

Be The Shofar
Erev RH Sermon, 5782
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I can't remember more uncertain times: a resurgence of the fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan, earthquakes and hurricanes, systemic racism, and a global pandemic that rages on--and on. Reading the newspaper is utterly overwhelming and there are days when I simply recycle it rather than read it. Anxiety is high; we have uneasy feelings in our stomachs; we have lumps in our throats.

And yet, it is a New Year; we yearn to be hopeful, to begin again and be inscribed for a good year. The sound of the shofar awakens us, stirs us, and reminds us that we are to start afresh; its piercing sound a spiritual wake up call, reminding us to make amends, repair relationships, and recommit ourselves to our best intentions.

But the shofar is not only a wake-up call or a reminder; it is something unique and entirely unto itself.

The shofar is the oldest, simplest, strongest symbol we have. It is the only symbol we have that is totally natural. The Star of David, the Menorah and the Eternal Light, other powerful symbols, are usually made of metal or glass. Even the Torah handles which are made of wood--are carved and shaped and molded by human hands.

But our ancient Shofar--the ram's horn--was created by God. Our human hand did not create it or invent it, but when we put it to our lips, music rolls out, thereby allowing us the privilege of participating in God's creation.

The shofar has served many functions over the years. But none so great as the message it brings to us on Rosh Hashanah. There is something about the quality

of the sound, about the form and pattern of the calls, which has made the deepest kind of impression upon the Jewish soul and the Jewish heart.

What is the shofar trying to say to us? What message does it bear? What has been its impact upon the countless generations of Jews--ourselves included--who have strained to hear its message? Across the centuries, our teachers have given a variety of meanings to the blowing of the shofar.

Rabbi Abahu, a 3rd century sage, said that we sound the ram's horn to remind ourselves of the binding of Isaac, for it was the appearance of a ram in the thicket which allows Isaac to go free.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, another Talmudic sage, said that the left horn of that ram in the thicket was the very horn that we heard at Mt. Sinai. And the right horn (the larger of the two) is destined to be blown in the time to come, when not *just* Isaac, but *all* the

world will be redeemed from bondage. In the meantime, each blast of the shofar reminds us that we are not yet where we hope to be.

There are also an amazing number of *laws* concerning the shofar. First, the calls are given in a prescribed order, and even though the shofar sounder knows that order, the shofar is *not* to be blown until the caller calls out the name of the blasts, so that even the shofar blower may concentrate on the sounding of the horn and not upon which *call* comes next.

Next, as far as its shape, the shofar must be bent, so that we might bend our hearts to hear its message. Finally, the mouthpiece is not allowed to be overlaid with gold as a decoration, for gold separates the mouthpiece of the horn from the mouth of the sounder, just as the pursuit of gold separates one human being from another.

Maimonides, the medieval commentator taught “It is as though the shofar announces: ‘Awake, O you sleeper, awake from your sleep. Look to your souls, and better your ways.’”

And so it is, for this Rosh Hashanah, I have followed Jewish tradition and have sought out the meaning in each of the shofar’s traditional calls.

Tekiah, shevarim, teruah. Each call is an alarm, calling us to be on alert, to watch, to listen, to send help. Just like an alarm, though the call of the shofar is the same year after year, it calls us to respond to *different* emergencies, to the troubles that plague our world wherever they may be.

The shofar speaks of *local* troubles in the call of Tekiah, a call for concern. And the shofar calls from more distant lands in the call of shevarim, a call of brokenness, for broken nations. Finally, the shofar

calls to us and alerts us to ongoing global dangers through the persistent, staccato blasts of Teruah.

Listen first to the sound of Tekiyah. Listen: _____

It is a sustained call. It is a steady, unwavering call. It reminds us of the work we must do close to home.

Right in our own neighborhoods we see evidence every day of racism, sometimes overt and sometimes less so. Structural racism continues to plague our country. We must continue to confront the legacy of slavery and its lingering effects on our attitudes. We must acknowledge and affirm the intergenerational trauma it has caused our Black (and Brown) brothers and sisters. We must also be aware of the lingering effects of government redlining, a discriminatory lending policy which prevented many Black people from access to mortgages to own their own homes. Tikyah reminds us that we must continue to work

locally toward racial justice in a steady and dedicated way.

Listen to the next sound of shevarim.

Listen_____.

The call, shevarim, means “broken” and it is a broken sound that calls our attention beyond the borders of our nation to a distant land of Afghanistan. The melody is interrupted, there are jolting halts, with sudden upward thrusts of desperation. As we witness the resurgence of the fundamentalist Taliban in Afghanistan, we are pained by images of violence and we know that women and girls bear a particular brunt of this crisis: women prohibited from working or driving and girls prohibited from attending school, both punished in cruel ways if discovered. We shudder as we think of our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan and other foreign countries who are stripped of their freedoms at the hands of

fundamentalist regimes. Shevarim reminds us of the broken system in this *distant* land.

As we listen to the third call, we hear a *persistent*, staccato blast, a blast whose alarm is effective indeed if we do not take too long to heed its warning. Listen to T'ruah. Listen_____.

The persistence of COVID 19 holds us in a state of worry. Even with the vaccine, we are gripped by the effects of the Delta variant. It causes us to be constantly on guard, to limit our contact and to curtail our plans. T'ruah reminds us that this is a marathon and not a sprint, and we must stay the course.

There is yet still one final blast; that is the sound of t'kiyah g'dola--the great t'kiyah.

Listen_____

Its emphatic declamatory sound reminds us of freedom--precious religious freedom. And for us as Jews, the recent upsurge in anti-semitism troubles us, stirs us and keeps us on guard. For too many centuries, our people have faced anti-semitic practices, policies, and pogroms. A blast of t'kiyah g'dola reminds us our work is far from complete despite the progress of recent decades. T'kiya g'dola implores us to stay the course.

What then do we do as we hear the blasts? How can we channel our emotional response to these guttural sounds? Well, for starters, we can heed the voice of the 8th century prophet Isaiah who implores us:

“Cry Aloud! Do not hold back. Raise your voice like a shofar!” (Isaiah 58) Each one of us is meant to raise our voices like the sound of the shofar.

Why does the text demand that we do that? The medieval Spanish commentator, Ibn Ezra, explains that Isaiah instructs us to raise our voices like the shofar so that everyone will hear! The idea is that we are meant not only to hear the sounds of the Shofar, but to speak up, to be noticed and be heard.

How then can we be the sound of the Shofar? How can we heed the sound of each particular blast?

Here are a few examples.

Tekiyah: Dan Barber, famed chef of the 2 Michelin Star restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns announced this past spring that he would step away from the kitchen and welcome a rotating chef-in-residency program of chefs of color to help combat racial and gender inequalities in the kitchen.

He said: “Becoming truly conscious of how I’ve both benefited from and contributed to that system is a process that is long overdue. And I know that this recognition means little unless I actually put it to use through concrete actions. I’m learning about structural changes that we need to make in order to ensure that at the heart of all of our future work we build a community and a culture that is supportive, equitable and diverse.”

Thank you Chef Barber for being the sound of T’kiyah as you use your local position to affect structural change toward racial justice.

Shevarim: The International Rescue Committee, a human rights organization originally founded at the request of Albert Einstein, is working to support

women and girls in Afghanistan and to provide emergency assistance to this broken nation. The IRC aims to respond within 72 hours with urgent humanitarian aid and also helps to resettle refugees in new countries. Thank you, International Rescue Committee, for organizing and acting quickly and heeding the call of shevarim.

Teruah: The scientists, doctors, caregivers and health information specialists, like many of you, who have worked tirelessly to treat those who are ill with COVID19. Thank you for the sustained efforts, for the nights, the weekends, the extra shifts and the dedication with which you have taken care of the sick. You have been the call of Teruah.

Tekiah G'dola. We rejoice in the appointment of Prof. Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University to be the US Ambassador to combat anti-semitism, who will work

tirelessly against the surge of anti-Jewish hate.

Drawing on her robust academic career, we feel a sense of hope as Dr. Lipstadt ascends to her new role.

But who, my friends, are the ultimate embodiment of “Tkiya g’dola?” You and I. You and I who live lives as Jewish people--proud, caring, dedicated to our values and practices--we must do as Isaiah instructs us, raise our voice like a shofar!

And of course we must each respond to ALL of the calls--not only t’kiyah g’dola. By bringing our voices together in a community of practice and by organizing, we amplify our message. By partnering with human rights organizations, and with people of other faith traditions, we can respond to all of the shofar’s calls.

Tkiyah, Shevarim, Truah. Each call urges us forward.
Each blast urges us to listen and to act. How will you
heed the call? Listen. Cry. Act. Be the Shofar.
Amen.