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Inward and Outward

Did you ever wonder what it must be like to live in one of the buildings next to the shul? I know it's no fun when the security alarm goes off at 3 AM and wakes the neighborhood. But a few months ago the shul received a lovely email from one of our neighbors. A woman, her name is Anita, who lives in one of the apartment buildings behind the shul took the time to send a letter to tell us how much she appreciated hearing our outdoor tefilot:

I'm a neighbor of your synagogue, I live next door and my window faces our shared back alleyway. I just wanted to say that as a neighbor, I really enjoy listening to your outdoor services. No matter what I'm doing, the moment I hear singing I open my window and just listen for a while. The morning services are especially pleasant to wake up to.

I'm not Jewish myself, and I don't know what the songs are about, but I just wanted to tell you that it brightens up our community and my day.

I admit it was somewhat awkward to receive that email in May, right when we were bringing our outdoor tefilot back indoors. I worried that by returning to our sanctuary we were depriving her of a source of beauty and inspiration. What should I write? "Thank you so much, we're so glad you enjoyed listening to our praying, but we are coming inside now." As it turned out, once our prayers moved indoors, we were able to use the parking lot for children's programs and I am sure our neighbor enjoyed listening to the songs of children echoing in the courtyard between our buildings.

I do hope that Anita listened earlier this morning to the outdoor prayers we convened there for the first time in months. And, I hope she heard the shofar today.

"I don't know what the songs are about" she wrote, "but I just wanted to tell you that it brightens up our community and my day." When we listen to the shofar we are hearing what Anita hears from her window. We are hearing a melody and we don't know what it is about. But the voice of the shofar travels up the Heavens and the voice of the shofar travels inwards, and the voice of the shofar - representing our community - must travel to our neighbors as well.

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16a) records the origin for the three special blessings that comprise the heart of the Musaf prayers on Rosh Hashanah, the longest and most grand prayer of the year:

וְאָמְרוּ לְפָנַי בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה מְלָכִיּוֹת זְכוֹרֹנוֹת וְשׁוֹפְרוֹת מְלָכִיּוֹת כְּדֵי שֶׁתְּמַלְּכֵנוּי עֲלֵיכֶם זְכוֹרֹנוֹת כְּדֵי שֶׁיַּעֲלֶה זְכוֹרֹנֵיכֶם לְפָנַי לְטוֹבָה וּבְמָה בְּשׁוֹפָר

Say before me, God says, on Rosh Hashanah the blessings of Malkhiot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot. Malkhiot, on the theme of kingship, so that you should coronate me as king over you. Zikhronot, on the theme of memory, so that memories of you should rise before me for good, and how should this be done? With a shofar.

According to this passage, the Shofar is a mechanism for elevating the other words that we say on this day. The cry without words somehow becomes a vehicle for transporting our words on high. The shofar, according to this passage, is a technology. How does it work? Words can become encumbered with

insincerity or with cynicism or with second guesses. The shofar exemplifies the sounds that our neighbor Anita heard - she understood no words, but she knew that beautiful prayer was taking place outside her window.

Rambam, Maimonides, writing in Mishneh Torah, arguably the greatest single book to explain both the how and why of Judaism, describes the shofar in a different fashion. While the shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashanah, because the Torah says to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, there is an additional message and that message is directed at each one of us:

עוּרוּ יְשָׁנִים מִשְׁנֵתְכֶם וְנִרְדָּמִים הִקִּיצוּ מִתְרַדְּמֵיכֶם וְחַפְּשׂוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם וְחִזְרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵיכֶם.
 Ye that sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and ye slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator!

For Rambam the shofar is a technology. How does it work? It awakens us in a way that words cannot. Words can become cliches. Words can be said by rote in a fashion that is completely separate from our hearts and souls. The sound of the shofar, so shocking and so primal, can rouse us out of complacency and crack open the callous layer that prevents us from seeing ourselves as we are and as we can be. This shofar too could exemplify what our neighbor heard - without the distraction of words, sounds can touch our souls and stir our consciences..

There is a final message of the shofar, and this one goes back to the Torah where, in Sefer Bamidbar, the Shofar was the means by which the community of Israel was summoned together and given direction. The Torah, in Chapter 10 of the Book of Numbers, presents a sort of biblical morse-code that enabled the community to organize itself by the sound of the horns.

And that summoning still works. Here we are, together again. Not in the same way as in some other years, but we are here. We have gathered in person when that has been safe and we have gathered online when we had to. But we remain a community that is bigger than the sum of its parts, more impactful than the sum of its parts, and able to inspire each individual in the community to greater heights of ethical excellence, spiritual virtuosity, and concern for one another.

What message do you need to convey through the shofar this year? What is the emotion that you cannot express in words? Is it gratitude? Is it grief? Is it fear? You do not have to find the right words in order to speak to God. You do not have to find words at all. The shofar elevates all of our words and the thoughts we cannot put into words.

What message do you need to hear this year? Is it encouragement? Is it reassurance? Is it a reprimand or a call for living with more integrity, commitment, and consistency? Open your ears and open your hearts to the sound of the shofar. Hear the shofar that sounded at Sinai as it is echoed in the Shofar Gadol, the great shofar, heralding the end of days. Let the sound inspire and awaken.

As we hear the shofar in just a few moments, know that it's sounds are taking all the words of our prayers, and the thoughts we are not able to articulate into words up to Heaven. Let the sound penetrate into the deepest corners of your soul and awaken your most delicate and sacred hopes. And feel the presence of the community who have been summoned by the sound of the shofar to renew our commitments to one another, not just as one person to another but a community, a kehillah, that is committed to bringing out the best in each one of us.

Shannah Tovah

