

## The Loudest Silence

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky<sup>1</sup>

Rosh Hashanah - 5784

Allow me to set the scene: One Rosh Hashana, in a dark room lit only by natural light entering through a tiny window. A small group of intrepid Jews are gathered, and the tension that pervades the room is palpable. At any moment, someone could discover this clandestine gathering, and all would be lost. A revered older man removes a shofar from a secret hiding place, lifts it up to his lips and blows a barely audible *tekiah*, the first of one hundred muffled sounds.

Listening to this account, you are probably imagining that it took place during the Spanish Inquisition, or perhaps the dark years of the Holocaust, or maybe during communist Russia. These are all good guesses, because there were indeed such secretive gatherings during those awful periods. But you would be mistaken. In fact, this secret minyan took place in Yerushalaim, in the heart of the Old City, in 1885. The Jews gathering in that room were not afraid of any edicts from the reigning Ottoman empire; it was not them they were defying. No, the ones they were worried about were other religious Jews. The *baal tekiah*, the shofar blower, was Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

respected Torah Scholar who was also the great grandson of Rav Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, known as the Chatam Sofer. Rav Schlesinger was a fascinating figure; He was considered one of the most militant and extreme religious zealots in Hungary, but he was also a deep believer in the vision of a Jewish homeland, with settlement in the land of Israel, the revival of spoken Hebrew and even a Jewish army. He was no stranger to controversial halachic opinions, either. For example, he was in favor of the reinstatement of the *Korban Pesach*, and he advocated for the reversal of the thousand-year Ashkenazic ban on polygamy. But the reaction to those two opinions, which people wrote off as eccentric, paled in comparison to his third, most controversial view. In an act of halachic defiance, Rav Akiva Yosef Schlesinger blew the shofar and, like this year, it was Rosh Hashanah that fell on Shabbos.

Rav Schlesinger followed a minority opinion and creatively read sources, arriving at the conclusion that it is permitted to blow the shofar *in Yerushalaim* on Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbos. He felt, further, that given the rampant *pogroms* in Europe, it was a time of great distress for the Jewish people, and blowing the shofar to awaken Heavenly mercy was a matter of *pikuach nefesh*, of life and death. Rav Schlesinger had the tacit support of some of the Rabbis in Jerusalem, but many, many others opposed him. What was their rationale- and ours, who follow them?

The Talmud in several places records the opinion of the sage Rabba who prohibited blowing the shofar on Shabbos. The reason for his ruling was a concern that someone might carry a shofar to the local expert, in the public domain, for a lesson in shofar blowing. If you think about it even for a second, this reason is far from compelling. I was blessed to grow up in a house where my father, he should live and be well, has been a *baal tekiah* for many decades at Congregation Beth Hakneses Hachodosh in Rochester. Despite the inherent bias of the following statement, and no offense to any of our splendid *baalei tekiah* or anyone with relatives who blow the shofar, I say with confidence that my father is the best *baal teki'ah* I have ever heard. I have half-heartedly asked him for lessons, but evinced little talent; I certainly didn't extend myself too much to improve, even when he was standing several feet away. The chances of me schlepping the shofar on Rosh Hashanah for a lesson *in a different location* were virtually nil. This year, our extended family got together for a week-long vacation in Catskills, which coincided with Rosh Chodesh Elul, when my father begins practicing. Every morning, my kids got to watch my father practice shofar, and even try it themselves. I can tell you that if you haven't been practicing all of Elul, you won't be ready on Rosh Hashanah, either. And if you don't possess the natural ability to blow the shofar, no amount of lessons in the world will help, no matter what day it is. Furthermore, one has to question why it would be problematic to carry the shofar in the first place? After all, most communities, like ours, are blessed with an Eruv! We may and do carry our

*taleisim*, push our strollers, transport water bottles and bring gifts for hosts. Let's not forget that our kids are carrying basketballs, and whizzing through suburbia on their scooters and no one bats an eyelash...yet someone dares to blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, and *that's* when we morph into religious fanatics? Most fundamentally, how can we possibly contemplate a Rosh Hashanah without the Shofar? The Rambam writes that the shofar is designed to awaken our souls from torpor and indifference; as the Rambam says (Laws of Teshuvah 3:4) , עורו ישנים משנתכם והקיצו נרדמים מתרדמתכם, . To paraphrase, "Wake up, sleepyheads!" Our kids will come to shul, and instead of rushing in to hear the shofar, counting the seconds of the *tekiah gedolah*, they will carry on like any other Shabbos. Aren't *we* going to feel let down, too? How are we meant to achieve the spiritual awakening we need, without the sound of the shofar piercing our soul?

I'd like to suggest an answer based upon a comment of the great Mashgiach of the Chevron Yeshiva, Rav Leib Chasman (1869-1936), who suggested that, when observed properly, Shabbos can accomplish the same goal as the shofar, so there is no reason to have both when Shabbos and Rosh Hashanah coincide. The only difference is that the shofar wakes us up with a rousing call from the outside, whereas Shabbos represents the inner stirring of a contemplative soul. There are two different pathways to change. There is the pathway of the shofar, representing the sudden, cataclysmic events and

changes that turn our world upside down and prompt us to reevaluate the way we are living. And then there is the pathway of Shabbos; this one is more subtle and does not come by force. It represents a dawning realization that something needs to change.

These two pathways are not mutually exclusive- we each have experienced both of them, and will undoubtedly do so again. Shofar events may be blessed, like the birth of a child, or finding out that a dreaded disease is in remission or has a positive prognosis; when your daughter, who had been looking for so long, finally met a terrific guy, or your child, who had been searching for a path in life, finally found one. But they may be catastrophic, like the death of a loved one or an unexpected diagnosis, a deadly earthquake or catastrophic flooding. For our Israeli brothers and sisters, it may be any of the above, plus societal upheaval, or terror attacks. This week, our community experienced a shofar moment when AYA went into lockdown. Someone had called in a threat that sounded like it came from within the school, representing a clear and present danger. Lockdown protocols were immediately and calmly deployed, and with great professionalism, security protocols were set in motion, following which it became clear that it was a hoax. But what happened in the half hour or so between the first text, saying that the campus went into lockdown, and the second, saying that the situation had been resolved? I know how nervous I felt, especially when I read and heard the message that said "THIS IS NOT A DRILL." I fired off texts to and called anyone who might know anything. I checked my Whatsapp for updates, rumors and inside

information. Many of you told me you cried or had anxiety attacks- and plenty of people went to the school even when they were told to stay away. I think many people, aside from all these understandable and even visceral reactions, also uttered a silent or extremely loud prayer. I know I did; in between the furious texting and whatsapping, I said a chapter of Tehillim. The thought that our children were in physical and emotional danger surely propelled us in that direction. Aside from forcing us to better appreciate the need for security in our schools and shuls, moments like these- the shofar moments- awaken us to confront and reckon with a world that has changed, and our need to change in response.

But there are also the Shabbos moments when nothing “dramatic” is taking place- when you realize that after years of inaction, you really should exercise more; that you have a strained relationship with your children accreted over years, or that your marriage is just pareve, focusing on trying to manage a household. It’s a partnership, and not a connection- somewhere along the way you went from being madly in love to white-knuckling it; that you are nearly 50 years old and don’t know how to read the Chumash and you have no idea what parshah it is; perhaps you haven’t attended a Torah class in ages and if you have, it hasn’t been consistent. The holiest day of the week- actually, of the year- Shabbos- has become vapid, perhaps best characterized by the Rambam, who cautioned against experiencing Shabbos solely by avoiding *melacha*.

A German Torah commentator named Rav Yaakov Elttlinger said that when Shabbos and Rosh Hashanah coincide, Shabbos becomes the defense attorney that the shofar usually is- but only when we have properly observed and honored it the rest of the year. Shabbos, for us, may be just a day of eating, drinking, sleeping, playdates perhaps, and very little else. For some people, it isn't even that, because they don't have Shabbos lunch at all, or they have perfunctory Shabbos meals rushed through so as to get more sleep. And even for those who do have meals, they don't feature zemiros or words of Torah, and are often conducted in the company of the same small clique of people they usually spend time with. At some point an insistent voice starts playing in our ear, *"Is there something more to life, to Judaism, to marriage, to parenthood, to our relationships with others? What will we do about it?"*

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin tells a story<sup>2</sup> about a phone call he received from his dear friend, Rabbi Alexander S. Gross z"l, with whom he became close during Rabbi Riskin's winter visits to Miami. On this occasion, Rabbi Gross called Rabbi Riskin for advice about a moral dilemma. As a newly married man recently ordained by Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, Rabbi Gross suffered a life threatening asthma attack. He immediately sought the counsel of his specialist, who informed him that if he wanted even a chance at living, he needed to relocate immediately to a more humid climate, such as Florida. Even then,

---

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, *Listening to God*, p. 275

this doctor asserted that under the best of circumstances, he would only live for another six months to a year. Rabbi Gross dutifully packed his belongings and together with his young wife, Shirley, moved exactly where the doctor said. Yes, it was a death sentence, but he felt God was challenging him to maximize the little remaining time he was allotted, and to go to Florida to do it. The Miami area, which we know as a Jewish wonderland today, was Jewishly desolate before Rabbi Gross arrived. Six months went by, then a year, and then a decade, and then several decades- and Rabbi Gross continued to live, and build, first founding the Hebrew Academy, and then a kollel and a shul thereafter. While the initial impetus was very much a shofar moment, the work he did over the next thirty years was more the product of Shabbos moments, an inner voice propelling him to grow and build, to do what must be done even if no one is forcing you. What was the moral dilemma about which he called Rabbi Riskin? The doctor, who had initially rendered the diagnosis and given him such a short life expectancy, had passed away. Rabbi Gross wanted to know whether Rabbi Riskin felt it would be appropriate to attend the funeral, if Rabbi Gross might feel some joy for having outlived the doctor!

Rabbi Riskin did convince his *chaver* that it would be appropriate to attend, confident that Rabbi Gross would have the proper intent. Not long afterward, Rabbi Gross himself passed away at the age of 63 years old. It was not his lungs that did him in; it

was his heart. Due to a bus drivers strike, Rabbi Gross undertook to drive a bus himself so school would not be impacted, picking up each child at the proper location. The stress and strain of this task, which was unfamiliar to him, led him to suffer a fatal heart attack. But there is a remarkable postscript to this sad event. Rabbi Riskin was on a flight back from Miami after attending his dear friend's funeral. This was in the days when airlines still served dinner on domestic flights. The woman next to him was devouring a piece of steak, washing it down with a glass of milk, while Rabbi Riskin eating his kosher dinner, lost in thoughts about his late, beloved friend. Perhaps compelled by her guilty conscience, the woman turned to Rabbi Riskin and said, "I suppose you think I'm not religious, but I'm more religious than you are. I bet you think you're a better Jew than I am!"

Rabbi Riskin replied, "Ma'am, I had no idea you're Jewish at all, and frankly, I wasn't thinking about you."

She retorted, "I am very religious. I would never eat a kid in its mother's milk, but there's nothing wrong with eating a steak with a glass of milk."

Rabbi Riskin began to explain politely about the prohibition of eating milk and meat together but had no bandwidth to engage her in a technical and philosophical discussion of the issue. Sometime later in the flight, a terrible storm broke out and the plane was tossed about by unusually severe turbulence. The plane had to be rerouted due to the storm; children were crying, and many adults were queasy. Rabbi Riskin's

seat mate turned to him, ashen-faced, and asked if he could recite Psalms with her, which he did, and then she added that “if this plane lands safely, I will never eat a non-kosher steak or consume meat and milk again.”

When they reached the destination, Rabbi Riskin invited her for a Shabbat in the future, an overture that caused her to take deep offense. She suddenly snapped back to true form and in a combative tone said “You think that I don't observe Sabbath? I'm a proud Reform Jew; you can come to *my* house for Sabbath! And, everything I said about not eating steak with milk? Well, I was joking.” Attempting to change the subject, Rabbi Riskin used the final few moments together to share the story of Rabbi Gross arriving in Miami Beach, starting a school and building a community. They exchanged addresses and he reiterated his invitation for Shabbos. Well, that woman never did come for Shabbos, but two years later, a letter arrived in the mail on the letterhead of a Reform Day School somewhere near Miami Beach, which featured her name by the title “President.” She explained that the story of Rabbi Gross made a lasting impression, and she realized that in her world, too, there was a need for more intensive Jewish studies, so she founded a school. The food, she added, was kosher...even by Rabbi Riskin's standards.

Rabbi Gross lived a life of Shofar and of Shabbos, committing himself to building Yiddishkeit when he thought his days were numbered, and then he doubled down on

that commitment once the metaphorical plane had landed safely. In so doing, he inspired people he never knew to add more Torah and more *yiddishkeit* to their lives. This year's Rosh Hashanah includes a silent shofar due to Shabbos, so our charge is to decide which kind of life we want to live- a shofar life, or a Shabbos life. Will we turn to God when we are terrified or thankful, when we are disappointed or delighted, in confusion or for comfort, only at the big moments- the shofar moments- or will we talk to Him regularly, in Tom Thumb or at traffic lights, during mundane times too? Will we only participate fervently in davening when it is a musical kabbalat Shabbat, or will we participate regardless, and be the ones to make it special? Do we finally pick up the book, attend or initiate a shiur this year, or will we continue trying to silence the voice that tells us we need to do more? Do we only visit our loved ones when there is an emergency, or other times as well? Will our Shabbos tables be regrettable, or remarkable? Are we committed to a welcoming culture of *chessed* that *anticipates* the needs of others, or do we just mobilize to *respond* when the need arises? Can we be present and attentive as parents, spouses or friends, or do we need a crisis to awaken us to the importance of these relationships?

Let us respond in the moment we need to, when God knocks on our door- when our neighbors need us, when life throws us a curveball, but it's not enough to just wait for

those moments to be roused from our slumber. This Rosh Hashanah, the shofar may be silent, but let's hear the voices of a shabbos life loud and clear.