

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ARGUMENTS FROM AND FOR SILENCE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Yalkut Shim'oni Behaalotkha 737, Mishlei 946:

Our teachers said:

Two rhetoricians were standing before Adriannus Caesar.

One of them argued for the superiority of speech, and the other for the superiority of silence.

The first said: Master, there is nothing better than speech. Were it not for speech, [how would kings be coronated, and the dead be treated graciously], and brides praised, and commerce be transacted, and ships go out to sea?

Adriannus said to the one who advocated silence: What is your argument for silence?

He began to speak, when his colleague arose and struck him on the mouth.

Caesar said to him: Why did you strike him?

He said: Master, I used speech to argue for speech, but he is using my technique to argue for his position.

Yalkut Shim'oni reads this story as a victory for speech over silence. The story is introduced by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's statement that "All my life I have been raised among the Sages, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence," but followed with the assertion that a variety of verses in Proverbs demonstrate that only restraint from harmful speech is praiseworthy.

Perhaps Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel meant this as well. Regardless, he is hoist by his own petard; to convey the value of silence, he is compelled to speak, and therefore he must concede that at least sometimes speech is preferable to silence.

Under the rules of rabbinic logic, however, this concession does not mean that he is defeated. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel might agree that speech is sometimes necessary *bediavad*, in response to circumstances beyond one's control, but that silence is best *lekbatchilah*, when one has an unconstrained choice.

The story's argument appears to be that speech is necessary for education and persuasion, and so silence is sterile. The irony that silence can only be spread through speech appears conclusive.

But there is a second irony as well. The speaker does not triumph through language, but through force; and he does not make a better argument, but rather silences his opponent. A less naive look at the story therefore suggests that

- 1) rhetorical contest is not a reliable mode for determining truth, and
- 2) by making rhetorical contest the mode of investigation, Adrianus predetermined the outcome, but
- 3) even in that rigged game, the argument for silence would succeed if anyone would allow it to be heard.

Moving all the way from naiveté to cynicism, we can note that in the version found in *Yalkut Shimoni*, the argument for speech begins by noting its necessity for the coronation of kings; in other words its political utility. Speech is a necessary accoutrement of power. The second argument for speech is the necessity of eulogies, which we might reasonably understand as playing to Adrianus's concern for how he will be treated by history, or more broadly, as playing to the concerns of all those whose deeds do not speak for themselves. This point is made clearly when we move to the third case, praising the bride, where the purpose of speech is to overcome objectivity through suggestion (Beit Hillel) or disproportion (Beit Shammai). In other words, speech is more powerful than silence. But we need not agree with Thrasymachus that power equals virtue, and so silence may yet be better than speech.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

Yalkut Shimoni introduces Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel in the context of *Bamidbar* 12:1:

Miryam (and Aharon) spoke about Mosheh regarding the Cushite woman (ishah) whom he had taken; for an ishah Cushite he had taken.

The apparent conclusion is that speech about someone else should always be avoided; Miryam and Aharon sinned because they spoke about Mosheh, regardless of the intent or content of their speech. But this cannot be sustained as an absolute, brides and kings are people, too. So Miryam and Aharon must have said something negative about someone. What did they say, and about whom, and why?

To some extent the answer to these questions depends on the identity of the Cushite woman. At least some members of *Chazal* likely had a tradition, cited later by Rashbam from *The Chronicles of Mosheh*, in which Mosheh conquered Ethiopia while Prince of Egypt, or while on the run, and married an Ethiopian princess in the course of that conquest. On that understanding, Miryam and Aharon may well have objected to his continued relationship with that princess after the giving of the Torah. Rashbam chalks this all up to their misunderstanding that the marriage was consummated, when in fact it had been purely political. To my mind this is another instance in which “*pesha?*” takes a mallet to a three-dimensional Biblical narrative until it is completely flattened.

But the mainstream position in *Chazal* is that “Cushite” refers to and compliments Tziporah, and its repetition in the verse indicates that she was praiseworthy in some extraordinary fashion; and that Miryam and Aharon were objecting to Mosheh’s abstention from conjugal relations with this exemplary woman. In other words, they were praising a bride. So why did G-d object?

My tentative suggestion is that a careful reading indicates that so long as Miryam and Aharon confined themselves to speaking about Tziporah, G-d made no objection. He objects when they shift to speculating that Mosheh’s actions were motivated by arrogance, by the belief that speaking to G-d had made him too holy for physical intimacy:

“They said: Is it true that Hashem spoke only to Mosheh? He spoke also to us!” At that point the Torah notes that Mosheh was the most humble of men, and G-d suddenly calls to all three of them.

But here as well, the message of the story is at the very least ambivalent. In response to Miryam and Aharon’s complaint that G-d has spoken to them as well, G-d speaks to the three of them simultaneously, and then, with all three present, calls to only Miryam and Aharon. True, he tells them that His relationship with Mosheh is unique, and wonders how they were not too afraid to speak about “My servant, Mosheh.” But the context seems to be one of affirmation. I think a first-time reader would properly be stunned when the narrator follows this by saying that “G-d was enraged at them,” and when Miryam is punished with *Tzoraat*.

Perhaps there is another gap in the story. Miryam and Aharon spoke about Mosheh to each other, but the narrator tells us that “G-d heard.” G-d then asks Miryam and Aharon a question: Why were you not afraid? He becomes enraged only when they have no response.

In other words: Speech about others is acceptable only when it has a constructive purpose. If Miryam and Aharon had intended to go to Mosheh and correct his behavior, they would have been praiseworthy. Their motivations become suspect when they introduce their own egos into the equation—“He spoke to us as well”—and they are found guilty when they cannot speak in their own defense. Silence was not their best strategy, and indeed, Miryam is healed only when Aharon speaks to Mosheh on her behalf, and Mosheh in turn speaks to G-d.

But perhaps the deepest underlying truth remains that speech was only necessary in the first place because of ego and power issues. Had there been no underlying jealousy, Miryam and Aharon would have felt no need to speak about Mosheh; in a relationship of perfect understanding, actions and silence are clearer than words. And yet, like Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, I can convey this idea only through words. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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