

How was this shofar born? These days of Rosh Hashanah are defined by the blasts of this ram's horn. But where does it come from, and what can its origins tell us about the journey we need to take today, and in the year ahead? The answer begins with recalling a feeling.

We've all experienced that moment of relief when a dreaded, feared outcome has passed unactualized. We got to the gate just in time for our international flight. The medical test results came back negative. A loved one survived a round of layoffs at work.

That rush of relief, of release of the built up tension, is almost palpable. There's a passage in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading of the binding of Isaac that embodies this feeling - and it is the moment of the birth of the shofar.

Avraham seems to pass the ultimate test of faith, as unimaginable to us as it may be, demonstrating willingness to sacrifice his son. Suddenly, the angel pulls him back, at the brink of executing God's command, saying, אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה - "don't send forth your hand against the boy, and don't do anything to him" (Gn. 22:12).

This is one of those moments of utter relief. We imagine Avraham nearly collapsing from the release of the anxiety and dread. So I have always been stunned by Rashi, quoting the midrash, who explains Avraham's response *this* way:

(אל תשלח - לשחוט), אמר לו אם כן לחנם באתי לכאן, אעשה בו חבלה ואוציא ממנו מעט דם, אמר לו אל תעש לו מאומה, אל תעש בו מום: (רש"י בראשית כב:יב)

(Don't send forth [your hand] - to kill.) Avraham said to God: if so, then I came here for naught. Let me just wound him and shed a little bit of blood. God replies, don't do anything to him, not even a blemish.

I want to cry out: Avraham! Where is the relief? Where is the gratitude? You don't have to kill your beloved son anymore!

Truth is, we could never imagine ourselves in Avraham's shoes. Who are we to judge? But what was this response?

Let me suggest a reading. Poor Avraham got tripped up by latching too tightly, somehow, onto God's initial command. He got caught in the focused, blinded place of performing God's will, so much so that he could not shift gears when he was called back from the edge.

Even though God's word has changed, Avraham needs to somehow feel he has accomplished his goal of heeding what he believes is God's word - after all, the call-off is only delivered by an angel. So he wants just

to hurt his own son - just a little. To somehow satisfy himself that he actually did what he thought he was supposed to do.

I actually know this kind of moment. It's hard to stop on a dime and switch gears, from when you think you're doing what someone wants you to do, whether you want to or not, to switch to follow a new approach. We can't get out of the mode we're in, even if it's not what we really want.

The Divine response is, broaden your perspective, Avraham. Don't get fixated on an old command - move with Me to the new one. To letting go, lowering your hand, and reclaiming your son. *Realize that there are more ways than one to actualize My Will.*

And from this moment emerges the shofar. It is in the very next verse that Avraham lifts up his eyes and sees the ram, the origin of our shofar, and sacrifices it *בנו תחת* - in place of his son. He is able to move from the narrow place of feeling he must hurt his child in order to do God's will, to seeing other options.

The shofar, then, is reminding us, teaching us, to widen our scope - to broaden our vision, from the confined and rigid to the open and diverse.

In fact, one central law of the shofar teaches this very basic message that I want to focus on today, of not getting stuck in a narrow perspective. Of learning to be broader-minded, more flexible, more open.

Let me ask you a silly question: What if, just this year, I decided to blow the shofar through the wide end?

Besides for being hard to hear, the halakhah says it's not allowed - even if I could get a good sound out of it. Thus Shulhan Arukh, our code of Jewish law, in the Laws of Shofar, says just this:

... אם תקע בצד הרחב של השופר, לא יצא. (שו"ע או"ח תקצ"ט (וע"ע רמ"א תקפו"ב))

If one blew from the wide side of the shofar, one did not fulfill one's obligation (Shu" A OH 590:9 (and see Rema OH 586:12))

But, really: what difference does it make? In fact, if there is one theme about the laws of the shofar, it's that as long as the physical item is functionally intact, it doesn't really matter what the shofar looks like. It can be cut down, hollowed, and whittled, even have small holes in it, as long as it makes a sound.

So why should it matter which side you blow out of, as long as you can get some noise?

The commentaries on this halakhah, basing themselves on the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah, tell us that the reason is:

דבעין שיהא כדרך גדילתו שהצד הקצר מול פה האדם: (מ"ב תקפו"א)

We need the blowing of the shofar to be the way it grows, with the narrow side against the person's mouth (MB 586:61)

In other words, the shofar grows beginning with a little narrow piece against the head of the ram, and as it grows, it widens. So we blow with our breath following the course of the growth of the ram's horn itself, דרך גדילתו - the way it grows - from narrow to wide.

The language here is so powerful to me - דרך גדילתו - the way the shofar grows. From narrow to wide.

Isn't this also the way we grow? Or the way we should grow?

How *do* we grow? How do we mature as Jews, as people, as productive contributors to family, to community, to society?

Maybe we grow and develop following the method of essay writing I learned in middle and high school - the inverted pyramid. You begin with a general introduction, and you slowly zone in on your topic. And in a world of niche markets and specialized professions, we can easily be led to believe the same - that we grow by zeroing in on who we are - slowly shedding the ideas and beliefs and breadth of options for how to live our lives, until we settle in on a fixed, exact sense of ourselves. And there *is* a certain growth in this narrowing in on a set of beliefs.

And it is appealing - we don't have to pay attention to the things outside our field of view, or bother with people who fall into other boxes or areas, because we know exactly where we fit - our little corner of belief and ideology and practice. And from there we get our script, our lines, our actions, and we're set to go.

It's much harder to move about between communities, identities, and ideas. To remain open to various possibilities in our religious, spiritual, personal, and yes, even political lives.

But the shofar suggests the opposite.

The shofar says the true sign of sophistication and maturity is to be wide open, to be broad and inclusive. To move about in a wide space. Not to be pigeonholed or boxed in by one simple focused way of being in or thinking about the world. From narrow to wide - the shofar tells us, this is דרך גדילתה. This is the way we grow.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof points this out in describing philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin's analysis of two types of people: hedgehogs, who know one thing, and foxes, who know many: "Hedgehogs tend to have a focused worldview, an ideological leaning, strong convictions; foxes are more cautious, more centrist, more likely to adjust their views, more pragmatic, more prone to self-doubt, more inclined to see complexity and nuance. And it turns out", Berlin argues, "that while foxes don't give great sound-bites, they are far more likely to get things right." (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/opinion/26Kristof.html?_r=0)

This is the wisdom of broadening ourselves.

There has been so much to wrap our heads around in 5773. Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc on our region. Unthinkable shootings in Newtown, CT, and across the country. Across the Jewish community and the political scene, sexual misconduct of our leaders left us vulnerable and pained. Israel continually found herself threatened at multiple borders, and unrest in the Middle East become both more violent and more complex.

And many of these dark moments brought with them moments of exceptional heroism, generosity, and resilience. And as I reflect on the successes and milestones of this year, I think of an extraordinary Sunday in June, when three Orthodox women joined the ranks of spiritual leadership in our community.

And in our own families and community, we experienced personal losses and new lives, milestones and journeys. Hardships and successes, in our careers, our families, and our internal lives.

But we cannot respond by going about our business as usual. We cannot follow Avraham's initial - deeply human - instinct, to follow an old way of behaving, if perhaps there is a new way. We must find new and different ways to confront the challenges of our lives.

Perhaps it means trying out getting the news from a different source than we usually do - hearing a different angle.

Perhaps it means trying out asking the advice of someone we trust, to get a fresh perspective on a major life decision.

Perhaps it means trying out inviting into our homes for a Shabbat someone we don't think of as similar to us, whether economically, religiously, ethnically, or socially - and seeking to connect to them and learn from them.

Perhaps it means trying out expanding our religious worldview - trying a new mitzvah, refreshing or experimenting in our relationship to prayer, thinking differently about faith.

Perhaps it means trying out a moment of spontaneity in a precious relationship - getting out of our comfort zone to express extra love or gratitude or complexity of feeling - rather than running along the lines of our rehearsed script for how we interact with each other. How often do we let being set in our point of view get in the way of relationship - with a co-worker, or loved one, even a spouse or a child or a dear friend?

Every one of these things, when we try them, is a shofar moment - a moment of living life on the wider end, not the narrower end. Not letting ourselves settle for the certainty of the zoomed-in focus of doing things the way we always do, even if we are convinced it is right.

For let us ask today, on Rosh Hashanah: who is on the other end of that broad-mouthed shofar? The Talmud Yerushalmi¹, when it mentions this halakhah, that a shofar cannot be used if it is reversed, offers a scriptural proof, from the verses we will recite immediately before the shofar blasts, *in just a few moments*:

מִן הַמְצָר קָרָאתִי יְיָ-הֵ עָנֵנִי בְמַרְחֵב יְיָ-הֵ: (תהלים קיח/ה)

From the narrow places I called out to you, God. Answer me, God, with breadth. (Ps. 118:5)

It is our nature to begin in narrow places. Confined and restricted. The shofar blasts remind us how to grow. To broaden our minds and hearts.

¹ According to the Ra"N's version, but not in the Vilna edition.

To be open to new ideas and new experiences.

To reach out to those who are different from us.

To explore spiritually and intellectually.

To use our breadth to be inclusive, to make room to share our world with others.

Not to become rigid, stuck in one understanding of what God asks of us, as Avraham - so understandably - did in that terrifying moment.

יה - עני במרחב - God is the broadest, the most inclusive and open and all-encompassing of beings. *God - answer us by allowing us to move towards you, to a place of breadth.*

As we prepare to hear the calls of the shofar, may we hear the sound *actually expanding*, as the shofar of Sinai did - קול השופר הולך וחזק מאד - actually expanding from the single point of expelled air from our mouth at the narrow opening, to the broad, diverse tones of the sounds and voices of the shofar at the wide open end.

May the breath of the shofar summon our own breadth of openness, of expansion, of making room, of welcoming others. As we journey on the way of growth, through the shofar, from narrow to broad, may we find God, and each other, and our best selves, on the other side.

And may it be a year of personal, communal, and universal growth.

Shanah tovah.