

## **What Would My Great-Grandfather & Grandfather Think...**

Rosh Hashanah, Day 1 (Burke Sanctuary) & Kol Nidrei (Paul Family Social Hall) 5778  
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

This is the first High Holidays that I am spending with you at Har Shalom that I don't have my beloved grandmother here with me. She loved coming to Har Shalom, and so many of you were so kind and warm and welcoming to her. She always wanted to sit right up front, right here in the first row. And to tell you the truth, she was the best audience for all of my sermons. First of all she never once fell asleep! And she would give me all kinds of great non-verbal feedback: she would nod and smile and watch every move...She hung on every word, every syllable...or so I thought. Turns out she couldn't hear a single word I said! Even with the hearing aids and the amplifying devices, she didn't get any of it. Last year I asked her at lunch after Rosh Hashanah services, so how did you like the sermon? She said, well, I really would like a hard copy so that I can read it over carefully. I said, sure--no problem, but what about that story I told, or that joke I told, or that brilliant point I made...Finally she confessed—to tell you the truth, I really couldn't hear it! I miss her terribly, especially today.

I am the executor of her estate, and along with all the bills and paperwork, I've also been sifting through pictures and mementos representing 92 years of life on this planet. I found this picture of her father, my great grandfather when he was discharged from the Army after World War I. He was attacked with shrapnel and mustard gas, which affected him the rest of his life. He actually volunteered to go to war in place of his brother who was mentally impaired, and he feared that his brother wouldn't stand a chance in battle. His own parents fled Russian pogroms, and my great grandfather loved America and everything it stood for. Sadly my great grandfather died at 56 of complications from his war injuries.

I also found my grandfather's high school diploma. My grandmother's husband Joe graduated from Hagerstown High School in 1940! (See, it was *bashert* that I should be living in Maryland!) Soon after his graduation he entered the U.S. Army as well, to fight in the Second World War. He wasn't an officer and he didn't command any troops. He was but one of the 16 million Americans who took part in that great battle of civilization against a brutal, evil Nazi regime. According to my grandmother, her husband was never the same after the war. The once

gregarious, uninhibited 19 year old came back from Europe solitary, quiet, and often lost in his thoughts. He suffered from what we now call PTSD, but no one talked about that back then, at least not in those terms. He too was extremely patriotic, and though he was forever changed by the war, he believed in this country and was proud to have served.

As I think about these two men, these ancestors of mine with whom I am becoming reacquainted as I sift through my grandmother's keepsakes, I keep asking myself the same question: What would they think of America today? Would they recognize the country that they loved so much? If they were alive today, what would they think of the America they made such profound sacrifices for?

Can we talk about this past year for a moment? This has been a rough year...you know it's bad when a hurricane is a welcome distraction from the news cycle! I don't want to minimize the loss and devastation, but at least with the hurricanes we also got some incredible stories of kindness, generosity, and heroism--Like our very own Ian Weston, who left his day job to go to both Houston and Florida to be a first responder. The solar eclipse was a nice diversion too, but here on earth it's been a pretty downright grueling year. I recently spoke to a prominent pediatrician in this area who told me that he's seen an 80% increase in anxiety among his patients over the past several months...his patients are children! My God, what would my great grandfather and grandfather have thought about Ku Klux Klansmen marching in America in the 21st Century? What would they think about a rally of neo-Nazis waving flags with swastikas, the very symbol that 300,000 Americans died fighting against; bigots and racists chanting "Jews will not replace us" and "Make America White Again?" What would they think about a synagogue in the 21st Century surrounded by a tiki torch, gun-slinging mob, whose congregants were told to sneak out of services through the back door to safety, or whose Torah scrolls were removed from the ark and hidden away so that they wouldn't be burned or desecrated. And I know very well what they would think about the statement that there were "very fine people on both sides." They would think that if you march with neo-Nazis and Klansmen, you have forfeited your right to be called very fine people. You are not a very fine person if that's who you keep company with.

I was at a meeting recently at the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights. The office is on the third floor of the public library in Rockville Town Center. The director, James Stowe, told me that library patrons have found neo-Nazi propaganda slipped inside of library books on the subjects of Nazism, World War II, and Adolf Hitler, in that very same library, just three floors below! That's not Charlottesville, that's right here in Rockville. Anti-Semitic broadsides were found recently in mailboxes in Chevy Chase. And the scourge of Israel hatred and anti-Zionism has cross-crossed America's college campuses, which have become hotbeds of antagonism for Jewish students. Don't forget what Martin Luther King once said: "When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews."

Part of the pain of this year is the realization that there is a whole lot more hate, a whole lot more racism, xenophobia, bigotry, and chauvinism in our society than any of us realized. We may have thought, *Oh that's a thing of the past; we resolved that decades ago; Heck, we fought wars over these things; nobody harbors such primitive, ignorant ideas anymore!* But, guess what? We found out they still do. And one thing that was clear about this most recent manifestation of hatred is that it is not cloaked in white hoods anymore; there was no attempt at anonymity or disguise. The faces of those white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and modern day Klansmen were revealed for the entire world to see.<sup>1</sup> Hate has become normalized in this country!

I want you to think for a moment about the sounds of the shofar. I've been thinking about these signature notes, and what they are supposed to be communicating to us—and why that specific order?

These signature blasts: *tekia-shevarim/teruah-tekia gedola* that are sounded on the shofar occur in a deliberate pattern, established hundreds of generations ago in the Talmud. I believe they contain a powerful message that we need to hear now more than ever. I am grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg for writing so poetically about these signature sounds.<sup>2</sup> First is *Tekia*...it is a pure, simple, blast, No quivering, just a straightforward, unadorned sound. This simple *tekia* is

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<sup>1</sup> Gratitude to my friend and colleague Rabbi David Stern, Temple Emanu El, Dallas for pointing this out

<sup>2</sup> Wittenberg, Jonathan. *The Eternal Journey*, 2004. Page 30

“the naiveté of childhood,” as Wittenberg writes. The presumption that the world is less complicated, that people are essentially good, that whatever trouble or distress that exists in the world is far away from us. It is in a sense the idealism that my grandfather and great grandfather had about this country. They knew there were challenges and that it wasn't perfect, but they were absolutely committed to the idea that we were moving forward, never backward; that the world could only get better, but never worse.

But no sooner than the *tekia* is sounded is the air ripped apart by the agony of the *shevarim teruah*; notes meant to sound like shrieks of weeping and wailing. This represents innocence lost, the end of naiveté; The realization that evil has not yet been eradicated. That there are still people bent on doing us harm. *Bechol dor va'dor omdim aleinu lechaloteinu*, that truly as the Passover Haggadah proclaims, every generation consistently produces another enemy, another genocidal maniac, another villain, another adversary, another foe, another terrorist who hates us. The dangers we thought were far off seem much nearer than we realized. And so we become afraid, we cry, we huddle together in uncertainty.

And then the series of blasts ends with a *tekia gedolah*; whole and resounding like the first *tekia*, only stronger, longer and louder than other blasts. After the wailing and moaning of *shevarim teruah* comes the strong, unequivocal, booming blast of *tekia gedolah*. This is the sound of resolve. This is the sound of strength. This is the sound of hope. Remember it's still a *tekia*, just a *tekia* on steroids! It still has all that optimism and idealism of the very first *tekia*, but it has been refined by the realities of suffering and vulnerability. This *tekia gedola* is what we need to hear now. This powerful sound according to our tradition confounds the Satan, it baffles the negative forces arrayed against us. The shofar was what mobilized our ancestors to battle, to join forces, to stand together in the ancient world. And this is the call of the shofar today. *T'ka beshofar gadol le'cheiruteinu* we say every day, not just today, in the Amidah: Sound the great shofar proclaiming freedom. We must hear this year's *tekiah gedolah* as nothing less than a call to mobilize, to act, to speak out...and not just in Facebook posts, but with diligence and vigor, without feet as well as our fingertips.

There is a mitzvah in the Torah to rebuke or admonish someone who is involved in misconduct; who is off track, or engaged in wrongdoing. *Hocheiach tochiach et amitecha*...the Torah says in Leviticus 19:17 You must surely admonish them *v'lo tisa alav cheit*, or you will bear some of their sin. In other words if you remain silent in the face of corruption, immorality, wickedness; if you do not speak up when those around you are doing wrong, then you are complicit in their wrongdoing! This is not a time for the Jewish people to remain silent. This is not a time for Jews to blend-in or keep a low profile. If the values of the Torah and prophetic tradition mean anything to us at all, then we must surely admonish! We must rebuke! We must speak out!

Just prior to the command about rebuking another person, the Torah says: *Lo tisna et achicha bil'vavecha*...Do not hate your neighbor in your heart. Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman, who was murdered by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto taught on this verse: What is the connection between not hating our neighbor, and rebuking them? He said, you can only rebuke someone you love. Attempting to rebuke someone you hate will never have any effect. Only by means of the command not to hate your brother is it possible to carry out the command to surely rebuke them when necessary.

I believe that we must not remain silent during these uncertain times; that we must make our voices and values heard loud and clear precisely, and that we must surely rebuke, because I take seriously the mitzvah to love our neighbors as ourselves. And also because I love this nation and this society that has bestowed so much blessing upon our people and upon so many others. The great Yale Divinity School Chaplain William Sloane Coffin once said<sup>3</sup> that "uncritical lovers of their country are the most dangerous patriots." And "Surely the best patriots are those who carry on...a lover's quarrel with their country...the main burden of their quarrel in...today's world must be to persuade their fellow citizens that the planet itself is now at risk, and in an order of magnitude never previously even imagined....Hence, everyone's security depends on everyone else's. No one is safe until all are safe."

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<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, "Insights from Religion in the Quest for Peace," 1984.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0B9FL9oK3E>

There are many, many people in our country today who do not feel safe...and that is on all of us. This is not about politics. I was talking with Rabbi Cahan the other day, who said that today, the line between politics and morality has been blurred. These are the times when rabbis must speak out.” And you know that if Rabbi Cahan said it, it must be true! Still I know some of you are going to go home after services today and say "He spoke about politics..." This is not politics! This is Torah. This is the most religious, the most Jewish message ever...If you were to ask me what the most important verse in the Torah is, I would tell you it is Genesis 1:27: *Be'tzelem Elohim nivra Adam...* That every human being is created in the divine image. The entire system of the Bible rests on that fundamental teaching, which was then and is now totally revolutionary. That people, all people, have the divine image within them, and must be treated accordingly. That's why the Bible has always been such a subversive text to dictators and tyrants throughout the ages. The second runner up biblical verse would be: *Ve'ahavta le'rei-acha kamocho...* You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. It has been pointed out that there are two ways to say friend in Hebrew: *chaveir*, and *rei'a*, like in this verse. *Chaveir*, coming from the word that means joined or connected, is someone similar to or just like you. But *rei'a*, in contrast, means someone who is fundamentally different from you. The Torah is specifically commanding us to show loving consideration not only for those who share our point of view, our every opinion, or even who come from the same background, race, religion, or ethnicity. Our loving God wants us to love all of His creation. Let 5778 be the year that we re-educate ourselves about these sacred Jewish principles, and reassert them in the world whenever possible.

I'll tell you what I know my grandfather and great grandfather would be proud of in today's America. They would be proud to know that American Jews have responded en masse when other minorities were threatened. They would be proud to know that the American dream that enabled their families to live in peace and freedom is a dream that future generations of Jews have insisted that others be privileged to experience as well. They would be proud to know that when the national discourse turned crass and mean-spirited, Jews overwhelmingly have called for mutual respect and *shmirat ha'lashon*, the careful use of words and language. This is in fact what my grandfather and great-grandfather fought for...and what I will continue to fight for, in their honor and in their memory.

There is a beautiful quote by Abraham Joshua Heschel, my personal religious hero and guru, on page 88 of the *mahzor*.<sup>4</sup> He said: "Is it really our desire to build a monolithic society: one party, one view, one leader, and no opposition? ....Does not the task of preparing the Kingdom of God require a diversity of talents, a variety of rituals, soul-searching as well as opposition?"

As we enter a New Year, I pray that it is a better year than the one that is ending; It just has to be...

In this New Year may we be more united, because we cherish our diversity.

May we be more secure, because every one of us feels secure on our streets and in our cities

May we be richer, because we assist those who have the least.

May we be stronger, because we protect those who are most vulnerable.

May we be more powerful, because we defend the powerless.

And may American be first; May America be truly great again; Great in decency, Great in kindness, and great in justice for all its inhabitants. So may it be God's will, and let us all say together: Amen!

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<sup>4</sup> Mahzor Lev Shalem, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010