

Most of us learned that we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashana in remembrance of the akedah, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. The shofar is meant to recall Abraham's faith and to entreat God to judge us in light of our relationship to Abraham, our forefather. Our deeds may be found wanting, but his were irreproachable and we are his descendants.

An alternative and much less well-known reading is that the shofar recalls Sarah's cries when she learned of Isaac's near death. In the very next chapter of the Torah, Sarah dies and according to Rashi, the biblical commentator par excellence, she dies as a result of the news that her son was **almost** slaughtered — **kimat** shelo nishat — or, more accurately and intriguingly, almost not slaughtered..

Although there are some midrashim that imagine Sarah dying upon being told that Isaac was in fact murdered, Rashi says no. Rashi says she dies from the knowledge that he was **almost** slaughtered. That her world was stripped of meaning. That the ground was pulled out from under her. That God would not reliably protect her or her son. That her husband's compassion or character or sanity might not be a given. That her world was shaken to its roots and would never be reconstituted.

Remember, Sarah dies knowing Isaac lived. Shouldn't she respond with tears and thanksgiving? Isn't that the right response to disaster averted? Perhaps. Perhaps some faithful souls might react that way. But Rashi is saying that the knowledge of her own vulnerability and the fragility of the world undoes Sarah and that this is a universal reaction to a situation in which anything can happen, in which life hangs by a thread.

The Maharal, a 16th century commentator on Rashi takes us a little deeper into Sarah's emotions. He writes that Sarah realized that it was a just a small thing — a dvar muat — a hairsbreadth that kept Isaac from being slaughtered and this knowledge shocks her — nivhala. He goes on, "This is the way of humanity to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing kept one alive."

What is behala or shock? Aviva Zornberg writes, "...one could say [it is] something like shock. But nivhal is not exactly shock. Nivhal is something like dizziness, even a kind of nausea. It's vertigo. It's not knowing where one is, a shock in the sense of the loss of orientation. I don't know where I am in the world. ...The reaction is a sense of theological vertigo. If it's really just a matter of a millimeter — it could go this way, it could go that way — how do we understand God's providence? How do we understand anything?"<sup>1</sup>

I first read Zornberg's essay more than twenty years ago and it is one I return to often. Still, it was only when I was reminded of it in a lecture this summer by Erin Smokler, that I gasped in recognition. This sense of dizziness, nausea, theological vertigo is exactly what I felt when I learned almost two years ago that Hallel had fallen. As if the world were spinning out of control. As if I would throw up. One night, about a week after she fell, Hallel and I just held one another and wept — almost—almost — almost. We could have lost her. An inch here or there. A hairs breadth separated life from death. Almost... almost..almost. This is a reality that is always true — it is just one we mostly avoid looking at. Why stare into the abyss? It is just too painful.

And yet. This year, as we continue to trudge through this pandemic, most of us, I think, have experienced this sense of behala, of theological vertigo, of the knowledge that only a hairs breadth — a dvar muat, separates life from death. We have lived in much closer proximity to

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<sup>1</sup> Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Cries and Whispers: The Faith of Sarah" in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holidays*, edited by Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 182.

death than most of us usually do and we have been confronted “with the hairs breadth that stands between wellness and illness, order and disorder, coherence and incoherence. It is but a *dvar mu’at* — one very small, microscopic thing — that keeps us vital and our world functional.” If our denial protected us before, we now know how precarious life is. And it is “a very dizzying consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

Even if we are here and healthy and our loved ones are here and healthy, we have all lost so much this year — jobs, human contact, a sense of security, precious time with grandchildren that we will never get back, predictability, the privilege of facing each day without anxiety and without calculating risk. I could go on. So much loss it is, literally, dizzying. In the face of such loss, how do we go on? Sarah, after all, didn’t make it.

And yet, Sarah notwithstanding, we are heirs to a tradition of resilience. We are children of resilient ancestors. Jewish history is filled with stories of loss and destruction, but also of resilience and renewal. What can we learn from our history about where renewal comes from? What does our tradition teach us about how to find our way through very, very difficult times? From whence renewal?

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE was a loss of the greatest magnitude. God’s house was destroyed; the place of communal gathering laid waste, the primary means by which our people connected to God severed. In Jewish history we call it the *Hurban* — the destruction. We commemorate the *Hurban* on *Tisha B’Av*, a day on which we also commemorate many other tragic events in our history, as if the Destruction of the Temple was a magnet around which all other calamities cluster.

So devastated were those that lived through this monumental rupture, that it was not clear that life itself could or should go on. The Babylonian Talmud recounts:

When the Temple was destroyed, large numbers of people in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. [When Rabbi Joshua asked them about their choices, they replied that they could no longer eat meat when it is no longer brought to the altar nor drink when there are no longer libations poured.] He said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased. They said: we can manage with fruit. He said, we should not eat fruit either because there is no longer a first fruit offering. They said, we can manage with other fruits. He said, but then we should not drink water since there is no longer a water libation ceremony.

Rabbi Joshua went on: My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible...To mourn overmuch is also impossible because we cannot impose such a hardship on the community.

The sages therefore ordained that when a man builds a house, he should leave a little — a *dvar muat* — bare. When he prepares a banquet, he should leave out one or two items — a *dvar muat*. A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two.

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<sup>2</sup> Erin Leib Smokler, editor, *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2021) 3. This sermon was directly inspired by Smokler’s introductory essay, in particular her analogy of Sarah’s experience to the pandemic and her use of the rabbinic restraint in relationship to mourning the Temple and how we might apply that.

We break a glass at a wedding reminding us that even at a moment of perfect wholeness, the world is still broken.

In other words, the sages are saying, in the face of tremendous loss, when we could retreat or give up, we don't. But we also don't forget about our loss and party as if it were 2019. The sages provide a way to step back into life — to build, to feast, to celebrate, to love — and to do so in a way that retains the recognition of loss and vulnerability while also not allowing it to overwhelm us. "One can keep brokenness — and all of its hard-won truths — at the forefront of one's consciousness without being broken by it."<sup>3</sup>

Smokler picks up on the word *dvar muat* — a small thing. Just as Sarah realizes that it was a small thing, a *dvar mu'at*, that stood between her son's life and death, so too we are commanded to maintain that awareness of the small thing, of the hairs breadth that separates life from death, coherence from incoherence, thriving from languishing. We are charged to keep going, to keep living — to love, to build, to eat, to seduce. Just leave off a tiny bit. We affirm the truth of instability without being incapacitated by it.

I invite you to think about what *dvar mu'at* you will keep in front of you from this pandemic. For more than a year after Hallel's fall, we kept a post-it stuck to a framed photo of the girls in our kitchen. This was not a conscious decision; it just happened. The post it has the words Jefferson Hospital written on it and their phone number which David scribbled when he received the call on that first morning. Many times I thought to take it down. We certainly didn't need it anymore, thank God. But every time I considered taking it down, I didn't. Something held me back. We needed that *dvar mu'at*, that reminder of the hairs breadth, in order to keep moving forward.

What have we learned from this pandemic that we want to take with us? What insight or awareness or growth or feeling do you want to hang onto? A recognition of life's preciousness? A resolve not to waste time? A decision to work less or to do something altogether different? Deeper compassion? What *dvar mu'at*, what small thing, will you keep to remind you of this time as you move forward? A mask hanging from your rearview mirror? The bread recipe you mastered? The weekly zoom call with your family? How will you keep the loss before you as you return to life? How will you remember what you have learned?

As you think about that, I want to return to the idea of the shofar with which I began. If we read the sound of the shofar as symbolic of Sarah's cries before she died, it's kind of strange. How does hearing Sarah's cries help us to bring in the new year? How does it help us do the work we need to do here this year? to crown God king?

After all, Sarah, according to Rashi's reading, dies in despair. She didn't get to the other side. She didn't find a way to keep living in the face of the *dvar muat*, the hairs breadth separating life from death.

But after we blow the shofar we say, "Ashrei ha'am yode t'ruah — happy are the people who know the sound of the shofar. In what way could we be happy hearing Sarah's cries of despair? If the shofar is to remind us of Sarah, what is it doing here on Rosh Hashana? Why are we blowing it?

For me, the shofar is reminding us that life hangs by a thread. It is important for us to remember, as we enter the new year, that life is uncertain, but that we go on, together, in the

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<sup>3</sup> Smokler, 5.

face of the unknown. We are still here. Sarah died in despair but we are her descendants. The story did not end with Isaac's death nor hers. It meandered, like the crooked shofar, through triumphs — leaving slavery, receiving Torah at Sinai, entering the Promised Land, the Hannukah miracle, the creation of rabbinic culture, the flourishing of Jews in America, the creation of the state of Israel — and tragedies — the destruction of the Temple, the Inquisition, pogroms, the Holocaust. And yet, we are still here. We are alive. Isaac almost died — in some readings, he died — and Sarah died, but they gave birth to us and we are here telling their story.

Sarah's personal story of despair is set against the larger context of the story of the Jewish people and the miracle of our survival. In the same way, we are invited, with the call of the shofar, to view our personal losses in the larger context of the story of the Jewish people, the magnificence of the world, creation, revelation, redemption — the ongoing miracles of life and love and beauty and joy. We are invited to see our stories of loss and pain in the larger context of redemption.

Ours is not a story of a simple faith, Hallmark greeting cards and happy endings. It is a story of a world filled with holes, and with the deep knowledge that life hangs by a thread, a knowledge Sarah bequeaths us. And it is the story of our willingness, across the generations, in the midst of a pandemic, to blow the shofar, proclaim our faith, and walk forward knowing full well that the ground can open beneath us. We affirm coherence against incoherence. We don't close our eyes to it. We put it on the wall and under the chuppah. We omit a dish or a piece of jewelry. We walk forward, knowing there are holes and cavities and we can fall through at any moment, and we walk forward all the same. We affirm that life is worthwhile even so.

In saying this, I am reminded of the words of Rachel Frankel, mother of Naftali Frankel, one of the three boys kidnapped and murdered in Israel in 2014. At his funeral, Frankel said, "Rest in peace, my child. We will learn to sing without you. We will always hear your voice in our hearts." I find it incredible that in a place of the most heart-wrenching grief, Frankel, a mother at her teenage son's grave, was still able to imagine singing again. Her seeming certainty that life will go on and there will be joy and song is stunning." It is precisely the shofar's affirmation, life is precarious and precious. Heartbreak and joy coexist in the same breath.

A kosher shofar cannot be straight. It must be crooked. To remind us, I think, that despite the twists and turns, despite repeated trips through the spin cycle, we can come out the other end. We, collectively have, so far. Mere breath, life's breath, almost inaudible, becomes, in the shofar, mighty sound. We blow the shofar and affirm that despite the holes, despite the twists and turns, or perhaps because of them, we can still connect to God. We still crown God king, not because God is of necessity king, but because we choose, in full knowledge, to declare his sovereignty, to affirm coherence in the face of incoherence, to say, "we choose life. we choose the blessing."