If Not Now When?
Kavanah for Second Day of Rosh Hashanah
TBZ 5776
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Many of you are familiar with this teaching from Pirkei Avot Chapter 1: Mishna 14:

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָיו, אֵימָת

(Hillel) would say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? When I am for myself, what am I? If not now, when?

I want to take a moment, as we prepare to hear the shofar, to truly hear the last words of this teaching. *If not now, when?*

*If not now, when?* is the urgent call for us to be compassionate and caring, to recognize our responsibility, and to pursue justice and work together towards a better reality. Not tomorrow, but today. *If not now, when?*

Our rabbis teach that one should pray only in a house with windows (Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 34B). This is so we do not disconnect our prayer from the rest of ourselves. We must connect our actions inside the synagogue with what is happening outside of it. When we come together, we must not disassociate ourselves from the larger world; instead, we must realize the depth of our interconnectedness.

This means being aware of – and feeling called to respond to – a lot of brokenness.

Soon, we will hear the shofar of Musaf. As we come together on the High Holidays, we look not only inward at our own deeds, but also outward to the world at large. We are part of a deeply interwoven global family, for which we are all hold collective responsibility. During the Days of Awe, and every day throughout the year, we hold the power to change the world.

Shofar is the cry of brokenness – but it is also the promise of wholeness.

I invite us to hear the shofar as a call to pursue justice.
I invite us to hear the shofar as a prayer for a promise of wholeness.
I invite us to hear the shofar and to remember all those who have been victims of violence, racism, bigotry, hunger and war.
I invite us to hear the shofar and cry with its sound as we remember:

- Shira Banki, 16 years old, who was stabbed by an ultra-Orthodox Jew at the Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem this summer.

- Carol Browne, the cousin of a member of our congregation, and a victim of domestic violence. She was 39 years old when she was stabbed to death in the driveway of her home in New Jersey.
• Ali Dawabsheh, who was only 18 months old, and his parents Saad and Reham. Their house in a Palestinian village in the West Bank was set on fire by presumed religious nationalist extremists.

• Rabbi Moshe Twersky (60) and others, who were killed by two terrorists as they entered the Kehilat Yaakov Synagogue in Jerusalem last November during morning prayers.

• Jean Louis, a 20 years old from Dorchester, who was killed by gun violence last July.

• Clementa C. Pinckney (41), and all those who gathered together in The Emanuel Church in Charleston, a holy space to study Bible and were victims of a horrific racist shooting.

• Alan Kurdi, a three year old who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to migrate with his family for a better life. A refugee, he was fleeing the violence in Syria along with thousands of his countrymen.

In the words of our teacher Rabbi Art Green: “The shofar sound represents prayer beyond words, an intensity of longing that can be articulated only in a wordless shout. But the order of the sounds, according to one old interpretation, contains the message in quite explicit terms. Each series of shofar blasts begins with teki’ah, a whole sound. It is followed by shevarim, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings.” “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.” Then follows a teru’ah, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: “I was entirely smashed to pieces.” But each series has to end with a new teki’ah, promising wholeness once more”. (Seek My Face, Page 169).

Let us hear the call of the shofar, and have it reconnect us to the knowledge that we cannot accept that “this is just how things are”. Let us remember how precious every life is, and dare to hear the call that moves us to change this world, for us and for future generations.

May the shofar awaken our hearts and motivate us to create a more just world, where all are inscribed for a lifetime of peace and fulfillment. *If not now, when?*