On my way to Israel, this summer, on the airplane, I watched the movie Noah, starring Russell Crowe and Emma Watson. As you might imagine from the title, it tells the story of God’s decision to destroy the world with a flood because of the moral shortcomings of the people of that generation, except for Noah and his family. God tells Noah to build an ark and to bring his family and a pair of each animal species into the ark – one by one – as the song goes. Being familiar with the story of Noah and the flood from the Torah, and through children books for so many years, I was surprised by how much the movie moved me.

Without spoiling the story (though, I believe we all know how it ends), I want to share what I found powerful about this reading of the biblical tale, which will be mentioned as part of the zichronot section. First, I was struck by the representation of evil and the potential for evil in humanity. The principal moral shortcoming highlighted in the movie is the way in which the people were harming Mother Nature. Noah, unlike others around him, cares deeply about the environment and teaches his children to respect all living things – including animals, which he doesn’t eat, and to be mindful of not wasting or destroying anything. While Noah speaks the language of stewardship, the “bad guys” in the movie are all about subduing and conquering the earth. This is, of course, a reading based on our own reality and the widespread human obliviousness to our harmful treatment of the earth, and it points out so vividly the horrendous impact of our behavior on the environment.

In the movie, we meet a Noah who believes that there is no future for humankind. He believes that God only wants Justice, not the continuity of humanity. It is through his family, his wife, his adopted daughter and his granddaughters that he comes to understand that both God and humankind must balance Justice with Compassion, that God is giving humankind a second chance to do better – to make the right moral choices. By the end of the movie, he has come to see this potential. He feels love and gives the future generation their birthright, telling them to be fruitful and multiply and take this second chance, to build a better world. A world without hatred, a world without destruction. Ham, one of the sons, when walking away, says to his brother’s wife, Ila “maybe we’ll learn to be kind”.

Though we have not yet internalized this message, maybe it’s not too late. Maybe we’ll learn to be kind, maybe we can take this new chance to repair the world more seriously. Maybe we can realize that it is upon us, upon humanity, to stop destruction, war and hunger and bring hope for our children and the next generations.
Ashrei Ha’am yod’ei T’ruah, says the Psalmist- Happy is the people that knows the sound of T’ruah- the sound of the shofar.
Adonai b’or panekha y’halekhun – they walk in the light of your divine presence.

What does it mean to know the sound of the shofar?

The Hassidic Master known as Degel Machane Ephraim teaches that knowing the t’ruah means allowing our hearts to be shattered, in order to open ourselves to the light of the divine presence.

My heart is shattered. It is shattered by this world full of violence, hatred and bloodshed. As we prepare to hear the shofar, I pray to allow myself to open to the Divine presence. To hear the call for responsibility, the call to bring change to the world, not to be passive, but to act.

In a few moments and before each shofar calling I will bring our awareness to an issue that needs our attention. Sadly, there are too many to be listed. On Rosh Hashanah we look at our own lives, at the choices we make as individuals, at our relationships, at the new possibilities that life can bring to us. But we ought to do so, by looking also at our place in the world and our responsibility to create a better world. The shofar is a wake up call to act in this world, to not sit silent to injustice. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson teaches us: “If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and what is ugly in the world, then it is you yourself that needs repair.”

I invite us to hear the shofar as a call to care, to find kindness and hope, and to look for those pieces of the world that God has left for us to complete.

In a moment I will invite you to rise to hear the shofar of Malchuyot. As we come together on the High Holidays, we look not only inward at our own deeds, but also outward at the world at large. We are part of a deeply interwoven global family for which we are all personally responsible. The hunger, poverty and disease that afflict our world are not an irrevocable destiny but injustices that we can overcome. During the Days of Awe, and every day, we hold the collective power to change the world. As we reflect on the year past and the year to come, we must recognize our responsibility, hope for a better reality and pursue justice. May our prayers today inspire us to become agents for change, working to ensure that all people are guaranteed the human right to food, sustenance and healthcare. May the shofar blast awaken our hearts and motivate us to forge a just world where none are hungry and all are inscribed for a lifetime of peace and fulfillment.

1 (As told by Rabbi Aaron Fine).
As we rise to hear the shofar of Zichronot, I invite us to take a moment to remember the violence in our communities. The violence that takes life daily on the streets of Boston and other big cities in the United States. The violence that has again and again taken the lives of children in our schools. The violence in our homes directed against women, children, and men. The violence that took place this last summer in Ferguson, Missouri and other places as a result of racism and bigotry.

Let us hear the call of the shofar reconnecting us to the deep inner place where we know that we cannot accept that "this is just how things are". Let us remember how precious every life is and dare to hear that call that moves us to change this world, for us and for future generations.

As we rise to hear the shofar of Shofarot, take a few moments to reflect on the call that you personally need to hear. What is it that you need to be reminded of? What in the world, in our country, in our local communities and in your life is calling out to you not to be ignored?

Will you let the call of the shofar take to your innermost, most vulnerable places? How will you take that call and transform it into action?