

## **Silence For Renewal: The Power of Silence In the Classroom**

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*Jewish Educational Leadership, Winter 2007*

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*“It is only with the heart we can see. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”*

*~Antoine de St. Exupery*

What does silence in the classroom look like? What are the benefits? Can teachers use silence to increase spirituality in the classroom? How can silence be used for renewal? And most importantly why?

This paper will address these very rich and intriguing questions. Through a philosophical examination of silence as well as through self-reflective exercises, it is hoped that this will speak directly to the reader’s heart and spirit. However, questions can sometimes be more profound than any proposed answers. How can a topic that needs to be experienced be discussed in words? How can you give verbal expression to a non-verbal experience? What follows is a humble approach to address the power of silence, in general, and in the classroom in particular.

The gifts of silence touch the cognitive, psychological, physiological and spiritual dimensions of our lives. But, silence and stillness are very foreign to our culture. We live in a world that is so fast paced that when we slow down, we almost metaphorically topple over. What a true sign of imbalance! What would it be like if our lives weren’t so frenetic and we took time out of our busy days to just slow down? What would the classroom look like with periods of silence?

Sometimes, we just need to stop before we can continue. Stop and listen to the silence. At first, the silence can be deafening. If we take the passive action, if you will, of sitting quietly, the chatter in our brain can slow down, and if we do it long enough we might even be able to watch it go away.

If you look at a muddy pond, and you stare long enough, the mud will settle on the bottom of the pond and the water will appear clear. It is the same with our thoughts. If we can find the courage to sit quietly with gently closed eyes, giving ourselves the permission to leave the outer world and enter our inner one, our thoughts will settle and our minds will become clear. It is in this stillness and solitude where the potential harmony of the heart and mind reside.

Why is it that we have to give ourselves permission to be silent? It is as if our culture tells us that if we aren’t making noise, verbally or otherwise, we are not being productive, the yardstick for success. It is through listening to the silence that resides deep within the heart that we can hear and find our own voice, our true essence.

In my yoga-inspired work with children, it has become very clear to me that we are born with the desire deep in our hearts to be heard. In order for that to occur, we need to first find our inner voice, our true essence, then we need to know that our voice will be listened to with complete and honest open hearted respect.

In Tanach, there are many references to the heart. The one that holds a special significance for me is in *Parshat Chaya Sarah*, 24: 45, when *Eliezer*, *Avraham's* faithful servant, is recounting his first meeting with *Rivka*, *Yitchak's* future bride. He says that he had not yet finished meditating (translation from The Stone Chumash) when he saw her. In Hebrew the wording is "*ledabar el libi*" literally translated as, "to speak to my heart". It doesn't say he was speaking to himself, but to his heart. Speaking or more appropriately, listening to what our heart is telling us, is crucial in our daily lives. Because, if we can truly sit quietly and listen, there is so much to hear.

The ancient art and science of yoga offers us a system of using the breath, *nesheemah*, in Hebrew, to help us find stillness and silence. The breath is the vehicle into the inner world. It is the bridge between the body and the mind, the gateway to the soul. It is through the breath that we enter our inner world, and in turn have the opportunity to quiet our thoughts so we can listen to our heart.

In Hebrew *nesheemah*, (breath), and *neshamah*, (soul), have the same *shoresh*, (root). It says in *Beraishet: 2: 7*, "And Hashem G-d formed the man of dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul (neshemah) of life, and man became a living being." Rabbi Abraham Twerski, MD, in his book *Twerski on Spirituality* says "Judaism teaches that spiritual drives are an expression of the neshamah (soul). . . .and the Zohar points out that when one exhales, he exhales something from within himself. Thus, G-d breathing a breath of life into man means that He put something of Himself into man, and the human spirit is therefore a 'part', as it were, of G-d Himself." So this means that our soul is the breath of Hashem. What does that mean about our own breath? An example of a question being more profound than any proposed answer.

*(Turn to exercises on page, 4 and do Exercise 1: The Journey Inward)*

What happens when we first sit in stillness? The "monkey chatter" begins in the brain. As my 6 year old friend Matan says, "It is hard for me. First, I get one thought, then another thought, then another thought and then another thought and I just don't know which one to listen to." We are all so busy rushing about doing the next thing that when we try to stop for a moment and sit in stillness, our thoughts continue to race. We find it very difficult to find this inner sense of quiet. We want to be anywhere but here, right where we are. All of a sudden, we forgot to turn off the oven, or we are overcome with the irresistible urge to mow the lawn, something we have never done before, or even considered doing before.

This type of silence is more a quietness of the heart, rather than the absence of sound. There is a stillness that resides deep in the heart and The Lubavitcher Rebbe called it "a Quiet Heart." He said, "The human heart is beautiful. The human heart can know secrets deeper than any mind could know. The mind cannot contain G-d, but deep inside the heart there is a place that can. . . .Let the heart be quiet and hear out the mind. In that quiet listening, she will discover her true beauty and her deepest secrets will awaken."

To enter this quietness means to relax into it, no matter what the distractions are around you. To approach it with "effortless effort", as the world renowned yoga instructor Baron

Baptiste says. It is a journey into the quiet to find that place of solitude and balance. It is the place where it is clear that G-d is closer to us than our own breath.

There is a transformative power, a renewal that occurs after periods of focused silence. As with the muddy pond, when the mud settles and the water is clear, so too after periods of silence, the thoughts settle and the mind can become clear. Quiet reflection can be very self-nurturing and is accessible to us at any time. This might sound very New Age, but as we see with Eliezer, this practice is quite Old Age.

Silence in the classroom has to start with the teacher. It is only when the teacher has had her own self-reflective experience with silence, that she can in turn facilitate experiences of silence and stillness for her students. The teacher's role of providing a calming presence in a safe nurturing environment can be supported by offering moments of silence in the classroom.

*(Do Exercise 2: Silence at the Desk, on page 5)*

After doing this exercise with a group of 10 year olds, we discussed why we place our hands on our hearts to listen in. One girl said, "Because we relax from our hearts." What would happen in a classroom of noisy and loud students if the teacher offered the permission to be silent? To relax from their hearts? What would it look like if she guided her students inward? Inviting them to gently close their eyes, to slowly drop inside and just listen. Listen to the sounds in the room. Listen to their own heartbeats. Listen to silence.

When the teacher understands the power of silence, because of her own personal experience with it, she can create a safe environment where silence is a welcomed break from the frenetic and hectic school day. If the teacher can find her way into her own heart, she can be present to help her students do the same and help them find their own way inward. Isn't this the essence of spirituality, finding your way into your own heart, and discovering the place inside us where G-d resides?

On the issue of spirituality, Tzvi Freeman in his book, Be Within, Stay Above, Meditations from the Wisdom of the Rebbe, interpreted the Lubavitcher Rebbe's ideas in the following way. "X is an enlightened being. He spends his life in the wilderness far from humanity, focusing his mind on the higher realms. Harriet Goldberg is a schoolteacher. She spends her life cultivating small minds, hoping to give them a sense of wonder for the world they live in. Who is closer to G-d? If the world came from G-d as light comes from the sun, spontaneously, but with no real interest, then X is closer. If G-d created a world deliberately, because that is what He desires and cares for, then Harriet is closer."

*(Do Exercise 3: Magic Carpet Ride, on page 5)*

Psychiatrist Anthony Storr in his study, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, found that "learning, thinking, innovation and maintaining contact with one's own inner world are all facilitated by solitude." Richard Mahler in his brilliant book Stillness refers to silence and solitude as "creative allies" that we can "enlist in a personal campaign to create simpler, more balanced, less frenetic lives". He says if we slow down, and "help the

distracting exterior clamor to subside” we will be able to really see, hear and even feel what is going on inside us, within our hearts. Mahler says, “getting away from it all helps us get close to it all. We are likely to be more at peace with ourselves when we occasionally stop to sit quietly and attentively.” Mahler calls this, “the undefined interior space.”

*(Do Exercise 4: Rainbow Journey, on page 6)*

After 9 year old Devorah went on a Rainbow Journey she said, “ I am going to try this at night to help me fall asleep. I will take myself to the rainbow. I will look at all the colors, but I won’t have thoughts about the journey and the colors, I will just have the feelings that I get from the colors.” Devorah and I are working on her problems with anxiety during the day, and we are looking for ways to help her sleep better at night. From her comment, you can see that she understands how the silence of her rainbow journey can give her the opportunity to tune in to her feelings and help her relax.

While being silent, teachers have the ability to offer a certain presence, which can be heard very loudly and clearly if the students can only attune to it. Through silence, an awakened deeper awareness can develop. It is a place beyond words. It represents recognition of the depth in us that needs no words, the place that represents spirituality.

We have seen that there are many benefits in using silence in the classroom and they all speak right to the heart. It is a simple tool, yet is very challenging. Used for self-reflection and awareness, silence offers an opportunity to develop a strong understanding of self. As each self-aware student comes together with other self-aware students, a sense of community develops. This coming together of the hearts creates an experience for spiritual awakening and offers an opportunity for deep and profound renewal. When we allow ourselves to go into our own inner world, we find who we really are.

Give yourself the gift of silence and listen to who you really are. But remember, it is only when the mud settles in the pond that the water is clear. Who and what we experience after the stillness and silence is the true guide.

### Exercises:

About the exercises:

The following exercises promote deep relaxation and are best done when you can be guided by someone else. It is almost impossible to do the exercises by yourself, trying to read as you have the experience. A few ways to try them are: 1. find a partner and take turns reading as the other experiences. 2. record your voice as you read it, and then play it back as you experience the exercise. Whichever way you choose, pause where you see the ellipses (three or four dots ....) then continue.

These exercises offer a very powerful way to get in touch with your inner world. They can take just a few minutes, not less than two, or this can be the beginning of a much deeper and longer experience in guided imagery. Notice how you feel when you finish the exercise. You might want to write down or draw a picture of what you are

experiencing. What are your thoughts? What are your feelings? Are you more relaxed? More anxious? Frustrated? Do you feel exhilarated? Sad? Inspired? Check in with what is going on for you right now. As you honestly scan your thoughts and feelings, imagine being with others right now. Who are you to them right now? If you are a teacher who is the teacher who is showing up? Do you recognize that teacher? Has your perspective changed at all? Listen carefully to what comes up for you. That is the true guide!

### Exercise 1: The Journey Inward

*Sit in a comfortable position on the floor, cross legged on whatever feels right, with a straight spine. Your hands resting on your knees. Gently lower your gaze taking in as much as you can on the floor. See the colors, textures, patterns. See all that you can see....When you are ready, invite your eyes to gently close. With your eyes closed, listen to the sounds around you. What do you hear? ..... Allow yourself the chance to fully listen, taking in as much as you can.... When you feel like you want to open your eyes, resist the urge, and bring your awareness to your breath. Watch how you are breathing, without judging it. It isn't right or wrong, it just is. Continue to watch your breath and when it feels right deepen your breath filling up your belly on the inhale and watching your belly fall on the exhale. Allow yourself to watch your breath for a few more rounds just like this..... Take a few deep breaths, inhaling through your nose, exhaling through your nose....., Keeping your gaze down, gently open your eyes and take in the floor again. Does it look different this time? What do you see? Focus on the colors, textures, patterns, all that you see. Slowly allow the light of the room to fill you, and, as you are ready, invite the outside world into your world.*

### Exercise2: Silence at the Desk

*Find a comfortable position at your desk, with back straight and feet firmly planted on the ground. Gently rest your hands on your knees or on top of your desk, palms down. Slowly invite your eyes to close and slowly drop inside. Listen to the sounds in the room.....Listen to the sounds outside the room..... Maybe even listen to the sound of your own heartbeat..... Keeping your eyes gently closed, bring your right palm up and place it on your heart, then place your left palm on top of your right and gently listen. Can you feel your heart beating? Can you hear it talking? What is it saying? Listen to the silence.*

### Exercise 3: Magic Carpet Ride

*Lying down on the floor, either on a towel, blanket or preferably on a yoga mat, find a way to comfortably release into the ground. When you are comfortable begin this journey. Here comes a magic carpet of clouds to swoosh you up into the sky. If you don't want to go up, just stay just where you are. Allow the carpet of clouds to take you higher and higher up in the sky. As you float, look around and see what you can see. What colors do you see? What sounds do you hear? Where is the carpet taking you?*

*Allow it to take you to a special place just for you. It can be somewhere you've been before or a brand new place. It doesn't matter where it is as long as you feel good when you are there.....Look around.....where are you? What do you see? Are you alone or do you have company? What colors do you see? What is the weather like? What are you wearing? What do you hear? What do you smell? Take a deep breath in and try to smell the fragrances in your special place. If your mind starts to take you somewhere else, just take a deep breath in to bring you back. Stay in this special place for a few more moments, then slowly start your journey back, bringing with you the memories of being in a special place. Remembering that this special place is always there for you, and you can go there any time you need to. When you arrive back on the floor, on your mat, begin to bring your awareness into your body. Take a deep breath in and as you exhale, begin to wiggle your fingers and toes. Slowly bring your knees up to your chest and give yourself a nice delicious hug, hugging in all the sensations of being in a special place. Slowly roll onto your right side, and hug your knees in again taking a deep breath. Gently push yourself up into a comfortable seated position and sit for a few more moments with your eyes closed. Allow your self to feel whatever sensations or feelings are coming up.*

#### Exercise 4: Rainbow Journey

*Lying down on the floor, either on a towel, blanket or preferably on a yoga mat, find a way to comfortably release into the ground. When you are comfortable begin this journey. Here comes a magic carpet of clouds to swoosh you up into the sky. If you don't want to go up, just stay just where you are. Allow the carpet of clouds to take you higher and higher up in the sky..... Look above you...There is a beautiful rainbow.....Look at all the colors as you take a deep inhale through your nose and out through your nose.....See all the colors in the rainbow beginning with red...inhale red into your body, then exhale...filling your entire body with red...now see orange...inhale orange...then exhale orange.....next, see yellow...inhaling yellow....exhaling yellow.....see green filling up your body as you inhale and exhale green....inhale blue...exhale blue...inhale purple....exhale purple.....Pay attention to how the colors make you feel.....If you'd like, stay with one color noticing why you chose that color....What are you feeling?....stay with your rainbow for a few more breaths....start your journey back, bringing with you the feelings and sensations that you had while you were on your rainbow journey.... Remember how each color made you feel..... When you arrive back on the floor, on your mat, begin to bring your awareness into your body. Take a deep breath in and as you exhale, begin to wiggle your fingers and toes. Slowly bring your knees up to your chest and give yourself a nice delicious hug, hugging in all the sensations of being in a special place. Slowly roll onto your right side, and hug your knees in again taking a deep breath. Gently push yourself up into a comfortable seated position and sit for a few more moments with your eyes closed. Allow yourself to feel whatever sensations or feelings are coming up.*