

Yom Kippur
Introduction to Yizkor 5779
Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin
Silence is Golden and So is Speech

Every single day for the last 5 1/2 years I have read a page of Talmud, with the goal of reading the entire Talmud. It is a seven year commitment. Usually I enjoy the learning.

Recently I have come close to giving up.

Usually, tractates are edited together with a combination of halacha and aggada, of law and narrative; and I prefer the aggadic material. This format has not been the case in the most recent tractates. The halachic material has far outweighed the aggadic material so that when I finally come across some narrative, I inhale it.

One piece of Talmud that I chanced upon in August was found on page 115b of *Zevachim*, or three months into studying that challenging tractate.

There I read:

“Sometimes one is silent and is rewarded for silence; sometimes one speaks and is rewarded for speech.”

As the Talmud is comprised of pages and pages of Rabbis arguing with each other, at first I was surprised to read that the rabbis would reward someone for silence.

But then I thought about it some more.

In the Torah, we encounter many silent characters, mostly women. For example, we have no idea what was going on in Noah’s wife’s head when her husband decided to enter the construction field. We don’t know if or how she helped or if she thought her husband was nuts. She does not have a speaking role in the Torah, but she is rewarded in the midrash and in fables as the person who planted gardens and made everything beautiful.

There is even one character that the Torah specifically mentions was silent. The first verse of this morning’s Torah reading begins with the words **בְּנֵי שָׁנֵי מוֹת אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַ וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים** *And God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu.* When Aaron’s sons died for offering a strange fire, Aaron’s reaction is described as followed: **וַיִּדּוּם אַהֲרֹן** *and Aaron was silent.*

Rashi, our foremost commentator says that his silence merited him to have a Divine speech addressed to him personally (without Moses present) soon after.

Those are examples of being rewarded for silence,
When are we rewarded for speaking?

Maimonides teaches in the very beginning of Hilchot Teshuva, in the beginning of the Laws of Repentance וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְהַתְנוּדוֹת הַמְרַבֵּה וְכָל מְשַׁבַּח זֶה הָרִי זֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּמְאָרִיךְ לְהַתְנוּדוֹת הַמְרַבֵּה וְכָל מְשַׁבַּח זֶה הָרִי זֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּמְאָרִיךְ *Anyone who elaborates in confessing and goes on and on is, indeed, praiseworthy.*

For Maimonides, the words I am sorry is not enough. We need to do a little bit more. At Pesach we are definitely rewarded for speech. Maimonides teaches that it is a מִצְוָה עֲשֵׂה מִצְוָה שְׁנַעֲשִׂינוּ וְנִפְלְאוֹת בְּנִסִּים לְסִפּוֹר תּוֹרָה שָׁל תּוֹרָה שָׁל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ *a biblical positive mitzvah*, on the eve of the 15th of Nissan לְסִפּוֹר תּוֹרָה שְׁנַעֲשִׂינוּ וְנִפְלְאוֹת בְּנִסִּים לְסִפּוֹר תּוֹרָה שָׁל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ to tell all about the miracles and wonders that were performed for our forefathers in Egypt. Maimonides also says *Even great scholars are required to tell about the exodus from Egypt.* And he concludes with וְכָל הַמְאָרִיךְ בְּדִבְרֵיהֶם מְשַׁבַּח זֶה הָרִי... *Anyone who relates at length about the events that occurred deserves praise.* Our friends who stay up all night at their seders are rewarded.

“Sometimes one is silent and is rewarded for silence; sometimes one speaks and is rewarded for speech.”

How do we know **when** to be silent and when to speak?

In the beginning of chapter 3 of Kohelet we read הַשָּׁמַיִם תַּחַת לְכָל־חֶפְזִי וְעַת וְזָמַן לְכָל *A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.* By verse 7 we read: לְדַבֵּר וְעַת לְהִשְׁתִּיכֵת *There is a time for silence and a time for speaking.*

The time is set. Our task, our challenge, is to figure out when the appropriate times are.

One of those set times we are supposed to stay quiet is at a shiva house. According to custom, a comforter to a shiva house must remain perfectly silent until the mourner initiates a conversation. The purpose of shiva is to comfort mourners and allow a family to grieve. Shivas are not parties. I have been to shiva houses where I sat for ten minutes, the mourner did not acknowledge my presence, and then I left, knowing that I did my mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*, of comforting the mourner. Filling the room up, the mourner felt like she was not alone.

- As you reflect on your loved ones who are no longer with you, were you silent when you needed to be silent and did you speak when you needed to speak?

Based on conversations you had with them when they were alive; how much did you know about your loved ones who are no longer with you?

About 10 years ago, Emory psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that tap into family stories. For Duke and Fivush the content was not as important as was the process of families sharing stories about their lives.

As most of you in the room are saying Yizkor for at least one parent who lived in a different era, take a moment to think about the first three questions.

1. Do you know how your parents met?
A dance? A friend? A cousin? A neighbor?
2. Do you know where your mother grew up?
3. Do you know where your father grew up?
Local here in NY? In Europe? In Pre-State Palestine? In Canada? Somewhere else in this country?
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?
Have you ever visited there? If so, what was that trip like?
5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met?
Is there a story that makes you smile?
6. Do you know where your parents were married?
Have you seen the pictures? Do you now own the pictures? Even if that marriage ended prematurely or in divorce, remember, they were happy once.
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born?
Is this a story that your parents told you over and over again?
8. Do you know the source of your name?
Do you feel a connection to the person you are named after, if you are named after someone? Do you ever think of that person, and what that person's life was like?
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were being born?
Maybe this does not apply to you, but maybe it does. If you are saying yizkor for siblings, what were their values and accomplishments?
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like?
Your mom?
Your dad?
Your aunt?
Do you have the same bone structure as your grandfather?
Who is your voice from?
Who's body shape did you inherit?
11. Do you know which person in the family you act most like?
Where is your pensive nature and quiet intensity from? Who was studious? Or are you more like a relative who was the life of the party?

Thinking specifically of your parents for a while.

12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger?

How did that impact them?

13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?

How does that impact you?

14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?

Do your kids get caught up in the same shenanigans? How do those stories impact how you parent? Are you more careful because of these experiences?

And the final questions?

15. Do you know the national background of your family (such as English, German, Russian, etc.)?

16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?

17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young?

18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to?

19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to?

The main criterion to these 20 questions was that the answers could only have been learned through conversations. Except for rare occasions, children can't learn these answers on their own. Did you speak enough with the people you are saying Yizkor for today, to know most of the answers to these questions?

In their study, Duke and Fivush found that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.

Think about all the answers you knew and the way you live your life. Would you agree with their findings?

The psychologists also found that every family has a unifying narrative, and this narrative has a major impact on family life.

Some families have an ascending family narrative, which goes something like: "Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you. ..."

A second family narrative is the descending narrative. It might sound like this: "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything."

The third narrative is the oscillating family narrative. This is when your story sounds like this: We've had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.

To which of these three narratives can you relate? It actually does not matter. What does matter is that you own your family history. Know your family story.

As Duke and Fivush share, it is not the *content* of what is known that is the critical factor, but the *process* by which these things came to be known. How does one learn their family story?

One of the authors, Marshall P. Duke wrote: Some people have to talk and some have to listen.

Sounds very similar to the Talmud.

"Sometimes one is silent and is rewarded for silence; sometimes one speaks and is rewarded for speech."

If you had opportunities when you were younger to listen to your family narratives, then you were rewarded. With what? With knowing your story.

And now, you are the one that needs to speak. You need to tell your story and as much as you know about your parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, great aunts and great uncles to others. And when you are the one who speaks--you will be rewarded.

The other night, my daughter could not fall asleep. She said, "Ima, tell me a story." I had been reviewing Duke and Fivush's research, so I asked her if she wanted to hear about how Ima and Abba met. I kid you not--the rapt attention she paid to this story, my story, our family narrative far surpassed any book with Fancy Nancy, Elmo, or Gerald and Piggy. And now she knows this part of her family history.

A few years back, Bruce Feiler stated: the single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.

If you don't do it already, start telling your story. Make sure your spouses, children or siblings can answer Fivush and Duke's questions about you. If you don't have any of those relatives, write them down in a journal so your memory too, one day, when you reach 120, will be for a blessing.

When the Talmud says “Sometimes one is silent and is rewarded for silence; sometimes one speaks and is rewarded for speech.” we can learn that we need to listen to other people’s stories, and we need to tell our own stories as well. *Kol ha-marbeh harei zeh meshubach*. The more time we devote to telling our stories, the greater is the praise.

But now,
Take a moment to recall memories you had with your loved ones who are no longer here.

We are on page 290.