

THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE
Day 1 Rosh Hashanah 5777 – 2016
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The scene is etched into my mind. I can remember it like it was yesterday. It was opening night for the Bolshoi Ballet in Los Angeles. As the curtain went up, hundreds of us rose to our feet, each donning a large sash across our torsos. White with bold blue lettering, it read “Free Soviet Jews Now.” We stood for the entire performance. At the end of the evening, in a dramatic moment, one dancer leapt from the stage, declaring that he was seeking asylum.

I was in ninth grade, and I was hooked. I spent the years that followed deeply immersed in the Soviet Jewry movement, helping organize rallies, letter writing campaigns; and collecting prayer books and ritual items to be smuggled behind the iron curtain. In those days, we all were wearing bracelets inscribed with the names like Ida Nudel and Anatoly Sharansky. I’m sure that many of you in this room shared in the intensity, the passion and the excitement of those moments.

The Soviet Jewry movement gave hope to millions of Jews caught behind the Iron Curtain and encouraged them to persist in their Jewish and Zionist dreams. It played a singularly unique and powerful role in bringing down the Soviet Empire. It was intoxicating and empowering to realize that we can move mountains, to know that we do not have to accept the world as it is, we can create the world as it should be.

The Soviet Jewry movement was also my first introduction to Elie Wiesel, through his book, *The Jews of Silence*. I met Eliezer not in the darkness of Auschwitz but in the streets of Kiev and Moscow, as he described the fear and the courage that defined the lives of Jews valiantly defying an empire bent on their destruction. Wiesel once said that if he could choose to be remembered for one thing it would not be *Night*, his memoir of his Holocaust experience, but rather this: that he helped to free Soviet Jewry.

Elie Wiesel did not just preach Never Again, he lived it, devoting his entire life to seeking to overcome injustice wherever it raised its head. He became the conscience of the world, devoting his life to ensuring that the terrors of the Holocaust were never forgotten, that its lessons were learned, and that humanity would never again be silent in the face of discrimination, persecution and suffering. He spoke out not just in defense of Israel and Soviet Jews, but also for the plight of Ethiopian Jews, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the *Desparecidos* in Argentina, Bosnian victims of genocide in the former Yugoslavia, Nicaragua’s Miskito Indians, the Kurdish people, and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Echoing the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, Elie Wiesel said: “Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere.”

He could have come out of the Holocaust broken and bitter, resigned to the reality of evil in the world, but he did not. Despite everything he had endured, Elie Wiesel never gave up on his faith in God and in humanity. He never lost sight of what he believed the world should be. He never

lost faith that the world could be what it should be. And he never stopped holding us accountable for working toward that goal.

That imperative to move from the world as it is to the world as it should be is one of the lessons found in the symbolism of the shofar that we heard today.

The first sounding of the shofar is tekiah: one long solid blast symbolizing moments of stability, security and blessing in our lives.

Then comes shevarim, which literally means brokenness: three shorter blasts that sound like wailing or sobbing, representing the times when our world is shattered, whether from personal sorrow and suffering or injustice. Shevarim embodies our pain. It is easy to get stuck in the place of Shevarim and not see a way forward.

But Shevarim is followed by nine short staccato notes – teruah – the urgent sounding of an alarm that wakes us and calls us to action. It reminds us that we cannot allow ourselves to become mired in our pain and to feel helpless. We must act. Teruah calls to us and says: “Do not just accept the world as it is. It is your task to create the world as it should be.”

This is also the central theme of the Alenu prayer which introduces the *Malchuyot* portion of our service. The Alenu describes our obligation *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai* – to repair the world so that it reflects that it is part of the Divine realm. The Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* – Repair of the World – contains within it a recognition of the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. To recognize the broken nature of the world means never to allow ourselves to be at ease with its moral shortcomings, but rather to confront them and to overcome them.

I am saddened that Elie Wiesel passed away this year because it feels to me like we need his vision of the world as it should be, his voice calling us to action, now more than ever. Our world is so broken. We live in a constant state of sadness and confusion. We are overwhelmed by a world that seems out of control, its fate beyond our hands. Every time we turn around there is another terrorist attack, another police shooting. Every time we open the newspaper, it is filled with more attacks on Israel's legitimacy, more lies told by our leaders, coarser and more disrespectful discourse, more spreading of fear, hatred and marginalization, an undermining of the very values that have so long defined our country. We have allowed our pain and our fear to tear us apart, to turn us into a nation of “us” and “them:” Democrat and Republican, Black and white, police and resident, Jew, Christian and Muslim, citizen, immigrant and refugee. Each lives in dread of the other, each demeans the other, and sometimes even threatens the other.

How long can this go on? How long can we live in such a tense, divisive atmosphere while ignoring the truth before our eyes that by refusing to listen to each other we have come to accept the de-valuing of human life? And yet it seems that we have come to accept this as a new normal. We have resigned ourselves to the world as it is.

The first step in creating the world as it should be is to listen to each other. Hearing the sound of *teruah* means we have to be able to hear each other's stories.

Let me illustrate what I mean with a beautiful lesser known story about Elie Wiesel.

Sonari Glinton, a journalist who writes for NPR, recently shared his experience taking a college class with Elie Wiesel as his instructor.

Students in the class had to make a book presentation. Glinton chose Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, about an African American girl who grew up in an abusive and racist environment. She fantasized that if only she had blue eyes she would be accepted and loved. Glinton, who had faced discrimination both as a black and as a gay man, writes that he knew that girl. Sometimes, he wrote, "She is me."

When the time came to make the presentation to the class, Glinton broke down. Later, sitting in Wiesel's office, he apologized for, in his words, "not being able to get past it."

Glinton then continues: "I remember him – meaning Elie Wiesel – leaning in and asking why I would want to forget. Memory, he said, wasn't just for Holocaust survivors. The people who ask us to forget are not our friends. Memory not only honors those we lost, but also gives us strength."

Glinton goes on to say: In those office hours, over the years he gave me a shield, practical words and thoughts that would help me as a gay Nigerian Catholic journalist. He gave me tools that would aid me in an often hostile world. Over the years I found myself quoting Professor Wiesel to white people who want me to "get over race." [Or who say to me]: "That's old." "It was a hundred years ago." He was emphatic: Nothing good comes of forgetting...remember so that my past doesn't become your future.

Those were Elie Wiesel's words to this young black man: Nothing good comes of forgetting...remember so that my past doesn't become your future.

Think about that. Think about what it means for Wiesel, who lived through the darkest persecution in human history to be able to say to this young man, I want to hear your story, you must tell your story. Only by telling your story can you avoid my fate. We need more of that.

If only we could hear each other's stories –

-- the story of the parent who fears for her child while driving merely because of the color of his skin

-- the voice of the policeman who fears he has lost the respect of the very people he or she risks his or her life to protect every day

-- the cry of the refugee and the immigrant that only desires a better life

-- and the anxiety of those who are afraid of losing what little they have in a fragile economy

-- the tears of families ravaged by gun violence

--and suffering of those who cannot afford medicine and medical care

-- the sobbing of the homeless and the hungry and the child from a broken home

If only we could hear their story, truly hear their story, it would shake us awake, like the sound of the *teruah*, and move us to action. If only we could hear their story we would know that – whatever the answers are – and we may not all agree on them – we cannot do nothing. We cannot remain indifferent to their pleas.

As Elie Wiesel once said: “Indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own humanity. Indifference is not only a sin; it is a punishment.”

The sound of the shofar – *teruah!* – calls out to us not to be indifferent. It demands of us that we hear each other’s voices, most especially the voices of those who are hurting, and that we respond by taking action, by working to move us from the world as it is to the world as it should be.

That’s why I am so proud that this congregation that we have joined Greater Cleveland Congregations, taking our place beside other faith organizations, Jewish, Christian and Muslim to work together to make Cleveland a better place for all. GCC seeks to listen closely to the needs and concerns of all who live in our communities and to galvanize action to address those needs. Its current agenda includes criminal justice reform, education, reducing recidivism, increasing health care access, improving education, reducing gun violence and more. I hope that you will sign up and roll up your sleeves and join us, helping in these efforts.

The last blast of the shofar is the tekiah Gedolah. Its long, stable blast reminds us that as insurmountable as the goal might seem, it is within our grasp. We can create the world as it should be. All we have to do is to listen and to act.

May we answer the call, and fulfill the Divine imperative to heal our broken world. And in doing so may we merit God’s blessings in the New Year.