

A Time For Silence

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The world will not keep quiet.

Stores play music, billboards blare, our cars, iPods, and cellphones bombard us with words, images, and music. Still, silence and absence are among our most important teachers. As a great pianist once remarked, his playing uniquely was distinguished less by the notes than the space between the notes. Mystics studied not only the black letters of the Torah, but the white spaces between them. Stillness, absence, silence — the first letter of the Ten Commandments was an aleph, which has no sound.

Ecclesiastes was certainly correct that “there is a time to speak and a time to keep silent.” Silence corresponds sometimes to a deep need inside of us for peace, for a brief cessation of the tumult that disguises our hunger and distracts our sadness. Even our tradition of words knows that words are not always welcome. The *Midrash* on *Koheleth* tells a story: The wife of Rabbi Mana died. Rabbi Abin came to pay a condolence call. Rabbi Mana asked, “Are there any words of Torah you would like to offer us in time of grief?” Rabbi Abin answered, “At times like this the Torah takes refuge in silence.”