

## *A Still Small Voice - and how Elijah learned to listen*

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In Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, the epic oratorio of Elijah standing at Mount Carmel, challenging the prophets of Baal, comes to its peak with the choir, orchestra and soloist proclaiming:

*"Call Him louder"*

The prophet Elijah has just had a dramatic showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel where he challenges them to demonstrate that their deity is God: "The god who answers by fire, he is God" (1 Kings 18:24). The Prophets of Baal are unsuccessful. "There was no sound, and no one who responded or heeded" (1 Kings 18:29). In contrast, when Elijah prepares a burnt offering and calls upon the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, a fire descends and consumes everything he has prepared. The prophets of Baal are subsequently destroyed, and the people of Israel are convinced, once again, that it is God that they should hearken to. The covenant between God and Israel is restored, along with the understanding that Israel will follow the commandments set out at Sinai.

But something profound happens when Elijah goes from one mountain to the next – Mount Horeb. Despite Elijah's miracle at Carmel, Jezebel is still set on having him killed and he has not been vindicated. Elijah has just suspended a critical law (Deuteronomy 12:13-14) that sacrifices are not conducted outside of the place chosen by God – the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet despite this grandiose action and result, the people of Israel do not protest his death sentence. How can a renewed covenant of shared responsibility between the people of Israel and God fail to protect Elijah during his hour of need? This is the question that will be explored in this article through examination of **קול דממה דקה** – God's still and silent voice and its reverberations within Tanakh through which the key word **דממה** will be examined in further detail.

## Silence in the wind

Let us introduce the notion of God being the most present in silence. In stillness and in small moments. Images of divine power are usually associated with dramatic scenes telling tales of something explosive occurring. Michaelangelo's 'Face of God' is a classic example of God exerting His dominance and power through an outstretched arm and finger and larger than life dominance over Man. The narrative of Elijah's interaction at Mount Horeb sits against this idea of God just being portrayed as the mighty and out of reach God, as shown by the events at Mount Horeb:

*There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him: “Why are you here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11–13 )*

"A soft, murmuring sound..."

There have been a number of ways to translate this phrase into English, such as Rabbi Sacks' translation: "The sound of a slender silence." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz understands it to be "a faint sound of silence" and Rashi renders it as a "calm quiet". Why does God present Himself in such a way to Elijah and why does it occur after a wind, an earthquake and a fire? A clue can be found within Tanakh where דְּמָמָה is mentioned twice more:

Job 4:16 - דְּמָמָה וְקוֹל אֲשָׁמַע:

*"I heard a murmur, a voice,"*

Psalms 107:29 - יָקַם סְעָרָה לְדָמָמָה -

*"The storm was reduced to a whisper"*

What is key to this is the pretext to **דְּמָמָה**, where quiet revelation is preceded by some form of dramatic phenomena. In Job, it reads:

פָּחַד קָרָאֵנִי וּרְעָדָה וְרַב עֲצָמוֹתַי הִפְחִיד:

*Fear and trembling came upon me, causing all my bones to quake with fright.*

אֲרוּחַ עַל-פְּנֵי יַחֲלֹף תִּסְמָר שְׁעַרַת בָּשָׂרִי:

*A wind passed by me, making the hair of my flesh bristle.*

The underlined words highlight the contrast between the “voice” and links to the events that Elijah witnesses before the **דְּמָמָה**. What unites these three examples is the **דְּמָמָה** which appears after a dramatic event. It could be that God is showing His attributes of mercy and compassion as an example to the subjects of these separate texts. Elijah has escaped his people and condemned them but God sends him to Mount Horeb to remind him of the mercy that He shows when the giving of the Torah took place. Yet, Elijah does not come to the defence of Israel. (Haida, R. Shemuel. *Zikukin de-Nura*. 1676). The great and dramatic events at Carmel and the killing of Baal’s prophets appear to have been forgotten as Elijah seeks solitude in the desert, and this is perhaps why the **קוֹל דְּמָמָה דְּקָה** is so powerful because it has more impact than the drama that precedes it. The choosing of Mount Horeb is no coincidence, it is the heart of where the covenant between God and the children of Israel occurred with Moshe. It appears that God is reminding Elijah about God’s compassion and mercy for Israel, in contrast to Elijah’s ‘zealousness’ (Rabbi Moses Alshekh , *Mar'ot HaTzova'ot*). God does not wish for destruction but appears to want Elijah to understand that by being able to listen to the still, small voice, the covenant between the people of Israel and God can be restored.

## Active listening and Elijah

As Rabbi Sacks has noted, being silent allows for human freedom to flourish and space for the other voice to be heard. The idea of active listening as understood by Rabbi Sacks revolves around learning to listen in all types of situations and relationships and he centres this around the prayer, "*Shema Yisrael*", in what he translates to "*Listen Israel*". Rabbi Sacks argues that God reveals Himself through speech rather than appearances. From the beginning of Tanakh, God says and light is created where He then goes on to create the Universe through His speech. A still small voice through covenant is a promise and acceptance of rules between God and humans. The first covenant - the *Brit* - was to Noah that He would not destroy His creation again as He did during the Flood. The children of Israel's encounter with God at Sinai and its recounting in Deuteronomy emphasises '*Shema*'. In fact, it is mentioned 92 times in Devarim and is a key theme for what Moshe is trying to convey. Moshe laments to his people, "If only you would listen to these laws ..." (Deuteronomy, 7:12) which encapsulates the whole of Devarim. Likewise, God conveys this sentiment to Elijah on Horeb, a reminder to him that to hear the children of Israel is not to condemn them but to *understand* them - another translation of '*shema*'.

Active listening is not only centred between humans but also between God and human beings. In the Talmud, the rabbis ask Elijah when the Messiah will arrive and below Elijah says:

*Sanhedrin 98a: Elijah said to him that this is what he said to you: He said that he will come "today, if you will listen to His voice" (Psalms 95:7).*

Here, the Rabbis show that essentially, this is a call for God's people to listen and understand and implement His commandments. On a deeper level, we can connect this back to Elijah's encounter at Mount Horeb and the **קול דממה**, where Elijah is told that Elisha will take up the mantle of prophethood. The French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, elucidated a philosophy of Radical Responsibility and the art of listening by critiquing what he referred to as "ontological narcissism" (Jansen, Corine. whereby as human beings we box the Other into our own categories and experiences projecting our own interpretation of what the Other is saying. On Mount Horeb, God crushes Elijah's own interpretation of what it means to listen to Him by showing him that what he thinks as God being in the wind, earthquake or fire is in fact the opposite of what he would expect. "His voice" is not meant to be found in grandiose acts of show like what happened at Mount Carmel but in truly nullifying a self-centred perspective of what God wants. This is the lesson, that if we can really listen, we can then be transformed, just as Elijah's prophethood transitioned to Elisha who became the more gentle prophet. He was able to echo the lesson of **קול דממה דקה** and bring change in people through actively listening to their problems. The key takeaway from this is that active listening is not an ability exclusive to prophets, but to us all. If we can allow the **קול דממה דקה** to echo within us.

## Works Cited

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## Short Bio

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