

Happy New Year? – Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779

One of my family's favorite childhood haunts was an ice-cream parlor named Chadwick's. Located right on the Lexington/Waltham line, not too far from the winding road leading up to our synagogue, Chadwick's was one of those old-timey restaurants with waiters in bow ties and jaunty music piped in from a player piano and its own signature sundae, the Belly Buster, a confection so large it had to be carried out of the kitchen on an actual stretcher! Chadwick's also had an enormous gong that hung from the ceiling, and every time a customer had a birthday the wait-staff would bang this gong and ring a cow-bell, blow a kazoo, and then stand on a chair and loudly announce that there was a birthday in the house at which point the entire restaurant would join together and sing. In such a relatively small space, the cacophonous sounds of all this noise made quite a racket and, as a little girl, I both hoped and feared that there would be such a celebration each time we went out for dessert. There was nothing more exciting for a young child than the deep, ringing sound of that enormous gong. It was also more than a little bit terrifying!

While not a gong, per se, it is hard to think of the High Holiday season beginning tonight without also thinking about the striking, stirring, iconic tones of the shofar. For the last few weeks since the beginning of Elul, the Hebrew month immediately preceding Rosh Hashanah, we've been sounding the ram's horn each morning to announce the upcoming holidays and make sure that we are all sufficiently prepared for their arrival. On each day of Rosh Hashanah starting tomorrow, we will hear 100 full notes of the shofar in commemoration of the verse from Numbers describing this day as one on which "the horn is sounded" (Numbers 29:1). And, of course, we will end the solemn Yom Kippur fast next week with the shofar's piercing *tekiah gedolah*, the haunting climax of this entire holiday period. Like the sound of mallet on metal, the shofar is meant to strike a note of celebration – reminding us of trumpets

that are played before the coronation of a king on this day that we toast the birthday of the world and imagine promising new beginnings. Like the tones of a gong, the shofar is also meant to inspire within us as a bit of humility and awe so that we approach this season, with its significant themes of repentance, forgiveness, and return, in a state of appropriate seriousness of purpose.

The great Rabbi Sidney Greenberg points out that more than being a holiday, a time for festivity or recreation, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are really meant to be holy days, times for reflection and self-betterment. Even the way we greet one another during this season, he argues, wishing each other “Happy New Year” rather than “Good New Year,” which would be a more appropriate and literal translation of the Hebrew *Shana Tova*, places the emphasis on pleasure and contentment rather than on decency and right behavior. In his short poem, “Days of Trepidation” Greenberg explains what he believes this sacred period is ideally meant to be about when he writes:

On holidays we run from duties.

On holy days we face up to them.

On holidays we seek to let ourselves go.

On holy days we try to bring ourselves under control...

On holidays we reach out for the things we want.

On holy days we reach up for the things we need.

Holidays bring a change of scene.

Holy days bring a change of heart¹.

What we should be aiming for, this Rosh Hashanah, says Greenberg, is not joy or self-fulfillment, satisfaction or even gratification. What we should be aiming for, this holiday season, says Greenberg, is goodness and just action pure and simple.

Yet the shofar, I believe, reminds us that Rosh Hashanah is perhaps not quite so binary, that this sacred period can be both a holiday and a holyday at the very same time. On Rosh Hashanah we join together with friends and community, we dip sweet apples in honey, we cook special foods and feel the pleasure of our family all being together around the same table. And on Rosh Hashanah we also begin looking deep into ourselves, examining our deeds, making resolutions, creating repair. The shofar stirs us both for celebration and for introspection. It excites and terrifies us at the very same time.

And so it begins tonight! While we will not hear the shofar's evocative blasts until tomorrow morning, we referenced it earlier in our worship this evening when we sang: *Tiku b'chodesh shofar* – Sound the shofar on our feast day, on the new moon, when it is hidden. For it is Israel's law, a decree of the God of Jacob" (Psalms 81:4-5). The word *mishpat* – translated here as "decree" – also means "judgment" which is one of the reasons the ancient rabbis felt this passage from Psalms to be so appropriate for Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we both blow the shofar and experience the world being judged. In this verse, too, however we notice the juxtaposition of celebration and solemnity, the shofar marking a feast day which is also a day of reckoning, announcing a holiday that is simultaneously holy and a holyday that

¹ "Days of Trepidation" by Rabbi Sidney Greenberg (from Moments of Transcendence edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins)

is simultaneously happy. The shofar that we sound signals joy and also trepidation. It moves our hearts towards both celebration and introspection.

In this first hour of 5779 just begun, I wish you and your families *Shana Tova* - a year that is exceedingly good and exceedingly happy too! Please rise as we join together for Kiddush on page 24.