

A Shofar in Jerusalem: Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778

Once, during the tenure of Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, a group of workers under pressure to complete a building in one of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem continued their labor even on the holy day of Rosh Hashanah. People living in the area sent word to the rabbi, expecting him to order the builders to cease their efforts immediately. Instead, he sent an emissary down to the construction site to blow shofar for the crew.

Immediately the workers turned to listen. All put down their tools. Some began to cry. When the blowing was completed, each and every man decided of his own accord not to continue working during the holiday. Several ran home and changed their clothing. When the emissary returned back to shul he was surprised. Many of the employees had come to join him and Rav Kook in their Rosh Hashanah worship.

How extraordinarily powerful are the blasts of the shofar! In part, the sound of the ram's horn is a call to attention, to conscience, a rallying cry for the spirit, a reminder of moral responsibility. The workers in Jerusalem, discomfited by the ram horn's piercing notes, felt a pull towards virtue, suddenly recognizing the crassness of their behavior and a far better path for which to follow. In the words of the great rabbi and philosopher Maimonides, "It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying: 'Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber from your slumber. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator'" (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4).

Along with being a clarion call towards right and good, however, the shofar is also a soft and gentle reminder of home, a conveyer of tradition, of nostalgia, of time-honored practices passed down from generation to generation. The workers in Jerusalem, stirred by the ram horn's familiar cadence, felt

wistfulness and longing for customs they hadn't even realized that they had been missing, suddenly remembering their parents' homes, their grandparents' faces, smells of the musty synagogue in which they had once gathered each year at this time. Change, as we all well know, is so very difficult to achieve, and it is often inspired either by feelings of inadequacy and shame or by feelings of attachment and love - wanting to do and to be far better for those whom we care about. In its exquisite wisdom, Judaism has captured each of these impulses simultaneously in the ritual of shofar. It is both a wake-up call and a tender whisper of encouragement at the very same time.

This evening we join together for Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest nights of the Jewish calendar. We come to shul to reflect upon the past year, to express gratitude for its many joys and blessings, and to seek healing for its places of pain and disappointment. We come to examine our lives and our deeds and to make heartfelt resolutions that we pray we will have the strength to keep. We come to see dear friends and to feel part of a community, to link ourselves to other Jews throughout time and space, to honor our parents and grandparents, some of them long gone, with whom we once sat in similar services, singing similar melodies. We come to synagogue to affirm our identity as Jews, to serve as role-models for our children, and to find inspiration. Many of us, too, come to feel a connection with God.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the central *mitzvah* of shofar lies not in the blowing of the instrument but rather in the hearing of it, that when we say the blessing over the ram's horn it ends with the words *lishmoa kol shofar* – “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made us holy through Your commandments and commanded us to *listen to the sound of the shofar.*”

While there are many things that we will be called upon to *do* in services over the next few days – to stand and to sit, to recite hundreds of words both privately and out loud, to open the ark, to put on *tallitot*, to kiss the Torah as it comes around in processional – when it comes to the shofar, we are simply commanded to listen, to be receptive, to allow ourselves to truly hear the ram horn's notes and

to be moved by its call. Tradition has long understood what Rav Kook intuited all those many years ago – that the pure, piercing blasts of the shofar alone are often enough to start turning us back towards center. All we need to do is to really listen.

Indeed, the words “Rosh Hashanah” are nowhere to be found in Torah; when it comes to the name of this holiday that falls on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish year it is simply called *Yom Teruah* – the day on which the horn is sounded. Chief Rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, points out that Israelite history knew of musical instruments besides the shofar, most particularly the silver trumpets that accompanied our ancestors during their period of desert wandering; in Temple times these trumpets were even sounded on Rosh Hashanah along with the shofar. But the ram’s horn became the central motif of this holiday, indeed the object for which it is named, because of its qualities of plainness and simplicity, mirroring the raw, bare nature of the human heart. In his words, “The very naturalness of the shofar gives it its power. The shofar is the wordless cry at the heart of a religion of words. Judaism is a profoundly verbal culture, a religion of holy texts, impassioned conversation, and ‘argument for the sake of heaven.’ Yet there is a time for emotions that lie too deep for words. The sound of the shofar breaks through the carapace of the self-justifying mind and touches us directly, at the most primal level of our being” (*Koren Machzor*, p. 498).

The shofar isn’t rational, it isn’t intellectual, it doesn’t move the mind but rather the spirit. And so, in most cases, it is with *teshuvah*. We can tell ourselves 1,000 times that we need to change; we can write lists and make plans and vow to do better, but it’s only when our hearts and our souls catch up with our brains that transformation truly occurs. We have to feel it, not know it; want it, not rationalize it.

Perhaps this is why Rosh Hashanah is named for the aesthetic experience of shofar. Music and sound transcend mere words, nudging the human heart to open.

And so it begins tonight! While we will not hear the first clear blasts of the shofar until tomorrow, we begin this evening the process of *teshuva* - return to our best selves - that we hope that the ram's horn will continue to accelerate. Over the past year, each of us have had our own moments of "building on Rosh Hashanah," engaging in behavior that was counter to our highest aspirations and values, that took us away from who we most wish to be. Tonight, like the construction crew, we put down our work, change our clothing, and come to synagogue seeking a better way.

I do not know what would have happened in that Jerusalem neighborhood so many years ago if Rav Kook would have gone down to the construction site himself to chastise the crew or to plead with them or to order the workers to drop their tools immediately and stop building. My sense is that he would not have been successful; often, we do not respond well when confronted under pressure. But by playing a note both strident and comforting, the rabbi brought a disillusioned group of men alienated from tradition back to their senses, back to their center, back to a place of meaning and of memory. Indeed, he brought them back home.

May the sounds of the shofar that we hear tomorrow do the same for us, moving our spirits towards a glorious state of return.

Wishing you all the very happiest of new years! Shana Tova!