Writing in The Sunday Times of London on the Asian tsunami, Minette Marrin (who describes herself candidly as “an unbeliever”) quotes a simple aphorism of the leading philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Remarkably, this response is (at first sight) almost identical to that called for on the part of ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim (a community of believers). Almost identical, and yet radically different. There is a vast difference between the silence of the “unbeliever” and the silence of the ma’amin (believer).

The unbeliever is silent because he has no answers. Unable to make sense of this world—of the seeming injustice that strikes down the innocent, the suffering that seems to overwhelm good and bad alike—he concludes that there is indeed no rhyme or reason. In the words of Kayin, “LeiT din, velev D ayan.” He cannot understand everything, so he refuses to understand anything. His is the silence that says “If I cannot comprehend everything, if I have no ultimate answers, nothing has meaning.” There are, quite simply, no answers. Equally, of course, it follows that there are no questions. Tsunamis happen because tsunamis happen. There is no point asking why, because “why” implies purpose and meaning, and there is—in this view—no purpose or meaning. The world simply evolved from nothingness; man developed by chance, over eons of time, from the protozoic slime; there is no Creator, and no purpose to life or to history.

To us it seems that these propositions are scientifically absurd. If the universe simply “happened” by chance, as a result of a Big Bang explosion of a pea-sized mass of infinite density, we are still faced with the questions of where the tiny mass came from, and why it exploded—let alone how it formed our infinitely complex universe. But more significantly, the unbeliever’s universe is also absurd and meaningless from an existentialist point of view. The ma’amin finds, on the whole, clear meaning, design, plan and purpose in his existence, despite his inability to find meaning in the tragedies of this world. He knows that “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways,” says Hashem. His inability to square the exception with the rule may well cause him considerable personal anguish, especially if he is sensitive to the pain of others. But he is not reduced to living in a universe of meaninglessness.

The unbeliever, however, throws out the baby with the bathwater. Instead of having to grapple with bits of the jigsaw puzzle that do not fit, he has to deal with a puzzle in which none of the pieces fit.

The ma’amin, by contrast, is silent because he has no questions. That is not to say that he is not troubled by the apparent contradictions in this world: by the difficulty of reconciling Hashem’s goodness with His power. Of course he is, and—at least according to some Rishonim—so he ought to be. “Blind faith,” in the view of Ramban, is not emunah; it is a refusal to face up
there are some things that are simply too difficult, too overwhelming, too incomprehensible for the human mind to contend with. His is the silence that says, although I cannot understand everything I nonetheless affirm that everything has meaning. He has no ultimate questions; he is honest enough to recognize that he is merely a mortal being, standing in awe in the presence of the Borei Olam. While never giving up on the possibility of finding answers to agonizing issues, he recognizes that it is equally possible that he may never find solutions.

Hence, the Chazon Ish refrained from expressing an opinion about the Holocaust. In response to a questioner, he said: "Is it possible for a person who just about manages to understand a mishnah to object to a Tosafot on the grounds that the reasoning does not seem right to him?" Bemekom gedolutai, sham anvetonai. For all his greatness, he recognized his limitations.

"Lacha dumiyah tehillah," says D avid H amelech. Sometimes the greatest praise of H ashem, the highest expression of song to Him, is silence. "Vayidom Aharon," Aharon's silence, says R av Yaakov M ecklenburg, was not the silence of one who has a question, but suppresses it; of one within whom there is a protest, which he deliberately refrains from expressing. It is, rather, the silence and equanimity—the shalvah hanefesh and calmness—of someone who does not voice the challenge because he accepts that man is but man, and H ashem is the Almighty.

It is the silence of one who recognizes—as H akadosh Baruch H u demonstrated to Eliyahu H anavi—that H e is not to be found in the wind, the fire, the earthquake of questioning, but in the sound of a kol demamah dakah—an exquisitely refined silence.

And yet, sometimes silence is an inappropriate response. I may be silent in the face of my own pain, but I dare not be silent in the face of someone else's suffering. M y rebbe, R av Chaim S hmuelevitz, z"l, used to say that this is the message of Sefer Iyov. O ne of the three advisors of Paroh, Iyov kept silent in the face of the decree that all baby boys be thrown in the river. H e realized that any attempt at protest was totally futile; it would have achieved nothing except his own death. And yet, his silence was unacceptable. When something hurts, one cries out; when there is pain, one cannot keep quiet. It was only after Iyov experienced his own yisurim (suffering), and cried out to H ashem as a consequence, that he learned this lesson.

T his idea is implicit in a famous passage in Rambam's H ilchot T alanit: It is a mitzvat aseh [positive commandment] of the Torah to cry out and blow the chatzotzrot [trumpets] for tzarot—cry out, and blow! And this is the silence of the unbeliever and the silence of the believer. The unbeliever is silent because he has no answers. The believer is silent because he has no questions.

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suffer so that we should become better”), but to reinforce the altogether different message that our own suffering should be viewed as a justified punishment for our failings. The focus is on us and our inadequacies, not on them and their punishments.

Yet, others believe that they can explain the recent tragedy in Asia by reference to the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the countries involved. Thus it is commonly said that the people affected are ovdei avodah zarah (idol worshippers); or that their lifestyle is morally degenerate or that they are given over to materialism, and hence are abandoned (as Rambam implies in Moreh Nevuchim) to the forces of the material world.

But while to some there may seem to be an element of truth in a few of these statements, a little reflection demonstrates that they are too glib and simplistic.

Firstly, at least two-thirds of the victims were Indonesian Muslims, who (while perhaps not well-disposed to Jews) are certainly not ovdei avodah zarah. Nor is it certain that those who are idol-worshippers are halachically classified as ovdei avodah zarah, since the Gemara clearly suggests that non-Jews “nowadays” merely carry on their traditions by rote, and are not deemed ovdei avodah zarah. And even though—in the opinion of Rambam—in Hilchot Ta’anit—is no excuse for Bnei Noach, this is only the case (according to Rav Shimon Sofer) when they have an opportunity to learn, such as if they are living in an Eretz Yisrael governed by halachah, where they can see the example of gerim toshavim. Finally, what of the children, who comprised fully one-third of the victims?

As for the degeneracy of the lifestyle of the peoples concerned, one wonders why the victims were not the town dwellers, where most of the degeneracy occurs. And if the focus is on the materialism of their lifestyle, is it really the case that the simple fishermen, struggling to make ends meet, are really more materialistic than the worthy citizens of London, with their affluent lifestyle, their custom kitchens and en suite bedrooms?

It’s true that our nevi’im (prophets) constantly remonstrate over the failings of the world (goyim as well as Klal Yisrael) and often point to these failings as reasons for suffering. But we are not nevi’im, and we do not know the darchei Hashem. It is a little presumptuous for any of us to imagine that we are able to understand the actions of the Ribbono shel Olam, or to ascribe definitive “reasons” for those actions.

Rambam (in Hilchot Ta’anit) is not telling us why tragedies occur. He is simply telling us, firstly, that they are not just freaks of nature, but acts of Hashem; and secondly, he is telling us how we should react. It is not for us to explain how Hakadosh Baruch Hu runs His world. It is for us to respond to Him by living as He asks of us.

And there is another response that is called for—the instinctive human reaction that impels us to come to the help of those who are in trouble. It is a reaction that the world at large has demonstrated, in an astonishing outpouring of generosity and identification with those who have suffered. That is entirely as it ought to be; in the opinion of at least some Rishonim, Bnei Noach are obligated to give tzedakah. And it is also a reaction that we too, as ehrlicher Yidden and bnei Torah, should be demonstrating.

And yet, for the most part (the Orthodox Union—which raised significant money for the cause—and Zaka being notable exceptions), it seems to
have been missing. Whatever individuals may have personally contributed, there seems to have been almost no response on the part of the organized Torah world. There has been a silence, an apparent apathy and indifference, on the part of the Torah world and its leaders to this immense human tragedy.

To some extent, this is understandable. In part it reflects an insularity due to historical experience. Having seen how the world abandoned us in the Holocaust, we turned our back on the world. In part, it is due to the need for the Torah community to separate itself from the negative influences of “goyish” culture. And in part, it is due to the unique focus of the Torah world on self-improvement and the furtherance of Torah and mitzvot. But despite these considerations, it does not exonerate us of the need to act towards others with compassion.

My father, alav hashalom, was an East European ra'ah through and through, brought up living Torah and steeped in the yeshivah world of the tradition of the Chafet haKatan. He was a Holocaust survivor, who led a kehillah under three years of German occupation and lost his family in Auschwitz. Yet, he never lost his compassion for humanity. I well remember as a child how, during the Biafran War in Nigeria, he made an appeal to his kehillah to help the victims of the conflict (man-made as it was). To him it was natural, and instinctive, that help was required. His sense of humanity extended to all.

And he was not just naeh doreish; he was also naeh mekayem (he practiced what he preached). We had a plumber who had leased a house from the Church Commissioners. Owing to a minor failure to comply with the terms of the lease, they evicted him from the house (taking with them, for good measure, the tools of his trade). Over night, he became a wreck of a man.

My father went to the Archbish-