

RH 5768 – TWO SIDES OF THE SHOFAR

Shanah Tovah.

My birthday comes toward the end of August and this year it was the last day of my vacation. I mostly forgot about it until a couple of days before and realized that I what I really needed, the best present, was to get some exercise. I tried to organize a basketball game, but that didn't come off. I searched for something else. I used to take yoga classes regularly, but it's been a while. Yoga is a gentle form of exercise focusing on stretching, balance and relaxation. All good things that many of us need!

I turned on the computer and googled "yoga" to find something close by. Sure enough, there is a yoga studio just a couple of miles away in Waltham that conveniently offers many different classes at many different times of day. I got up early on my birthday and headed over to the yoga studio, wearing my normal yoga attire – sweatpants and a long-sleeved tee shirt. I took a little bottle of water in case I got thirsty.

When I arrived, the woman at the front desk looked at me strangely and said, "Is this your first time?"

I said, "No, I have taken yoga many times before."

She asked again, "But have you taken Bikram yoga?"

I tried to remember which kind of yoga I had taken. But to tell you the truth, all the Sanskrit names for all the different types of yoga and the various postures are a bit of a blur in my mind. I did take yoga weekly for a couple of years so I told her I was not sure.

The woman then explained that Bikram yoga is a little bit different – the room is much hotter. That struck me as odd, but I thought I'd give it a try. She suggested that I was a little bit overdressed and might want to get more water. I bought another bottle of water, but I had nothing to change into so I just went on in.

Well, it was different. Bikram yoga includes many postures familiar from traditional yoga, but holding intense poses at length in a room that is heated to 105 or 110 degrees is a challenge. Immediately, I began to sweat ... a lot. I must have lost 5 pounds during the class! Sweatpants and a long-sleeved tee shirt were probably not the best attire as they held all the moisture.

Although I was not able to keep up with all of the postures during the 90-minute vigorous workout, I came away from the experience revitalized and invigorated. It was an intense experience. I happened to have been wearing a watch that tells my heart rate so, at a few points in the class, I stopped to check.

It was fascinating to see how it went way up during the moments of holding a pose, almost like lifting a weight or doing something intense in an anaerobic exercise. But then there would be these short rests, maybe only 20 seconds, where we would like down and pause, and my heart rate would plummet.

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After the class, I came home, changed, and went outside to daven with my kids savoring these last vacation moments. It was a beautiful day. As we finished davening, it was time to sound the shofar; my older children, Talya and Ari took turns trying out the shofar. Much to my delight, they produced some sounds. As I blew, I checked my heart-rate monitor once more: blowing the shofar made it rise and then it went down again.

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For one month now, we have been sounding the shofar at the end of our morning service every day except on Shabbat. The congregation rises and various shofar blowers sound the four basic notes: *Teki'ah*, a single note; *Shvarim*, three shorter notes; *Tru'ah*, nine yet smaller notes; and finally, another *Teki'ah*. During this month of Elul, we sound the shofar to prepare ourselves for today, Rosh Hashanah, which then ushers in the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance.

But why do we sound the shofar today on Rosh Hashanah itself?

First and foremost, the Shofar is loud noise, an external call. This unique instrument enters Jewish consciousness at Sinai where it serves as the communal call from God Who must have made the very mountain resound, as no human shofar blower is designated in the text. The Torah states: "*V'kol shofar hazak me'od* – a very loud sound of the shofar, and all the people who were in the camp trembled." It is the ultimate siren, shaking its listeners, seizing them with an almost overwhelming awe.

The shofar sets the mood and motivates the people to act. Think of Joshua circling the city of Jericho with all his troops led by seven *kohanim*, seven priests, each sounding his own shofar before the Ark of the Covenant. After circling the city once a day for six days, on the seventh day, they circled it seven times sounding the shofar. And the walls came tumbling down.

The shofar marks signal moments in our communal lives. The shofar was blown on festivals, at excommunications, and at funerals. In ancient times, it was sounded to announce a death. It confers power and potency on an important event.

In June, 1967, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the chief rabbi of the Israeli army blew the shofar at the Western Wall after its liberation by the Israel Defense Forces, using the same shofar that he had sounded on Mount Sinai in 1956.

Imagine the Israelites standing at Sinai hearing the sound of the shofar emanating from the mountain itself – overwhelmed, excited, full of awe.

Imagine the shofar of tomorrow's Rosh Hashanah reading with the Binding of Isaac – the relief that Abraham and Isaac felt as they sacrificed the ram and the intense pain that must have pervaded the moment.

Imagine our shofar blowing, closing your eyes to let the sounds wash over you – the awe, fear, and trembling, but yet somehow pervaded with closeness and the deepest intensity.

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While the shofar is a clarion call to action – it is not a trumpet. There is a dissonance, even a brokenness to it. It is hard to get the notes out – we are not allowed to alter its natural form by adding a mouthpiece. It cannot be bent to our will; we must bend to its nature. The shofar often retains moisture which mutes its sound. At times, I think there is a *dybbuk*, a spirit, in my shofar, stifling the sounds.

The shofar takes us right up to the edge – it is not simply an alarm; it produces different notes, and different reactions as we hear it. Each shofar and its blower produce a unique sound. The notes themselves are whole but also broken – the three broken notes of the *shvarim*, the *tru'ah* – nine tiny pieces that feel like shattering glass, shattering the facades of ourselves that we project to the world.

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There are two sides to the shofar: the loud call with which we are most familiar and a more private side that pushes into ourselves. These two sides are revealed in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer which states: “*U’V’shofar gadol yeetaka, v’kol demamah dakah yishama* – the great shofar is sounded and the still small voice is heard.” What does this mean? Why did the author of this piyyut, - Kalonymous ben Meshullam, juxtapose Sinai and its *shofar gadol*, the loudest most public sound of Jewish history, with *kol demamah dakah* – Elijah’s private mystical encounter with God who consoles the bereft prophet?

Unetaneh Tokef frames this wondrous dichotomy – the loud and the quiet, the public and the private, the moving and the still. Two mountains: Sinai’s public space and Elijah’s personal retreat come together as we sound the shofar on

Rosh Hashanah, reminding us that we are filled with this tension – the outward and the inward. The call to action and the call to calm.

While the traditional interpretations of the shofar provided by Saadya Gaon, a great rabbi of the early medieval period, and others focus on the call to action, there are other perspectives that claim the shofar pulls us in. A few centuries after Saadya Gaon, Maimonides offers a moving understanding of this second side of the shofar: "*Uru y'sheynim mish'natkhem! Hakeetzu Mitardeimatkhem! V'Hapsu v'ma'aseikhem V'hizru ViTeshuvah V'Zikhru Vora'akhem!* – Awake, O sleepers from your sleep, O slumberers arouse yourselves from your slumbers, and examine your deeds, return in repentance and remember your Creator" (Yad, Teshuvah 3:4).

Maimonides wants us to begin the process of *teshuvah*, repentance, self-examination, and self-transformation that this season demands. It is a return to God and to our deepest self. A turn to listen to that still small voice.

Maimonides continues: the shofar then helps us “see ourselves each year as if we are half worthy and half un-worthy.” We are all living in the gray area and the shofar reminds us of that, shaking us to our very core, shaking us to confront ourselves in silence.

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Our Torah readings mimics these ideas. Over the last few weeks, we have been reading the narrative from the end of the book of Deuteronomy. Just this last Shabbat we read some of Moses' final speeches to the Israelites before they were to enter the land.

Imagine that liminal moment: Moses and the Israelites gathering together across the Jordan River, looking into the land of Israel, about to enter it - the people filled with excitement and anticipation, and Moses filled with gratitude tempered with disappointment, since he will not lead the people into the land.

We, too, stand on a precipice this morning, the shofar shaking us, lifting us out of our complacency, compelling us into this new year.

We stand as we hear the shofar, gathering together as a community, focusing our energy on the work that we need to do, as individuals, for some as couples, for some as families, and for all of us as a community.

How will we transform ourselves? How will we take seriously the act of *teshuvah*, of repentance, that our tradition demands?

How will we become better people? How will we become better Jews?

How will we strengthen our community? How will we work on behalf of the State of Israel?

How will we perform acts of *hesed*, acts of loving kindness, locally in our own community, in the Boston area, and in the world?

How will we cry out against the continuing injustice in Darfur?

How will we work to make *mitzvot* a deeper and deeper part of our lives? How will we make Shabbat all that it can be to transform ourselves and the world?

How will we study Torah more deeply this year and engage in Jewish learning?

How can we make Hebrew more and more a part of our conversation?

The shofar shakes us out of our complacency and sets us in motion.

But there is that second side to the shofar – an equally important, but less well known aspect of listening to the shofar. Often when I hear the shofar, especially the long list of notes that we blow today on Rosh Hashanah, when we sound 100 notes, there is a different feeling. There is an inward movement as I listen to the sounds, and I am pulled inside myself. This is perhaps the antithesis of the traditional understanding of the shofar, but equally important.

Although the shofar is supposed to shake us out of our complacency, for some of us, perhaps, the shofar brings us into a less active state. Maybe for those of us who are already always moving, always making to do lists, always busy, the sound of the shofar should bring us some degree of satisfaction. Not complacency, but an appreciation of where we are. A slowing down, a chance to look inward.

That, my friends, is a struggle that I have and that many of us have. As Pascal, the great 17th century French-Catholic philosopher, said: “What gives us humans the impetus to keep moving is that we are ultimately afraid of remaining alone in a room, of confronting ourselves.”

Sylvia Boorstein tells the story of talking with her grandson about her work as a mindfulness meditation teacher. She explained that her work is helping people pay attention. He responded that he could relate to that, as sometimes in school he found it difficult to pay attention to his teacher. He thought further for a moment and asked, “How can I know when I’m not paying attention?”

That’s it. What wakes us up? What helps us to realize that we are sometimes walking through our lives?

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th Century rabbi and founder of Hasidism, recognized this very problem. He taught: “When a person does not know that something is hidden from him – like the presence of God in all things – that is not good. He will consider himself righteous, and will have no motivation to do *teshuvah*. But, someone who realizes that there is a hidden quality to existence will sense this hiddenness, and will turn his heart to God.”

To not even know that we do not know is to be completely lost. Spiritual work is the endeavor to wake up, to give mind to our lives, to develop the habit of asking, “Am I paying attention now?” Over time, we may learn to sense when our actions are habitual, when our response is mindless, and we will be able to wake up, to fully inhabit our lives once again. God may be hidden behind veils of Creation, but that does not have to mean that we live ignorant of, oblivious to or without regard for God.

Whenever we wake up in our lives, whenever we look through the veils to see what is hidden, we return to God.

That is the challenge of this moment.

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Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi in the early 20th Century of what became Israel, taught that the shofar is the culmination of creating communal prayer out of individual striving.

But these two aspects of the shofar, the communal and the intimate, are not mutually exclusive. We all bring to the experience of the shofar our own thoughts, pain, celebration, and gratitude – the whole gamut of feelings in this moment when our community comes together each year. Of course, within us there are different souls, different yearnings, and different feelings. All of us have pieces that are broken and pieces that are whole. Each of the hundred notes of the shofar contributes to a rich symphony that speaks to our community’s coming together.

While one can blow the shofar alone, the shofar is truly felt by all of us coming together. That is the beauty of the shofar. It is an experience pushing us to the edge and then pulling us back into ourselves, getting us in touch with the mission and work of life and reminding us to make sure that we feel moments of satisfaction. It is shaking us, and it is quiet.

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About seven months ago, seventy of us went to Israel on a Temple Emunah trip. We found ourselves in Jerusalem on a Thursday morning *davening*

at the egalitarian *Kotel*. This is the area just south of the traditional Western Wall, where we are allowed to hold egalitarian services.

We davened, we read Torah, we celebrated birthdays, and we even remembered a *yahrzeit*. It was an incredibly significant and moving part of our journey. At the end of it, we toured the site. One of the huge stones that was found in the area has a clear inscription that we could read: “*L'veit Hateki'ah* – to the place of the *Teki'ah*.” This is one of the most incredible archeological finds – here is the stone that was on top on the southwest corner of the Temple Mount and, at some point in history, it was knocked down and there it was in front of us. It points to a corner spot up on the Temple Mount where a shofar blower would stand each Friday as Shabbat approached.

The Talmud (Shabbat 35b) explains the significance of this stone – there were six blasts were sounded on Friday afternoon. At the first sound, the laborers in the fields ceased their work. At the second, shops were closed and the city laborers ceased their work. The third signaled that it was time to kindle the Shabbat lights. The fourth, fifth, and sixth formally ushered in the Shabbat. You might ask – why not seven? Because the seventh sound was the sound of silence, Shabbat itself.

This ancient rite continues in modern Jerusalem. Before Shabbat a siren sounds to proclaim Shabbat and a second one sounds exactly at candle-lighting.

That Thursday morning we tried a re-enactment. I stood on the ledge of that stone and sounded a shofar, but the ledge was too small, and with a heavy backpack, I was falling backward. So a couple of members of our group propped me up and there I stood – half on the stone, half off the stone, sounding the shofar on the precipice, afraid I would fall. What I thought would be a big, powerful moment became a moment of vulnerability, of fragility ... and of feeling the support of community.

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The shofar is strong and broken, loud and soft, public and private. It is all of us as we stand together and alone on the precipice of the new year.

At the end of *Musaf* today, we will hear the shofar sounded another 70 times. In that loudness that shakes us out of our complacency, that pushes us to the very edge, that wakes us up like an alarm, let us find that space that also takes us to our deepest selves, like a moment of meditation where a bell sounds to indicate the start or stop of the meditation, and then there is silence.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the shofar is in between the notes, in the processing, in the breath that we take in. That is where we feel our deepest selves in God's presence.

May the shofar's notes and its pauses carry and hold us, propel us forward into this year, and may it also gently surround us as we journey together.

Shanah Tovah.