

Kol Shofar, our Call to Conscience
Rosh Hashanah 5780
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When we listen to the blast of the shofar, what is it that we hear?
And why do we need a shofar to hear it?

The shofar is one of our most ancient Jewish symbols. Its sound is triumphant, and since we always hear it on Rosh Hashanah its meaning is somehow reminiscent of the delicious joy of apples and honey. It carries in its undertone stories of liberation and freedom. But if we listen closely, we hear a trembling melody, which beneath the symbol's popular meaning tells a different story.

The Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud listened carefully to the shofar, as they grappled with the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, and some of them found it haunting. In one passage they asked whether the shofar should be straight, pointing directly toward the heavens? Or should a proper shofar bend & contort downward? The question behind the question: should the calling of Rosh Hashanah be one that lifts us upward, elevating our spirits with Divine inspiration? Or should this moment be one of bending our heads to ground, humbling us with the reality of our own human condition.

I've actually heard the same debate around High Holy Day sermons, if you can believe it. Should the homilies lift us up with inspiration, or move our heads and eyes downward toward the reality on the ground.

A story is told of a woman who approached the rabbi after services and said, "I am so sorry, Rabbi, for my husband who walked out during your sermon." The Rabbi replied, "It's okay, I know I can be provocative and alarming, and who am I to judge." The woman replied, "It's not a reflection on *you*, rabbi, it's just that Ralph has been sleepwalking since he's a child."

I think we can agree that there's no sleepwalking during the blaring sound of the shofar. But physically it embodies that essential question of how we can possibly lift ourselves upward when we know that there's a reality around us, a sobering story that demands to be heard.

For these talmudic sages, they had one story in mind. It's a story that they named only by implication, in a passage in which they discussed which animals were permitted to make a kosher shofar. Rav Hisda argues that we can make a shofar out of the horns of virtually any kosher animal, except the bovine family—that is, related to a cow. Why is that? Rav Hisda says cryptically, "*Ein kateigor naaseh saneigor*," literally "because an accuser may not act as a defender." What kind of a cow is an accuser? What animal in what story continues to accuse generations to come of a crime? Their answer: the crime of the Golden Calf. Why? Because it lingers on for future generations. And a shofar is, somehow, an instrument of our defense, designed to distance us, in every way, from the incident of the Golden Calf.

So as we spiral downward along the arch of the shofar, let us refresh our memories of Exodus 32. The people see that Moses is so long in coming down from the mountain that they call out to Aaron, "*kum aseilu lanu elohim*" make for us god, since we don't know what really happened to that man Moses who took us out of Egypt." And Aaron complies: "Take off your golden rings," he says, "from the ears of your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me." All the people take off their gold, they give it to Aaron, and Aaron magically transforms it into a Golden Calf for them to worship.

Meanwhile, on the top of the mountain, far removed from the people, Moses receives the 10 Commandments—the symbol of the very covenant that was being broken. When Moses returns to the people and sees what happened, in public, before the whole community he shatters the tablets. This is the lowest point of our text—the grimmest moment of public corruption. The relationship between people and God is devastated, with all parties to blame, and they’re left with broken tablets, in plain sight, at the foot of Sinai.

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Returning to our central question, *why do we need a shofar?* Because it is our most public symbol. It is our civic alarm clock. And the shofar, the sign of transcendence in public space, also spirals downward, alluding inversely to the moment in our story when covenant collides with civic corruption. Within the fragmented cry of the shofar, we can hear the echo of those two broken stone tablets.

In our own public square, do we not hear this echo? In June, Gallup released their annual poll of Americans’ Confidence in Institutions. The results were surprising—to absolutely no one. Trends of broken trust are continuing and confidence in U.S. Institutions—from organized religion to the media to banks—is nearly as low as ever.

This Gallup poll is no revelation, but it certainly corroborates the prevalent climate of distrust we’ve all sensed. According to the data, there was one institution that held the least amount of confidence—one establishment sitting rock bottom in the covenantal category of American trust: Congress. 11% of Americans have confidence in Congress. A figure that, as some pundits have quipped, amounts to less support than the King of England received from the colonists in 1776.

And this is not a *partisan* crisis of confidence. In the wake of the attack on our 2016 elections and the 34 people criminally charged—and just this week, the discovery of the well-coordinated flagrantly illegal defiance of Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act—we might be duped into thinking it is partisan, a fiction manufactured by a party that wants power. But as President Adams said, “facts are stubborn things.” the facts from Gallup and Pew Research are stubbornly clear that governmental and widespread institutional distrust spans political parties.

Here, in this room, we have Democrats and Republics, Independents and Undecideds, and despite what most think, what unites us as a *k’hilah k’dosha*, a holy community, is so much stronger than what divides us. What we learned from the Report on that election attack, what we learned from the stifling of a credible whistleblower report: is that our whole citizenry faces a well-funded, strategic campaign *to divide us*; to see each other—each and every Other—as a threat:

Immigrant vs. patriot
Concerned citizen vs. patriot
Jew vs. loyal patriot

We know how this story goes. This is how it begins. This is how it began at the foot of Sinai, when the Israelites organized their power and their gold to defy the God who gave them Freedom, dividing themselves from the Covenant of their ancestors.

Our ancestors endured the unimaginable, time and again throughout the ages. The United States of America, was the first nation to offer Jews full rights of citizenship. We, the Jewish people, out of respect for our ancestors and love for generations yet to be, we cannot for one moment put down our guard and turn on each other. Particularly in a moment like this, as we face rising antisemitism and white supremacy, does our safety and security depend on the welfare of this nation; upon the integrity of our democracy; upon the

rightful and righteous exercise of our power as citizens. As citizens how do we make sense of this reality on the ground?

Harvard Professor of Law and Ethics Lawrence Lessig, in his book *Republic Lost*, focuses specifically on how the campaign finance system is at the root of our nation's civic corruption. He writes, "Practically every important issue in American politics today is tied to this [one] because this issue is at the root, the thing that feeds the other ills."

The perception of brokenness in campaign finance is actually not so contentious. 75% of Americans believe that campaign contributions buy results in Congress, with Republicans just as convinced as Democrats. From the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizen's United* to what we learned in the Mueller report, to ongoing election fraud, to unconscionable voter suppression, it is clear: our democracy has been hacked, corrupted.

Lessig uses the term, "dependency corruption." He defines it in this way:

"Imagine a compass, its earnest arrow pointing to the magnetic north. We all have a trusting sense of how this magical device works. When we turn with the compass in our hands, the needle turns back.... Now imagine we've rubbed a lodestone on the metal casing of the compass, near the mark for 'west.' The arrow shifts. Slightly. That shift is called 'magnetic deviation.' Magnetic north was the intended dependence. Tracking magnetic north is the purpose of the device. The lodestone creates a competing dependence.... A corruption."

As American Jews, we have a proud history of loyalty to the device of our nation's compass, our Constitution, which points to the magnetic north,

"to...establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

As guardians of Jewish memory, we know the danger of governmental corruption. We know it from the Golden Calf, when Aaron gathers gold from among the people to manufacture a deity that deviates the Israelites from their magnetic north, a lodestone that perverts their purpose as a people—to be holy!

So when we sound our shofar, calling our attention to the public square, when we sound our shofar, allowing our eyes to bend downward toward the covenant between our people and our leaders, what we hear is our own broken tablets.

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But our ancient story doesn't end there, with the Golden Calf and the broken tablets. Moses climbs back up the mountain. The people return to the covenant, to each other, to God. They all pull their own weight and the result is two new tablets! That is because our shofar also bends upward. Yes, it spirals down, compelling us to see the world as it is, incomplete, but it also bends upward, uplifting us, calling us to the mighty mitzvot of civic repair, of *tzedek*, of social justice.

This is not a new kind of shofar blast for our community. We've been following the call of the uplifting shofar throughout our history.

This congregation has sounded the shofar in every chapter of our story, From the call in the 70's to fight racial segregation in schools, to the blast in the 80's, in the wake of federal budget cuts afflicting the poorest among us, and Judea Reform and our partners in Durham Congregations in Action (DCIA) led the charge to build Urban Ministries of Durham—to provide food, shelter, and a *future of promise*.

In every decade, every year, every hour the shofar calls for *a future of promise*.
And today, the shofar calls us to get organized—organized *for a future of promise*.
The shofar calls us to build power with our partners, like DCIA, like Carolina Jews for Justice, like Durham CAN and its 29 houses of worship— and rise above the petty politics of division, rise above the “dependency corruption,” rise above the broken tablets, and climb back up that mountain.

Because this is *our* story, and so long as we are *B’nai Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, we stand at Sinai *with a choice*: when we listen to the shofar, what do we *choose* to hear?

In the days ahead, when we read our newspapers and newsfeeds, watch our TVs, or open our inboxes, and our minds follow that depressive downward curve of the shofar, will we listen for its uplifting call? Will we hear the sound, and the quality, and the *music* of our most ancient instrument?

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Perhaps you’ve heard the story of a retired music teacher, an elderly man who lived in a boarding house. His health was declining, and he wasn’t able to get around so well. Each morning a neighbor of his, a student, would stop by his room and ask, “What’s the good news?” The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and say, “That’s middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. I can hear the tenor upstairs—he sings flat! The piano across the hall, it’s out of tune, but, my friend, this tuning fork will always be middle C!”

Within the harmony and discord of our daily lives, we have a middle C. Our shofar. It sinks our heads downward, demanding that we hold no illusions about the world in which we live.

But then it lifts our faith upward, reminding us of our mandate to climb, to ascend, to repair. On Rosh Hashanah 5780, may we hear the shofar, our call to conscience.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam
asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu lishmoah kol shofar.*
Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe,
Who makes us holy through our sacred deeds,
and commands us to hear the voice of the shofar.

(Shofar sounding)