

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5776

Not now, but one day, go online and check out Studio Libeskind, the architectural firm responsible for a dizzying array of urban, cultural and commercial projects around the globe. From the extension at the Denver Art Museum completed in 2006 to the new World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, from Ramat Gan, Israel to Seoul, South Korea, from Amsterdam to Warsaw and Milan to Singapore, Libeskind creations, with their bold and quirky designs, push the boundaries of architecture as public art. One of Libeskind's earliest projects was the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Opened to the public in 2001, the museum showcases the social, political and cultural history of Jews in Germany from the fourth century to the present. More striking than the exhibits is the edifice itself. Like the Denver Art Museum, the museum can be perceptually challenging. With five cavernous voids and three oddly intersecting axes, the building is visually disorienting. One of the underground axes is called the Axis of Exile. It leads outside to the Garden of Exile. The Garden of Exile is a compact space of forty-nine stark, concrete columns. Each 20 feet high, they sit at a 12-degree gradient on a small plot of ground in a 7 by 7 grid. Forty-eight of the columns are filled with the earth of Berlin. In number, they represent 1948, the year Israel became a State. In essence, they represent *galut*, the Diaspora, the dispersion of the Jewish people in foreign lands. The 49th pillar, smack in the center, is filled with earth from Jerusalem. It represents home, the physical and spiritual heart of the Jewish people. Branches of Russian willow oak grow from the columns, forming a canopy overhead. The simplicity of the garden is misleading and the layout is deceptive. Until you walk through it, you can't perceive how uneven the ground is or how lopsided the columns are. Both cause disorientation, and

the compact greenery 20 feet overhead makes one feel buried alive. About the Garden of Exile, Libeskind wrote:

One feels a little bit sick walking through it. But it is accurate, because that is what perfect order feels like when you visit the history of Berlin.

The Garden of Exile is a metaphor for the "shipwreck of the history" of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe.

This past July, some members of Temple Sinai and I participated in a tour of Central and Eastern Europe. Why this year? 2015 marked 70 years since the liberation of the concentration camps, and with the dwindling numbers of survivors still alive to tell their stories, it's up to us to continue the narrative. So we embarked on a Jewish heritage tour of Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, and Krakow to better grasp the scope of the horrific events of years past and, of course, to pay homage to the victims of the Shoah. We also went on this journey to gain a greater appreciation for the dynamic and thriving Jewish presence in those cities today, especially among the Reform Jewish communities. Of course, we also had fun exploring world renowned cities that, despite their tarnished histories, are breathtakingly beautiful.

Mixed with the fascinating European architecture and stunning scenery was the recurring question among the tour participants: Did **you** lose family in the Holocaust? For some, the answer was no. For others, the answer was yes, and they were able to list by name those loved ones who ruthlessly were murdered by the Nazis or their accomplices. For me, the answer was "I don't know, but I doubt it." All four of my

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grandparents immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s or very early 1900s, and I don't remember them ever speaking about the past.

My narrative changed at Auschwitz. Since I was last there in 2012, an exhibit was installed by Yad Vashem in one of the former prison barracks. The exhibit is called: SHOAH, The New Permanent Exhibition in Block 27 at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. To say that the exhibit is beautiful sounds like an oxymoron, but it's esthetically brilliant and emotionally heart-wrenching. In the middle of one room are sheaves of oversized parchment seemingly suspended in mid-air. The display is about ten-feet long and six-feet high, with pages three-feet deep. On both sides of each single-spaced page are listed hundreds of names, as well as date of birth, place of birth, and place of death of each individual. All were victims of the Shoah.

On a whim, I looked up my maternal grandmother's maiden name, Fetner, since it's less common than my other grandparents' names. According to my father, my grandmother was from a town called Horodenka. It sounds like a made up place, a fictional shtetl like Tevye's Anatevka. My dad had no clue where Horodenka was. But now I do, thanks to the help of a fellow traveler who helped me scour a wall map listing thousands of Jewish towns scattered throughout Eastern Europe. Horodenka was fact, not fiction. It was located east of Krakow and south of Lvov. Prior to WWII, tens of thousands of Jews lived in Horodenka. During the war, the Nazis established a ghetto there. And recorded in Yad Vashem's exhibit at Auschwitz are the names of my grandmother's family, victims of the Shoah:

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Aaron Fetner, born 1873 in Horodenka, Poland. Murdered in Horodenka, Poland.

Chaim Fetner, born 1923 in Horodenka, Poland. Murdered in Horodenka, Poland.

Chaya Fetner, born 1936 in Horodenka, Poland. Place of death unknown.

Leya Fetner, born 1925 in Horodenka, Poland. Murdered in Horodenka, Poland.

The list goes on. The names of the Fetner family cover a page and a half, single-spaced. Name after name after name of my family, perhaps even the names of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother whose photograph hung in my parents' home. Mingled with a profound sense of loss was the nagging question: WHY? Why didn't they leave when they could? Why didn't they foresee what was about to happen and try to do something? Why were they so attached to Horodenka, Poland that they chose to stay rather than attempt to find refuge in a different place? WHY?

And why didn't more people try to save European Jews, brave people like the late Sir Nicholas Winton or Irena Sendler who rescued Jewish Czech and Polish children respectively or the more than 25-thousand selfless individuals whose names line the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem? Why to this day do survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants, like the niece of Adele Bauer featured in painter Gustav Klimt's masterpiece *Woman In Gold*, have to retain attorneys and sue foreign governments to have their rightful property restituted? Most perplexing is the question: Why didn't more Jews try to flee Europe when they had the choice and the chance?

Every day we make choices. Some have minor consequences. Others impact our well-being and the fate of those we love. It would seem that with the rise of the Nazi regime and the escalation of anti-Semitism post-WWI, the obvious choice for my family and

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millions of other European Jews was a no-brainer: LEAVE! GET OUT! Yet we know that such wasn't the case. In truth, it's not always easy to make the right choice. It's not as if we know for certain what the outcome will be. Most of my Fetner ancestors chose to stay in Horodenka, but they had reasons. They knew the language. They were familiar with the culture and the customs. They had businesses and friends and family and a sense of self-worth. Horodenka was home. Opposed to this was fear of the unknown. Only in retrospect can we shake our heads in wonder and disappointment at their disastrous choice to stay in Eastern Europe.

As we enter the New Year 5776, we reflect on the choices we made in the year past and we contemplate those choices we are destined to make in the year ahead. What is life, after all, but a series of choices? Think about it. On a mundane level, why are you sitting where you are? Why are you wearing what you are? Why are you listening to what I'm saying, and for those who aren't, why have they chosen this opportunity for an after dinner nap? Why are some people counting the lightbulbs? Why are others flipping through the new *machzor*, which, as we all know, is a favorite High Holy Day pastime? I know you do it. Remember, I used to sit down there, but now I have a much better view from up here! So that we're all on the same page, let's talk about the *mazchor* for a moment. With its two volumes, colorful layout, new readings and Rorschach-like woodcuts it's a curiosity. And have you noticed some of the prayer titles and introductions?

- Start Fresh
- Your Book of Life Doesn't Begin Today
- Hear the Call
- How Do We Begin?

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- Pausing at the Threshold
- Imagine...

The *machzor* reads like a self-help book. And in truth, that's what it is. Think of it as a personal coach. These days many obsess over the trivial and make important decisions as if they were shopping choices. Our lives are filled with myriad forks in the road and opportunities to choose this or that, but I believe God endowed us with enough *sachel*, common sense, reason and judgement, so that the decisions we make are more than random occurrences that happen to us. Our lives have meaning and value, and the sacred teachings and traditions of Judaism, combined in this *machzor* with a liberal dose of modern perspective, can help us make better informed decisions, based on Jewish precedent and principle, in the year ahead.

Talk about making choices! In anticipation of these High Holy Day services, Rick and Cantor Nesis and Linda Leonard and I met for months to navigate the pages of this new *machzor* and decide which liturgy to read and which to skip, which music to include and which to omit. Hebrew or English, traditional translation or the contemporary paraphrase? When to rise and when to sit. And the big unknown: with this or that choice, how long will the service be? *Mishkan HaNefesh* is not so easy for worshipers, let alone worship leaders; there are too many choices!

If you've had a chance to look through the *machzor*, you've probably noticed a lot of changes from *Gates of Repentance*, which most Reform synagogues have been using since 1978. One startling change in *Mishkan Hanefesh* is the emphasis on the sounding of the shofar. Rosh HaShanah, after all, is known Biblically as *Yom T'ruah*, the Day of

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the Sounding of the Shofar, so thematically it makes sense that the sounding of the shofar is prominently featured. Over the years, however, the sounding of the shofar was relegated to a specific section of the Rosh HaShanah morning service. In *Gates of Repentance* it was late in the service: after the Torah reading, after the Haftarah, and in many congregations after the Rabbi's sermon. Tactically, the shofar service was situated ideally for late comers, and parents knew just when to bring the kids in to hear the piercing notes of the ram's horn. Well, those days are over. Even tonight the change was evident as we began this service with the sounding of the shofar. Lest anyone think it's against tradition to begin the High Holy Days with the sounding of the shofar, that the shofar should be sounded only in the morning, let me assure you it's perfectly Kosher.

Those of you who have been to Jerusalem and visited the archaeological site at the southwest corner of the Western Wall might recall seeing a large cornerstone. On that stone, which stood atop the Temple Mount in the days of the Second Temple, are carved the words: "To the trumpeting place...." The rest of the inscription is missing, but archaeologists are pretty sure that this was the spot from which the trumpeters, the shofar blowers, stood atop the Temple Mount before sundown to proclaim the onset of Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh (the new moon), the Festivals and other sacred times, including Rosh HaShanah.

To this day, in Jerusalem and in other cities throughout Israel, a siren, reminiscent of that ancient shofar blast, is sounded 18 minutes before the start of Shabbat and the

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Festivals. And so we began our service tonight. The ancient sound resonates over time and space, from Jerusalem to Denver, conveying the timeless message: Get ready! The holy day is upon us! All that is common and mundane should be set aside. It's time to turn our thoughts to that which is holy!

You'll notice tomorrow that there isn't a shofar service per se, when all the notes are sounded in sequence. Traditionally, the shofar service is comprised of three sections: *malchuyot, zichronot, and shofarot*, Sovereignty, Remembrance and Redemption. *Gates of Repentance* preserved that tradition, but the three sections were clumped together. The editors of *Mishkan Hanefesh*, however, decided that these themes and the sounding of the shofar could be developed and dramatized in a more pervasive way by splitting the three sections into three different places in the service. And that's Kosher too, because throughout the service they serve as periodic wake up calls to our Jewish souls.

On Rosh HaShanah it's time to wake up. It's time to shake off the staid routines we've gotten ourselves into. It's time to open our eyes to the magic of life and the majesty of existence, to rid ourselves of all that dulls our appreciation for the miracles and marvels of life. It's time to see and experience the world anew. All the qualities we speak of on Rosh HaShanah - renewal, repentance, changing for the positive in the New Year – they're all possible, but sometimes we need a shrill blast, or in the case of the shofar 100 blasts, to kick start that process.

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As individuals, we react to the sounding of the shofar in different ways. There are three distinct calls: *Tekiah*, one long, straight blast; *Shevarim*, three medium, wailing sounds; and *Teruah*, nine quick blasts in short succession. Why are there three different calls? So we can have more metaphors about which to expound. Here are a few explanations. Some people liken the shofar calls to the three distinct classes of Jews in ancient Israelite society: Cohen, Levi and Yisrael. Others posit that the three shofar calls represent different individuals in their relationships to God, Torah and Israel. For example, *Tekiah*, the one long, straight blast, represents those people who are confident in their beliefs, unwavering in their devotion. They journey through life with nary a pothole or fork in the road. In other words, they have their act together Jewishly. The second call, *Shevarim*, three medium, wailing blasts, is reminiscent of a sobbing cry. This personifies those individuals whose connection to God, Torah and Israel, perhaps even to the Jewish community, is tenuous. They navigate Jewish life gingerly, one careful step at a time as if crossing from slippery rock to slippery rock in a raging, Colorado river. The third call, *Teruah*, nine quick blasts in short succession, reminds us of individuals who are all over the place, ricocheting like balls in pinball machines. They're in perpetual motion and unsettled Jewishly. Eventually, their momentum will slow down and, hopefully, they come to rest Jewishly in a very comfortable place. All these explanations, by the way, are *midrash*, a modern explanation of a sacred narrative or custom. I made them up, but they work, don't you think? That's the beauty of Judaism. We have ancient texts and time-honored rituals, but they gain new and profound meaning as we experience them in our own days and through our own

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perspectives. They are fresh and vital as long as we invest in them from our own minds, hearts, and souls.

We know that throughout history there have been times when we've been deaf to the calls of the shofar. The Biblical Prophets were renowned for nudging our ancestors, reminding them of their shortcomings and admonishing them to change their ways for the better. Most of the time the people didn't listen until it was too late. Seventy years after the last concentration camps were liberated we're still grappling with the question as to why so many of our loved ones didn't heed the siren call to get out of Europe while they could. Like the varied parts of the shofar service, there were different kinds and stages of warnings throughout Europe in the 1920s, '30s and early '40s. Some heeded the warnings early and left as fast as they could. Others heard the warnings but decided to sit it out for a while. For most, the *T'kiah G'dolah*, the last long crescendo that finally got through came too late. There was nothing they could do to change their fate.

As we hear the calls of the shofar and as we journey through this new *machzor*, each of us will find sounds or words, sentiments or melodies that will resonate and touch our Jewish souls. That is the beauty of these High Holy Days and the challenge as well. Like Jews of other generations, we have chosen to honor this day and make it *kadosh*, holy and special. How we do that? By realizing how fortunate we are to have the freedom and the security to make choices that will impact us as Jews during this New Year. On this day of the Sounding of the Shofar and throughout these High Holy Days, may our heightened sensitivity to the words we speak and the sounds we hear inspire

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us as Jews to be open to new possibilities, new understandings, new adventures and, most important, to renewed connections to God, Torah, Israel and the Jewish people.