

The Pardes Center for Jewish Educators presents

An Interactive **PARSHA EXPERIENCE**



Parsha: Yitro

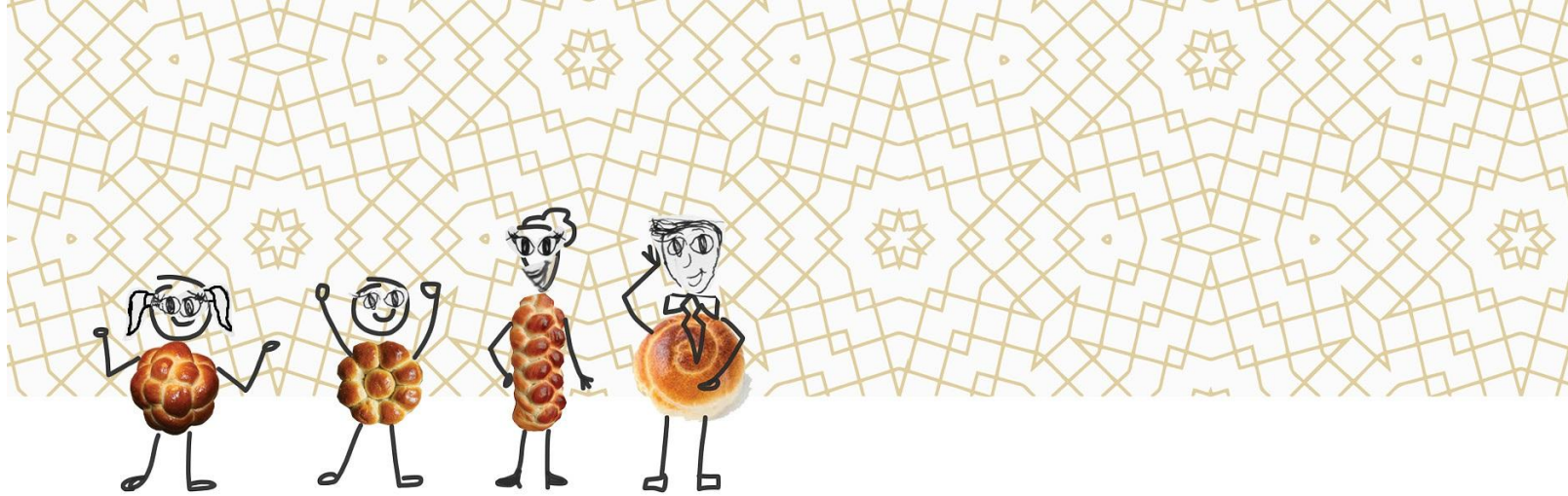
Title: The Sound of Silence

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The Parsha at First Glance

Spotlight on the Parsha:

In last week's parsha, the Jews had one of the most awesome redemptions ever when they left Pharaoh and Mitzrayim (Egypt) - from the intensity of witnessing ten plagues to the excitement of crossing the Red Sea. Only three months later,



in our parsha, the Jews are about to have a hair-raising, spine-chilling, soul-elevating experience that one can barely imagine.

Receiving the ten commandments (or 'utterances') was one of the most theatrical and awesome moments in Jewish history: the Jewish people experienced thunder and lightning, next to a smoking Mount Sinai enveloped in a thick cloud, with the sound of the shofar ringing in their ears. The ultimate 4d experience!

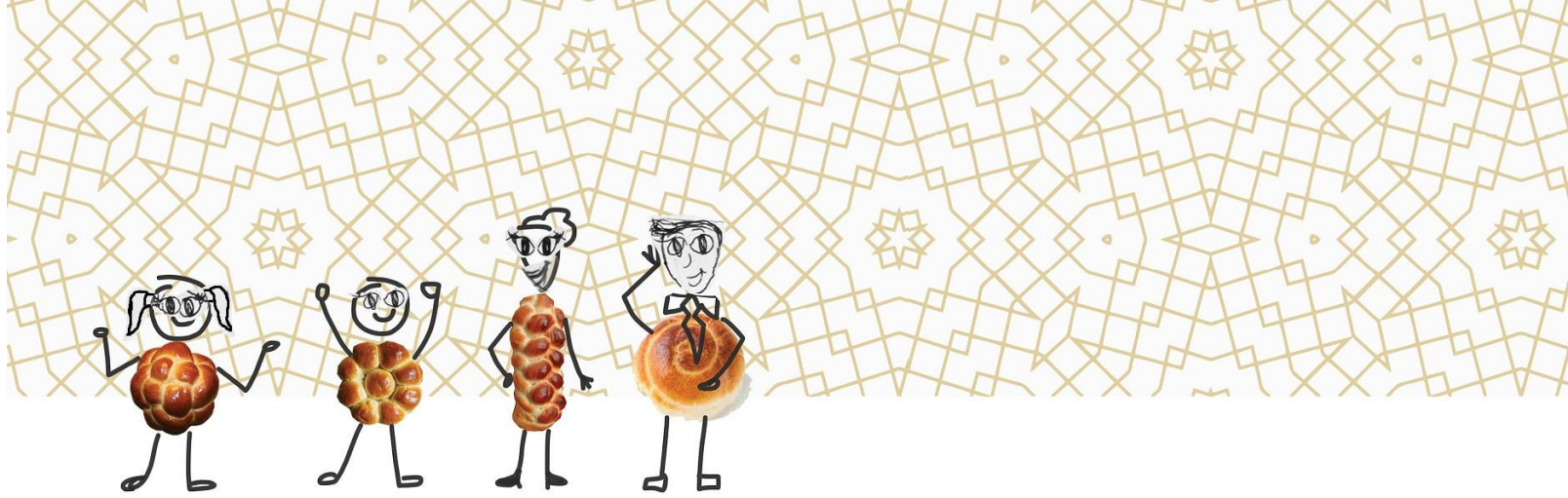
The commentators pick up on this and say that it was so amazing that God's voice could be heard all over the world, that God's voice actually spoke 70 languages so that everyone could understand, and that the impact of God's voice pushed the Jewish people back 12 miles after which the angels had to push them back around Sinai.

Amidst all the noise, and all the commotion, it is strange that one midrash focuses on silence.

Zooming In:

When getting ready to hear God speak to the Jewish nation one would expect the noise and theatrics mentioned in the Torah. Yet amidst all the background noise, one midrash (Exodus Rabbah 29:9) prefers a quieter, subtler approach:

Said Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird screeched, no fowl flew, no ox mooed, none of the ophanim (angels) flapped a wing, nor did the seraphim (burning celestial beings) chant "Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh (Holy, Holy, Holy)!" The sea did not roar, and none of the creatures uttered a sound. Throughout the entire world, there was only a deafening silence as the Divine Voice went forth speaking: Anochi Adonai Elohecha (I am the Lord your God)."



So why was there absolute silence when God spoke? Maybe you have seen this happen in everyday life. When the head of school enters the room, does everyone become quiet? Or when the rabbi gets up to speak in your synagogue, does the room become quiet?

Another piece we can add to the puzzle is that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, which is in the desert, a place known for its barrenness and quiet. It may be no coincidence that our ancient ancestors were shepherds and lived in the desert and could hear God speak. It could be that we need to have quiet space and quiet time in order to hear God.

As a side note: desert in Hebrew is called a *midbar*, but that word, with just a few vowel changes, can also mean 'one who speaks.' So the desert/*midbar* is a place of silence where you can hear the 'One who Speaks,' i.e., God.

Questions for Consideration:

- What do you think happened first: the creatures and natural world were quiet and then God spoke, or because God spoke everything else was quiet?
- It may make sense that all the animals were quiet, but how do you understand that the seas did not make any noise? What does that add?
- What do you think the midrash is trying to tell us by saying that everything was quiet?



The Parsha Through Another Lens

Acting Out - Silence and Listening:

Let's do an experiment. Everyone around the table will be silent for a minute (or 20 seconds if you have little kids) and focus on what noises you hear. Then discuss:

- What noises did you hear?
- Was it hard for you to be quiet?
- Did you feel comfortable or uncomfortable in the silence?
- When do you think you are most likely to hear the Creator - when there is noise, or when there is quiet?

Make a commitment every Shabbat to have a 'moment of silence': one minute to think, focus, and maybe, hear the voice of God.

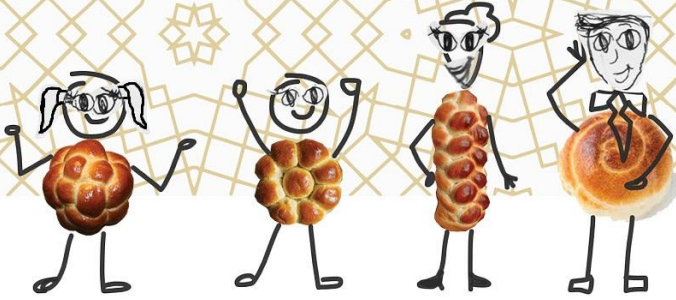
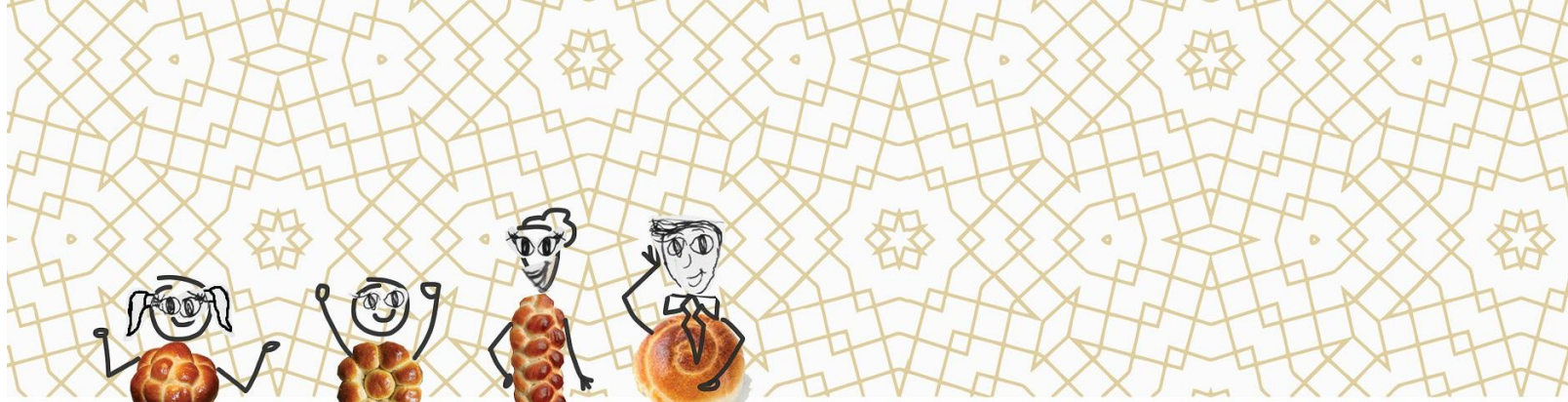
Text Study:

There was a prophet called Eliyahu (Elijah) who also heard God speak. Study the passage below and discuss the questions that follow:

I Kings 19:11-12

11. "Come out," He called [to Eliyahu], "and stand on the mountain before God." And God passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of God; but God was not in the wind. After the wind — an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake.

12. After the earthquake — fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire — a soft murmuring sound.



- In what ways is this similar to the giving of the Torah at Sinai?
- Why in both cases are there 'theatrics' beforehand? What does it add to the experience?
- Why, in these examples, do you think God chooses to communicate with humans in quietness?
- In your own lives have you heard God speak or reach out to you?
- How would you imagine God sounding if God spoke with you?

Shabbat Shalom!