

## **Erev Rosh Hashanah**

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Here we are at the new year.

How I wish I could proclaim, “it’s 5781!” and all our challenges and disappointments and fears would magically disappear.

I tried to write a message of hope. I tried to bring inspiration to buoy us up.

I typed page after page—and deleted page after page.

The Judaism I love offers realistic, meaningful spiritual guidance—not platitudes.

Did you know that the oldest name for Rosh Hashanah is Yom Teruah, the day of loud blasts-- the day of the shofar?

The symbolism of the shofar is not hard to unpack. A horn blast is the perfect way to announce the New Year. The unusual and loud sounds are a great alarm clock, waking us up from our spiritual slumber. Some ancient

images even portray the shofar as a coronation horn, reminding us of God's rule.

What has gotten buried over the years are powerful and poignant and necessary and radically different teachings about the shofar, from the Talmud, that frame this year much, much more meaningfully.

Through Hebrew wordplay, narrative interweaving and personal experience, the rabbis discuss the sounds of the shofar. What are the sounds it is to make? Are they long or short? What are the combinations of sounds? What emotions are the notes to elicit?

What do the rabbis decide?

The shofar sounds like crying. The shofar sounds like mothers sobbing for the different fates of their children.

The Shofar sounds like Hagar, Sarah's handmaid. Sarah, seeing Ishmael playing with Isaac, doesn't approve. Sarah demands to Abraham that he send Hagar and Ishmael away, and God agrees. Hagar is sent out into the wilderness with Ishmael and only a bottle of water. She puts Ishmael under a bush and moves away so she doesn't have to watch him die.

She lifts her voice and she weeps. She assumes that Ishmael has surely died. God answers her. "Fear not," God says to Hagar. "I have heard the boy where he is. Come, pick up the boy and hold him in your arms, for I will make a great nation of him." The shofar echoes her cries of fear as they become cries of relief and hope.

The Shofar's cry is for injustice. The shofar's cry is for compassion.

The shofar sounds like our matriarch Sarah. Sarah died immediately after the story of the binding of Isaac. To try to understand the cause of Sarah's death, the rabbis wrote this midrash- legend. Satan, the believed adversary, was mad that Abraham passed God's test with the Akedah. To exact revenge at Abraham, he pays a visit to Sarah.

He says: "Have you not heard?"

She said to him: "No."

He said to her: "Your husband, Abraham, has taken your son Isaac and slain him and offered him up as a burnt offering upon the altar."

Immediately, Sarah began to weep. She cried three cries, and she howled three times. She died from the grief.

The Shofar's cry is grief. The shofar's cry is fear.

The Shofar sounds like our role model Hannah, a text we typically read on Rosh Hashanah morning. Hannah, beloved by her husband yet yearning for a child, goes to the Temple in Shiloh to pray in desperation.

Hannah sits in the great Temple at Shiloh, bitter with grief, and "she prays to God and cries a deep cry". She bargains and she makes promises: "Eternal God, if You take notice of your servant's affliction, if You keep me in mind and do not forget me, giving me a son, I will dedicate him to You for life."

Hannah is blessed with a son and she fulfills her promise.

The shofar's cry is the cry for a future that is different than our dreams. The shofar's cry is for hopes and goals that seem impossible.

In their keening, the rabbis heard the shofar. In their keening, the rabbis heard their open hearts, the baring of their souls.

This year the shofar cries out, each note a falling tear.

We cry for the grief

We cry for the loneliness

We cry for the illness

We cry for the frustration

We cry for the stuck

We cry for the losses

We cry for the anger

We cry for the injustices

I resisted the cries of the shofar this year. I heard it—being practiced in my home; even on social media. I didn't want to give in to the tears. What if I cried and it hurt and I didn't feel any better?

Then I remembered: we are not new to tears, we Jews.

Every year, year after year after year after year: we place tears on our tables during Passover. When we put salt water on our tables, we purposely *make* tears. We *taste* those tears to remember the sadness of the past. We *taste* those tears to remember the strength in vulnerability. We *taste* those tears to remember: Through our tears, we know strength. Through our tears, we know resilience. Through our tears, we will learn possibility.

According to the Rambam—Maimonides-- the first aspect of the path of Teshuva is crying. My friends, this is not a part of Rosh Hashana. This is

Rosh Hashanah. We learn this from the shofar: tears of grief, of fear, of struggle, and of anger, and the tears of vulnerability, and strength, and resilience and possibility. And this year— And this year—we taste those tears on our cheeks.