THE SOUND OF SILENCE
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I didn't almost write a sermon this morning.

Five days after Yom Kippur, five days after the massacre in Las Vegas, just weeks after Rita, Harvey, Irma, Mexico City, Edmonton. The hate filled rallies of Charlottesville and Sweden are sill echoing across the Jewish world; I am speechless. I have no words, no sermons left in me to try and contextualize the events of these past weeks and the time we find ourselves in, in the Jewish Calendar.

And you, my resolute and dedicated congregation, you who show up here on a Thursday morning, when the sun is shining before the rain starts falling for months on end, you have been inundated by words, from Rabbis, politicians, commentators and well-meaning friends in emails and social media. I have nothing left to say and you have no room left to hear.

The Talmud instructs "*Da l'fnay me attah omed* / know before whom you stand" (B'rachot 28b) Its an instruction to the individual at prayer that they should consider carefully the words they speak when they petition God.

Artfully many synagogues, place this verse above the Aron HaKodesh the Holy Ark as a reminder to the congregation, "Don't waste your words!". But the Rabbi, Cantor stands in a unique position both before the holy ark and before the holy congregation. For the prayer leader the words of warning are double edged. I stand before God and I also stand before you, my words must not appear as empty vessels to either group.

So what do you say when you have nothing left to say, when there are no more words to unpack the pile of hatred and suffering that has been the summer of 2017 and continues to rain down upon us like falling leaves of autumn?

Simon and Garfunkel sang of 'The Sound of Silence' – its an oxymoronic phrase, silence has no sound, that's why its called silence, and yet at times nothing screams louder in our mind than quiet solitude.

There was a rebellious part of me that wanted to stop this sermon there. Just leave the silence hanging in the air, let you write the sermon in your own mind. It would be a brilliant rhetorical trick, but those instant ice packs they have in first aid kits, you can only use it once and the relief, if any it would bring to our aching souls would be fleeting at best.

Indeed, I went back to the source, to the haunting words of Rabbis Simon and Garfunkel. They are not singing for more silence in the face of human devastation, but less.

In the naked light, I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared, Disturb the sound of silence

"Fools" said I "You do not know, silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you"
But my words like silent raindrops fell
And echoed, In the wells of silence

And so while I am tired of speaking and you are tired of hearing; each of, knowing that we stand before each other and we stand before God, who looks out at us with hands upraised and say, “Nu?, what are you going to do?”

Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. If you are not hearing-impaired, hearing simply happens. Listening, however, is something you consciously choose to do. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes meaning from words and sentences.

Each of us has an obligation to listen, to listen to the pain that is unspooling around us, learn from it and then act with sacred purpose.

These past weeks we have witnessed once again, in sight and sound the fragility of life, the violence of both man and nature alongside the deep care and compassion of humanity. Silence will not solve these human and societal problems; indeed, silence may have created them. What is required then are words that spur us to action.

17th-century rabbi, Leon Modena taught his students to imagine standing on a shore and watching a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore. Now if you were confused about weights and motion, you might think that he was really pulling the shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: in prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God. Prayer doesn’t move God, prayer moves you.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “We offer prayers to elevate ourselves along with the one who has suffered. If our prayers are truly with them, we are committing ourselves to work toward a world in which such tragedies—whether mass shootings or diseases or natural disasters—can be mitigated or ended. A prayer changes the world through changing us. It moves us to action. Praying pulls us closer to God and therefore toward what might be—what should be.”

Seen in this light, a prayer is a sturdy rope of solidarity thrown to the sufferer, one that acknowledges that we are in this together, and they are hurting because we—all of us—have not yet done enough to help. To pray is to pull on that rope and draw us nearer to action.

In a free society when something terrible occurs, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, few are guilty, but all are responsible. A prayer offered with such consciousness says: "I am with you. I might have done more. Your pain is not separate from my deeds and my life. I pray that you will have comfort, and that I, along with others who know of your suffering, will work to make a world in which such pain is banished.

We did cause the hurricanes, or earthquakes, though maybe our abuse of the environment made them worse. We didn't sow the seeds of hate that cause anti-semitism and racism to lurk beneath the surface and rise above the roiling waters more and more, though maybe in thinking it was gone we allowed it to regenerate. We who in Canada take pride in our sensible and responsible gun laws look over the border and shake our heads with disbelief, but have we been a good neighbor, the one who gives the tochecha the constructive warning that leads our fellow away from the harm they are doing to themselves? In the words of American Civil Rights hero John Lewis, we are called upon to be a light unto the nations, not a taillight but a headlight, leading the way.

We didn't cause any of those horrible things, at least not directly, but we cannot be silent in the face of them. We must pull on the rope, bringing ourselves closer to God, to the Godliness of action.

So words matter, words of prayer, words of sermons, words of resistance to the forces of of man and nature that blow against the fragile construct of our society.

It is difficult to enter the holiday of Sukkot with the joy that it demands. Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) is called "Zeman Simchateynu" - the Season of our Joy. How can one find joy amidst all the sorrow? How can one be positive and optimistic during such dark times?

Perhaps we can find the answer in the structure of the Sukkah which represented the temporary dwellings of our ancestors following the exodus from Egypt. Just as they were exposed to the elements - rain, wind, cold and heat - during this festive week, we also expose ourselves to the elements. The Sukkah has a temporary and minimal roof which allows rainwater to get through and ruin even the most delicious feast. The rabbis were most pragmatic when the ruled that in the case of a driving rain, one may simply recite the Kiddush and then go into one's home to eat.

This image also invokes the plight of people without roofs, and without shelter, from storms, insults or more horrifically bullets raining down from the 32nd floor.

While we have the luxury to enter our permanent abodes to eat, sleep, shower and enjoy radiant heated floors if our Sukkah becomes uninhabitable, they have no such option. That is

because their permanent structures, the fortress against the elements that we build out of stone and out of family and friendships have been torn down, turned into unsafe, temporary structures. And unlike our observance which lasts only a week, the victims of hurricanes and the massacre in Las Vegas, unfortunately, they face long term and life threatening challenges.

I am reminded that during Sukkot, we all seek shelter in God's "Sukkat Shalom" - God's "shelter of peace." Life can be dangerous and precarious, and sometimes, it is only through the grace of God that we are spared suffering and death.

While this new Jewish year has not started off positively, I take comfort in knowing that the year is still young. Let us all hope that as 5778 progresses, that more of God's creatures will benefit from God protection and love. I also pray that we will be instruments of God's will, of Godliness and show our kindness and compassion to all of those who have been negatively impacted by recent disasters, both natural and man-made.

Moadim L'Simcha - May the festivals bring us all nothing but joy. I think we're due, don't you?