

Rosh Hashanah Without Shofar

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I cannot forget that Friday in March when it became clear our synagogue would have to close for services due to the pandemic. It ushered in a period of sadness and anxiety around the world. Many of us lost loved ones, parents, family, and friends. All of us had to change our modes of operation, our activities, and the way we do things. For months, we could not gather for services, weekday or Shabbat. Those of us who were in mourning or had *yahrzeit*, couldn't say the mourner's *kaddish*. We could not celebrate *Pesach* the usual way, sharing *Sedarim* with family and loved ones. On Shavuot, we could not stay up together to learn Torah. It's almost *too* appropriate that here we are, on Rosh Hashanah, in shul, and we cannot blow the shofar today.

Of course, that's not because of Covid. It's because of Shabbat. Even though there is a mitzvah to blow the Shofar, the rabbis of the Talmud decided that when the holiday falls on Shabbat, we should not, because we may carry the shofar in the public domain. Carrying an item in the public domain on a holiday is permitted, but on Shabbat it is prohibited. And so, every few years, when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we arrive at the section of the service in which we expect to hear the shofar and instead we hear nothing. In 2020, it could not be any other way: Rosh Hashanah just *had* to fall on Shabbat.

What is fascinating, though, is that, had the sages wished, they could have arranged the calendar such that Rosh Hashanah would never fall on Shabbat. There are other days of the week it can't start on: it's never Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday. If they wanted to, they could have worked out a leap month here or there, and made it such that Rosh Hashana doesn't fall on Shabbat, thereby avoiding the problem altogether. But they did not. They decreed: no Shofar on Shabbat, and then they deliberately designed the calendar such that every few years it really happens. They wanted us to experience Rosh Hashana with no shofar.

The problem is exacerbated by the value our tradition places on the shofar. The Talmud says in Tractate Rosh Hashanah

כל שנה שאין תוקעין בתחילתה, מריעין לה בסופה

Any year on which the Shofar is not sounded at its beginning, will suffer evil and misfortune at its end. Don't worry – we'll blow shofar tomorrow. But why create this situation?

Rabbi Joseph Solovetchik, in one of his many essays on the High Holy Days, described for us in vivid terms the importance, value, and meaning of the shofar. He writes:

It is not only the human who prays. Every living thing, every animal pours out its heart before the Creator instinctively and unconsciously. The bark of the dog, the song of the bird, the howling of the jackals,

and all the different sounds coming from the prairie in the evenings - all of these merge and join in prayer... We need to pray not only as human beings...using speech – but also as animals, creatures of flesh and blood. Prayer should express not only the greatness of man but also his humility and lowliness... That prayer is expressed by the sounds of the shofar. What is the sound of a shofar if not the cry of one without speech and without words, the spontaneous erupting cry of an animal in agony! ... When the person finishes his prayer, he begins to understand that he did not have time to say even a fraction of what he wanted to...And what should he do then? Repeat his words? Pray more and more? - it will not help!

That is where the Shofar comes in. It replaces our prayers when we have no words.

How can we do away with that? How could the rabbis deprive us of this prayer we so desperately need? How can they decree that we should negate our most basic need for prayer, and usher in a year that the Talmud says will be filled with suffering and misfortune-- So *WHAT?* So that we don't carry the shofar in a public domain?!

August 29, 1952. The pianist David Tudor took the stage of Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York – just 50 miles from here – to debut a new musical piece by the legendary composer John Cage. He sat down at the piano and in front of a stunned audience closed the keyboard lid, and did not play a single note for four minutes and thirty three seconds. The piece became known as 4'33, and consists of three movements of musical “rests.” No actual playing. Critics were aghast. What was John Cage up to?

Well, what he did was challenge our notions of what constitutes music. The idea came to Cage when he entered a “silent room” with walls built of special material meant to totally absorb sound – yet he still heard something. His nervous system, his breathing, his blood pumping, his heart beating. That, too, Cage contended, was a sort of music. So the unsuspecting concertgoers bought tickets, dressed up all fancy, went to a prestigious concert hall to listen to music written by a renowned composer; they focused their attention, and they sat in silence. It's radical – but Cage used the silence and the ambient noise, the breeze outside, rain pattering on the roof, crickets chirping, and the audience – any whispers, breaths, movements- as part of the music. Sure, some people were upset; some thought it was a joke or an elaborate prank. But it was no joke, and he changed music forever. He said it was his most important piece. In a sense, Cage gave other musicians permission and encouragement to push the boundaries of music and engage with the infinite possibilities of sound. And I am certain that all of you know and love songs or musical pieces that were influenced by what Cage did there; they probably would have been impossible without it. One silent concert transformed music forever because it challenged people to redefine what music meant for them, to reconfigure how we approach music, to broaden horizons and categories and see things we had not even imagined before. A concert with no instrumental music.

My dear friends, I think that is precisely the reason why our rabbis wanted us to experience Rosh Hashanah without shofar. We have these iron clad associations in our minds: Pesach, Matzah; Sukkot, Sukkah; Rosh Hashanah, Shofar. Sometimes they're really integral – You can't have Pesach without Matzah. But sometimes we think something is integral, but it's really not. You *can* have Rosh Hashanah without a Shofar. The Meshech Chochma, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk explained: Shabbat is our sign that God created the world, and our observing of Shabbat demonstrates our acknowledgement that He did so. When we do not blow the Shofar on Shabbat, we are placing God's honor over and above our own interests. The shofar is for *us*: We need it to earn God's compassion, to earn inscription in the Book of Life, to usher in a good year, and to yell out those animalistic prayers on our behalf when we're out of words. Yet we choose to forgo that in order to honor God by not breaking the Sabbath. Not blowing the Shofar on Shabbat reminds God of our commitment to Him; not blowing the Shofar yields the very same result blowing the Shofar would have.

You can have music without playing the instrument. You can have Rosh Hashanah without the Shofar. We just have to reframe how we think of it: it's not the holiday of the Shofar – it's the holiday of recognizing God as King of the Universe and about our introspection and our Teshuva as we approach the new year; the Shofar is just the tool we usually use. It's not the essence. Sometimes we think something's the essence – but it's not, it's just a tool, a means to an end, and we need to experience something that takes that means away for us to truly focus on the essence, for us to know what really is important – in music, in Rosh Hashanah, in our lives.

And that is also why it is particularly appropriate that today we do not blow the Shofar. The last six months have been marked by a reframing and reconfiguration of so many aspects of our lives. For those who have lost loved ones this year, parents, other relatives, friends – it also means a reconfiguration. Life without the physical presence of a parent is not the same as life had been with that presence. We mourn, and we reconfigure. Life will continue, but it is fundamentally different. And, *lehavdil*, I think about all of the people who are not able to be with us this year – they are otherwise healthy individuals, but the risk to them is too great and so they cannot come to shul on the High Holy Days this year. Is it even Rosh Hashanah without shul? Of course it is, and yes it looks different, but it's still Rosh Hashanah.

Today, we pray that a solution be found and that the pandemic come to an end. Covid has turned lives upside down. But as always, our question is: what do we do? How do we respond? For doctors and medical researchers, the answer is obvious. But the rest of us have all been called upon to reframe our perspective and reconfigure the way we approach life and our relationships. We had to learn how to do things differently. How do we relate to our families when we can't see them in person? How do we relate to learning when we cannot go to school? How do we relate to God when we cannot pray in the synagogue? What is the role of the synagogue, or of other community institutions, when we can't come together? We have all had to learn again how to study, reimagine how we work, and reconfigure how we experience community. The situation demanded that we redirect our energies towards making our relationships more intentional: reaching out to

others, making more phone calls or video conferences with the people we love, taking an active role in helping others and being aware of the the Chessed needs around us. Of course, I wish it never happened to begin with, but I hope the experience has made us more sensitive, empathetic, and kind. We have been compelled to take a more active, self-guided, and industrious role in our Jewish lives. We had to learn how to pray all over again, and many of us learned how to pray even better since we were confined to doing so in our living rooms. If we wanted to learn Torah, there was no default sermon in shul or class between Mincha and Ma'ariv – we had to choose to pick up a book or join a virtual class. Throughout these months, we have had to do what the Rabbis wanted us to learn by experiencing Rosh Hashanah without a shofar. To isolate what's important: what is the essence, what do we really value, and how do we accomplish that in a new way?

Next year, please God, we will all be in shul in good health, with our friends and family and community, and we will hear the Shofar on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. But we will forever be changed people for having experienced this year, without it.