

“Listening to Silence”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In the Bible, the prophet Elijah stands upon the mountain to encounter the Presence of God. “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 still, small voice.” (I Kings, 19:11,12)

The theologian Andre Neher has pointed out that the literal translation of “a still small voice” is “a thin voice of silence.” Elijah was witness to a titanic show of natural force in order to prepare him to listen for the silence. In the previous chapter Elijah, in opposition to the Priests of the idol Baal, has invoked God’s fire upon an altar. Now when God needs to speak to him, Elijah expects thunder. He learns to hear silence.

Listening to silence seems too much a paradox until one recalls the words of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vorki. Asked what characterizes an ideal Jew, he replied: “Upright kneeling, silent screaming, motionless dance.” One who can be broken, and thus whole. One who can listen to the silence, for the silence can speak.