Language as a Lens - Session 5
Silence

R. Dena Weiss

Pirkei Avot 1:17	
Shimon his son said: All my life I grew up among the sages and **I did not find a better thing than silence**. And the teaching is not the core, rather the doing and anyone who talks a lot brings sin.	שִׁמְעוֹן בְּנוֹ אוֹמֵר, כָּל יָמַי גָּדַלְתִּי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים, **וְלֹא מָצָאתִי לַגּוּף טוֹב אֶלָּא שְׁתִיקָה**. וְלֹא הַמִּדְרָשׁ הוּא הָעִקָּר, אֶלָּא הַמַּעֲשֶׂה. וְכָל הַמַּרְבֶּה דְּבָרִים, מֵבִיא חֵטְא:

Bartenura to Avot 1:17	
And the teaching is not the core, rather the doing and you should know that the silence is good, because even the teaching and the learning and the speaking in Torah which is the absolute best character trait and nevertheless the reward that you get is only for the action and the one who teaches and doesn't fulfill it would have been better for him to be silent and not teach.	**וְלֹא הַמִּדְרָשׁ הוּא הָעִקָּר אֶלָּא הַמַּעֲשֶׂה.** וְתֵדַע לְךָ שֶׁהַשְׁתִיקָה טוֹבָה, שֶׁאֲפִלּוּ הַמִּדְרָשׁ וְהַדְּרָשׁ וְהַדִּבּוּר בַּתּוֹרָה שֶׁאֵין לְךָ מִדָּה טוֹבָה הֵימֶנָּה, אֵין עִקַּר קִבּוּל הַשָּׂכָר אֶלָּא בִּשְׁבִיל הַמַּעֲשֶׂה, וְהַדּוֹרֵשׁ וְאֵינוֹ מְקַיֵּם, נוֹחַ לוֹ אִם הָיָה שׁוֹתֵק וְלֹא הָיָה דּוֹרֵשׁ:

Pirkei Avot 3:13	
Rabbi Akiva said: Merriment and frivolity accustom one to sexual licentiousness; Tradition safeguards the Torah; Tithes safeguard wealth, Vows safeguard abstinence; **A safeguard to wisdom is silence.**	רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, שְׂחוֹק וְקַלּוּת רֹאשׁ, מַרְגִּילִין לְעֶרְוָה. מָסוֹרֶת, סְיָג לַתּוֹרָה. מַעֲשְׂרוֹת, סְיָג לָעשֶׁר. נְדָרִים, סְיָג לַפְּרִישׁוּת. **סְיָג לַחָכְמָה, שְׁתִיקָה**:

Bartenura to Avot 3:13	
"Silence is a safeguard for wisdom." What kind of silence are we speaking about? If it means refraining from words of Torah, Scripture has already said, "You shall meditate upon it day and night" (Joshua 1:8). If it means refraining from gossip, slander, or cursing, those are already prohibited by the Torah. Rather, the teaching refers to refraining from ordinary, nonessential conversation between one person and another. A person should minimize such speech as much as possible. Concerning this, Solomon said: "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise." (Proverbs 17:28)	**סְיָג לַחָכְמָה שְׁתִיקָה.** בְּמַה אֲנַן קָיְמִין, אִי בִּשְׁתִיקָה מִדִּבְרֵי תּוֹרָה, הֲרֵי כְּבָר כְּתִיב וְהָגִיתָ בּוֹ וְגוֹ', אִי בִּשְׁתִיקָה מֵרְכִילוּת וְלָשׁוֹן הָרָע וּקְלָלָה, דְּאוֹרַיְתָא נִינְהוּ. הָא אֵינוֹ מְדַבֵּר אֶלָּא בִּשְׁתִיקָה מִדִּבְרֵי הָרְשׁוּת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַחֲבֵרוֹ, שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ לָאָדָם לְמַעֵט הַדִּבּוּר בָּהֶם כָּל מַה שֶּׁאֶפְשָׁר. וַעֲלֵיהֶם אָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה (משלי יז) גַּם אֱוִיל מַחֲרִישׁ חָכָם יֵחָשֵׁב:

Rabbeinu Yonah	
"Silence is a safeguard for wisdom." This is a safeguard both for wisdom itself and for its qualities. How so? A person does not interrupt another while he is speaking, and regarding something he has not heard, he says, "I have not heard." Although this latter point is not, strictly speaking, part of silence, silence leads to it. How is silence a safeguard for wisdom? A person should not speak in the presence of one who surpasses him in wisdom. For when a student is learning before his teacher and perceives a certain line of reasoning that seems correct, he should not immediately assume it is the true one or be eager to voice it before his teacher has finished speaking. If he does so, he will lose what his teacher is about to say and will not come to know the arguments of the earlier sages, because his mind is distracted and preoccupied with expressing his own opinion. Moreover, his own reasoning cannot be so accurate until he has heard what the earlier authorities said and weighed it on the scales of his own understanding to determine which view is sound—his own or theirs.	**סייג לחכמה שתיקה.** זה סייג בין לחכמה עצמה בין למדותיה כיצד שאינו נכנס לתוך דברי חברו ועל מה שלא שמע אומר לא שמעתי. ואע"פ שאינה מכלל השתיקה. השתיקה מביאה לידי כך לחכמה כיצד שאינו מדבר בפני מי שגדול ממנו בחכמה כי הלומד בפני רבו ורואה סברא אחת כהלכה אל יחשוב מיד כי היא האמתית ולא ירצה לאומרה בטרם שיסיים רבו מלדבר. ואם יעשה כן יפסיד מה שיאמר רבו ולא ידע הסברות מן החכמים הקדמונים כי לבו נע ונד מלהודיע דעתם. וגם כי סברתו לא תוכל להיות מכוונת כל כך עד שישמע

מה שאמרו הראשונים וישקול במאזני שכלו אי זו יכשר הזה או זה על כן השתיקה לתלמיד לפני הרב והגדול ממנו בחכמה סייג. ובהמצא סברא והרב עודנו מדבר והלא שותק לא יפתח פיו עד שיאירו דברי רבו וסברתו חקוקה בלבו. עד שיגמור הדברים וידע מה שלמדו רבו. ואחרי כן תהיה סברתו צלולה ומכוונת ועל זה אמר שלמה ע"ה (משלי י"ח ב') **לא יחפץ כסיל בתבונה כי אם בהתגלות לבו:**	Therefore, silence on the part of a student before his teacher, or before one greater than him in wisdom, is a safeguard. Even if an idea occurs to him while his teacher is still speaking, he should remain silent and not open his mouth until his teacher's words have become clear and firmly engraved in his heart. Only after the teacher has finished and the student fully understands what he has taught should he consider his own reasoning. Then his own understanding will be clear and properly directed. Concerning this, King Solomon, of blessed memory, said: "**A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing what is in his heart**." (Proverbs 18:2)

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… וְאִם הוּא יוֹשֵׁב בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים – יִשְׁתֹּק וְיִשְׁמַע דִּבְרֵיהֶם; כִּי כְּשֶׁהוּא שׁוֹתֵק – שׁוֹמֵעַ מָה שֶׁלֹּא יָדַע, וּכְשֶׁהוּא מְדַבֵּר – אֵינוֹ מוֹסִיף יְדִיעָה. אַךְ אִם הוּא מְסֻפָּק בְּדִבְרֵי הַחֲכָמִים – יִשְׁאַל מֵהֶם, כִּי זֹאת הַשְׁתִּיקָה רָעָה הִיא מְאוֹד. שְׁלֹמֹה הַמֶּלֶךְ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם אָמַר (קהלת ג ז): "עֵת לַחֲשׁוֹת וְעֵת לְדַבֵּר" – פְּעָמִים שֶׁהַדִּבּוּר טוֹב, וּפְעָמִים שֶׁהַשְׁתִּיקָה טוֹבָה.	…If a person is sitting among the wise, he should remain silent and listen to their words. For when he is silent, he hears what he did not previously know; but when he is speaking, he does not increase his knowledge. However, if he is uncertain about the words of the wise, he should ask them, for that kind of silence is very harmful. King Solomon, peace be upon him, said (Ecclesiastes 3:7): "A time to keep silent and a time to speak." There are times when speech is good, and there are times when silence is good.
וְאָמַר הֶחָכָם: כְּשֶׁלֹּא תִּמְצָא אָדָם שֶׁמְּלַמֶּדְךָ מוּסָר – הִדָּבֵק בַּשְׁתִּיקָה, פֶּן תְּדַבֵּר שְׁטוּת. וּבַעֲבוּר שֶׁהַלָּשׁוֹן קַלָּה מְאוֹד – צָרִיךְ לִזָּהֵר מְאוֹד לְהַכְבִּיד הַלָּשׁוֹן, לִשְׁמֹר אוֹתוֹ שֶׁלֹּא	The wise man said: When you do not find someone who can teach you wisdom and moral instruction, cling to silence, lest you speak foolishly. And because the tongue is so quick and agile, one must take great care to make it "heavy"—that is, to restrain it and guard it from speaking.

An abundance of words is like a heavy burden, and the weight of excessive speech is greater than the weight of prolonged silence. If a person hears another speaking, he should remain silent until the other has finished, for "**He who answers a matter before he hears it—it is folly and disgrace to him**" (Proverbs 18:13).	תְּדַבֵּר. רֹב דְּבָרִים – כַּמַּשָּׂא הַכָּבֵד. וּכְבֵדוּת שֶׁל רֹב דְּבָרִים – יוֹתֵר מִכְּבֵדוּת שֶׁל רֹב שְׁתִיקָה. וְאִם שָׁמַע שֶׁחֲבֵרוֹ מְדַבֵּר – יִשְׁתֹּק עַד שֶׁיְּסַיֵּם דְּבָרָיו, כִּי "**מֵשִׁיב דָּבָר בְּטֶרֶם יִשְׁמָע, אִוֶּלֶת הִיא לוֹ וּכְלִמָּה**" (משלי יח יג)
Sometimes silence is bad as it says, **answer the fool according to his waywardness, lest he be wise in his own eyes.** in words of Torah: If you see that the fools are mocking the words of the Sages, he should answer them in order to reverse their mistakes, so that they not be wise in their own eyes. And if you see someone doing the wrong thing - you should protest and rebuke him. …	וְלִפְעָמִים שֶׁהַשְׁתִיקָה רָעָה, כְּדִכְתִיב (משלי כו ה): "עֲנֵה כְסִיל כְּאִוַּלְתּוֹ, פֶּן יִהְיֶה חָכָם בְּעֵינָיו". בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה: אִם רוֹאֶה שֶׁהַכְּסִילִים מְלַגְלְגִים עַל דִּבְרֵי חֲכָמִים – יַעֲנֵם לַהֲשִׁיבָם מִטָּעוּתָם, שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיוּ חֲכָמִים בְּעֵינֵיהֶם. אִם רוֹאֶה אָדָם עוֹבֵר עֲבֵרָה – יִמְחֶה בְּיָדוֹ וְיוֹכִיחֵהוּ…
There is one who sits before the wise and is quiet and receives reward, that is when he intends to listen. And there is one who is silent and he has a sin, like when he thinks to himself, "why should I bother to speak before him, since he doesn't know how to appropriately respond? Doesn't he know nothing in comparison to me?"	יֵשׁ יוֹשֵׁב לִפְנֵי חָכָם וְשׁוֹתֵק וְיֵשׁ לוֹ שָׂכָר, כְּגוֹן שֶׁיְּכַוֵּן לִשְׁמֹעַ. וְיֵשׁ שׁוֹתֵק וְיֵשׁ לוֹ עֲבֵרָה, כְּגוֹן שֶׁיַּחְשֹׁב: "מָה אֲדַבֵּר לְפָנָיו, כֵּיוָן שֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לְהָשִׁיב לִי כָּרָאוּי? הֲלוֹא אֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ כְּנֶגְדִּי כְּלוּם.

“He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul. When his people would ask him why he was so silent with his son, we would say to them that he did not like to talk, words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart, they conceal the heart, the heart speaks through silence. One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe.”

