response until someone finished speaking?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What stresses you out?

*Say* – How could you preemptively know that this will stress you out and try to stop it before it happens?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 14** When Eliyahu HaNavi escaped to Sinai, Hashem showed Himself to Eliyahu in many different forms, one of which included a *Kol Dmmama Daka*, a gentle whisper. The verses are clear that Hashem is not found in all the noise and the big sonorous things, but in the most quiet of whispers. Why would that be true? What message is this trying to impart on us?

## CHESHVAN 15 | NOVEMBER 9

# WEDNESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – Think of an argument from the other person's side that you had recently.

*Say* – What you regret saying?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 15** Rav Sacks notes that this story (featured in yesterday's daily dose) had to have happened in the desert, in the **מדבר**, in order to properly be able to hear the words (**מדבר**). These are deep words. What does he mean by this? (The time for Silence: To Hear God you need a Listening Soul)



## CHESHVAN 16 | NOVEMBER 10

# THURSDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – Something that you wish you could do more of but feel you do not have time for.

*Say* – Why do we spend the time on the things that we spend time on?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 16** Chana taught us that the best way to have a personal conversation with God is to be silent. Based off of her prayers to have a child, we learn many different laws of prayer. Why is prayer supposed to be silent? How can we be silent during prayers? In body? In Speech? In mind?

## CHESHVAN 17 | NOVEMBER 11

# FRIDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – of a fight that you wish you never had?  
*Say* – What did you do wrong because you weren't thinking beforehand?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 17** In the Jewish laws of mourning, there is a focus on silence and remaining silent. The mourner is not supposed to really strike up happy conversation and the consolers are not supposed to initiate any conversation with the mourner. Why would that be? What message is can be imparted?

## CHESHVAN 18 | NOVEMBER 12

# SHABBOS

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – Something that you need to talk to someone about?

*Say* – How will you go about it?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 18** The Mishna Brura (ר"ל ט סימן) speaks about some of the laws that pertain to Shema at bedtime. He explains that it is better to not speak after Shema Hamapil once you say it. Why would that be? Why would we want to remain silent and have Shema and Hamapil as the last thing on our mind before going to sleep.

## CHESHVAN 19 | NOVEMBER 13

# SUNDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – Something you need to ask God for & what the best way to ask for it is.

*Say* – How long you stop and think before you speak to God?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 19** Why can't we do anything but listen during the repetition of the shemoneh esrei prayer? We already said the prayer, and we could even be potentially doing something productive. We could be learning Torah? Why do we have to remain silent then?

# CHESHVAN 20 | NOVEMBER 14

# MONDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?
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## Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something you want to learn about more?

*Say* – What step could you make to do that?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 20** Sometimes to act on the midda of silence means to act on the midda of restraining yourself from saying something. Sometimes we have a very juicy piece of gossip. But we restrain ourselves from telling anyone and decide to be quiet instead. What is the significance of the connection between these two middot of restraint and silence? Is it merely coincidental or something more fundamental? Interestingly, our lips could be used to speak or to seal. Is that also a part of this?

## CHESHVAN 21 | NOVEMBER 15

# TUESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Was I focused on finding quiet moments today?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – About something that you are insecure about and why.

*Say* – How does insecurities affect the way we feel and the thoughts we have? How could we silence them?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 21** Why is Shabbos a day of silence? How could that help us disconnect to connect?

## CHESHVAN 22 | NOVEMBER 16

# WEDNESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – How did other people help you today?

*Say* – If you expressed gratitude.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 22** The opposite of silent contemplation is constantly running from one thing to another, never leaving a second to think about anything. In Mesilat Yeshtarim, the opening chapter writes that this exact situation is the root of all sin. Why would that be the case?

## CHESHVAN 23 | NOVEMBER 17

# THURSDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
- 
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What was something that made you think and why?

*Say* – The importance of contemplation.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 23** The Yerushalmi Talmud (Brachos 1:2) says that Reish Lakish used to say that if he were to be at Sinai, he would have required two mouths: one for Torah and one for mundane matters. However, he comes to the conclusion that one mouth is better after all. What was he thinking? Why did he change his mind? What does both parts of his statement tell us about the way we should or could be using our mouths?



- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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**Daily Meditation Practice**

*Think* – What calmness is to you.

*Say* – What can you do for yourself to make yourself  
more calm and present?

**DAILY DOSE OF TORAH**

**DAY 24** There are three realms that every Jew is tasked to make as complete as possible: our actions, our speech, and our thoughts. It's interesting to note, that our speech is really just our thoughts shared with the world. A good example of this is that when a baby talks, it usually does not have a filter because although it has speech, it has not yet been controlled by his inner thoughts. What does this teach us about the idea of thinking before speaking and how that even may be a part of the definition of what it means to be a mature person?

## CHESHVAN 25 | NOVEMBER 19

# SHABBOS

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?

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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What relationship in my life do I undervalue?

*Say* – What you could do to change it.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 25** There is a very strong connection between the midda of silence and the midda of humility. A very important example of this is when after Aaron's sons died, he was silent and accepted the punishment from Hashem. However, this is very difficult for us to understand. Why couldn't Aaron have cried and been upset? It seems that this would have been a very warranted time to speak and not remain silent?

## CHESHVAN 26 | NOVEMBER 20

# SUNDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – Where did I see God today outside a religious service?

*Say* – How it made you feel.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 26** If you would like, you could read the entire story of Meggilat Esther as a story that is supposed to teach us when we should remain quiet and when it is no longer appropriate to do so. The first three chapters of Esther, Esther is silent. She plays a very passive role in the story. However, four chapters in, Mordechai tells her, if you choose to be quiet now, it would be inappropriate and now is the time for action. How could we use this story as a paradigm to learn when to and when not to be silent?

## CHESHVAN 27 | NOVEMBER 21

# MONDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What was a time you felt religiously inspired or uplifted?

*Say* – How can you bring that into your daily life.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 27** Sometimes we see that silence comes from a source of sadness. Other times, it can be from a place of immense happiness. For example, it says in Tehillim 65:2 that you, silence is praise because we are in awe of the world around us. Is there a common denominator where it makes sense that we are silent in these two extremes?

## CHESHVAN 28 | NOVEMBER 22

# TUESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What is something that I could do today that makes me a better person than I was yesterday.

*Say* – How you will do it.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 28** There is a concept in Judaism where one chooses not to speak for a given amount of time. Why would they ever do something like that?

## CHESHVAN 29 | NOVEMBER 23

# WEDNESDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
  - ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?
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### Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What are dreams?

*Say* – Do my actions reflect who I want to be as a person?

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 29** Rav Sacks z”l explains that one of the reasons why *Naaseh Ve-Nishma*, we will do and we will listen (Shemos 24:7) was such an incredible phrase is because we were saying that we would listen and contemplate. We would listen and not just speak. We would try to understand and be humble enough to understand. According to this, silence is a focal point to all of Judaism! The only way to truly give Judaism a chance is to be silent and listen!

# CESHVAN 30 | NOVEMBER 24

# THURSDAY

- ☐ Did I find a moment of silence today?
- ☐ Did I accomplish my personal *avodah*?

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## Daily Meditation Practice

*Think* – What ways have you incorporated silence into your life?

*Say* – How you did that.

## DAILY DOSE OF TORAH

**DAY 30** It is interesting to note that we read chapters of the Torah of rebuke unlike the rest of the Torah. We read it in a hushed whisper, silently. However, in the context of the verses that declare the Leviim had to specifically curse in a loud voice, it seems funny. Why do we change the way the curses and blessings were originally given?

# ADDITIONAL READINGS





The Sound of Silence, Rav Jonathan Sacks z”l

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamibar means, “In the desert.” What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God’s word?

The sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mekhilta the Torah was given publicly, openly and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, “You have no share in it.” Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.<sup>1</sup>

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that before God gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is God’s gift to us.<sup>3</sup>

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightening and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice, literally “the sound of a slender silence.”<sup>4</sup> I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the *midbar*, the desert, you can hear the *Medaber*, the Speaker, and the *medubar*, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a documentary series, *The Long Search*, on the world's great religions.<sup>5</sup> When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the Bet Midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but *we don't talk about them.*"

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanakh often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "Then they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom."<sup>6</sup> If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two.<sup>7</sup> R. Shimon ben

Gamliel said, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence."<sup>8</sup>

The service of the priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions -- neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar<sup>9</sup> has accordingly spoken of "the silence of the sanctuary." The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise *taanit dibbur*, a "fast of words." Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called *tefillah be-lachash*, the "silent prayer." It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child. "She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard" (1 Sam. 1:13).

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard "the voice of the child" (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a* in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when

the Israelites, having already said twice, “All that God says, we will do,” then said, “All that God says, we will do and we will hear [*ve-nishma*]” (Ex. 24:7). It is the *nishma* – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is *the ability to hear the music beneath the noise*. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

The heavens declare the glory of God

The skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Day to day they pour forth speech,

Night to night they communicate knowledge.

There is no speech, there are no words,

Their voice is not heard.

Yet their music carries throughout the earth.

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai, that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of “Torah from heaven” problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the “speaking cure”, but it is in fact a *listening* cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of

hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community?  
Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, 'In memory of W B Yeats,' W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.

1 Mekhilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid.

4 1 Kings 19:9-12.

5 BBC television, first shown 1977.

6 Avot 3:13.

7 Megillah 18a.

8 Avot 1:17.

9 Israel Knohl.

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