

Rabbi Andrea London
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue
Evanston, IL
2017/5778
The Call of the Shofar

Have you ever really thought about what it's like to hear the shofar on the High Holidays? Not to watch it being blown. But to hear the myriad and mysterious sounds that it emits.

There's an amazing book that I know some of you have read and that I re-read every year at this time. The book is called *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*. It's by Rabbi Alan Lew who was born Jewish, found himself attracted to Eastern spirituality, became a practitioner of Zen Buddhism and contemplated joining the Buddhist priesthood before returning to Judaism and discovering the wealth of spiritual wisdom and inspiration in the faith of his ancestors.

In one passage in Rabbi Lew's book, he describes what it was like for him to listen to the shofar: "Suddenly you are awakened by a strange noise, a noise that fills the full field of your consciousness and then splits into several jagged strands, shattering that field, shaking you awake. The ram's horn, the shofar, the same instrument that will sound one hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, the same sound that filled the world when the Torah was spoken into being on Mount Sinai, is being blown to call you to wakefulness. You awake to confusion. Where are you? Who are you?" (p. 64)

Where are you? Who are you? These are the essential questions we should be asking ourselves on these High Holidays as we evaluate the year that has passed. Where am I? Who am I? Are there any more essential questions than these?

The shofar blasts not only pose these questions; they also help us to answer them. How does the shofar help us gain greater clarity about who we are and how we should be living?

Jewish tradition assigns various meanings to the different sounds of the shofar. Building on some classical sources, I'm going to explore how the four distinct blasts of the shofar represent different kinds of consciousness and how taken together they can teach us how to live with purpose and wisdom.

The initial blast, the *Tekiah*, is a wake-up call to pay attention to how we are living and to the state of the world. The *Shevarim*, comprising three plaintive notes, is the sound of wailing, connecting us to the pain in our lives and around us. The nine staccato notes of *T'ruah* teach us that progress is often made in small steps. And the *Tekiah Gedolah* tells us that we need stability and discipline—we need to be in it for the long haul—if we are to become our best selves and contribute positively to the world.

Each blast separately is only part of the picture. Taken together, the shofar blasts serve as a guide for examining our lives and helping us to hone our judgment and live with greater intention.

Tekiah – paying attention. This is an important quality. We talk a lot these days about being “present” and “in the moment.” And with good reason. Too much of our lives are lived on auto-pilot. But by the same token being on high alert can lead to exhaustion, burn out, and a loss of clarity. What we see within and without can be difficult and painful. We need time and space to feel the pain in our lives. The second set of blasts—*Shevarim*—is the sound of crying. We can't just pound away at the issues in our lives or in the world or merely solve them analytically; we need to acknowledge our feelings. We need compassion for ourselves and others as much as we need concrete solutions. We need the *Shevarim*. Then the *T'ruah* follows *Shevarim*, and we realize that sustained growth happens incrementally. Finally,

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the long, steady blast of the *Tekiah Gedolah* calls on us to stay the course despite obstacles that might arise and the difficulty of the journey.

Tekiah. Maimonides teaches that this first call of the shofar says to us: "Wake up you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4.)

This past year has been filled with many wake-up calls, wouldn't you say? Devastating hurricanes, the election last year, the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, the pardon of Sheriff Joe. So many wakeup calls, that I suspect much of our country may be operating under conditions of sleep deprivation.

Right after the election, the Evanston Interfaith Clergy Association heard the call to state clearly and emphatically that we are an open and loving community committed to supporting and protecting everyone regardless of our differences. We organized a rally in Fountain Square in which we declared in a statement that we asked people throughout the community to sign: "We commit to act with courage, to stand up to hatred, bigotry, violence, and irrational fear, and to build bridges across and find common ground despite our country's deep divisions and the divisions in our own community." The tone and results of the election left many of us nervous about what to expect from the new administration and Congress. The clergy in Evanston felt it was important that we model the society we wish to see—one that is just and compassionate and cares about everyone.

And the marches and rallies just kept coming.

Perhaps most memorable was the Women's March in January when hundreds of thousands flooded the streets of Washington D.C. and cities across the country to demand equality and safety for women, and to insist that progress for the LGBTQ community wouldn't be rolled back.

Just a few weeks after the Women's March, protests erupted in airports across the country after the Trump administration issued a travel ban for people arriving in the U.S. from predominantly Muslim countries.

The day after these spontaneous airport rallies, several organizations held a march and rally at the mosque in Morton Grove to stand up for the Muslim community. Muslims were one of the groups that had been singled out for disparagement during the election cycle, and we felt it was important to show our solidarity and support for them. The event had been in the works for months, but scheduled coincidentally, or fortuitously, for the day after the travel ban was announced. What we thought would be a gathering of a few hundred people, turned into a crowd numbering more than a thousand. I gave the benediction that day in a packed room at the mosque. I said that day that it's less important what we call God than what God calls us to do. God's call for justice and compassion is the sound of the *Tekiah*.

This year has also been a wake-up call specifically to the Jewish community. We've seen an upsurge in overt anti-Semitism. From Whitefish, Montana, where the Jewish community came under assault by white supremacists because of alt-right leader Richard Spencer's connection to the town, to cemetery vandalism around the country and broken windows and swastikas at the Loop Synagogue right here in

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Chicago. And, of course, the images of neo-nazis marching just last month in Charlottesville chanting “Jews will not replace us” are still fresh in our minds.

If the political wake-up calls were not enough, the planet shouted at us as well. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, and Maria. A devastating earthquake just yesterday in Mexico. Fires in the Northwest. The storms are getting stronger and more devastating. What will we do to protect the environment and live more in harmony with the natural world? How will we support those who don't have the wherewithal to just “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” after a major storm?

In addition to being a wake-up call, the *Tekiah* is also the sound that announces the coronation of God. Rosh Hashanah is the day the Jewish people crowns God as our sovereign ruler for another year. It's tempting to dismiss this metaphor of God as king or sovereign as old fashioned and outdated. But we can also understand the idea of accepting God as our ruler as an act of humility. It reminds us that we have much to learn and much we don't understand. It teaches us to be more receptive to listening and partnering with others. It inculcates in us a desire to understand more fully what God wants from us as opposed to what's shouting most loudly at us from our Facebook feed or the front page of the newspaper. It reminds us to strive to see the bigger picture and not get so easily distracted by the latest news item.

In this year of record protests and political activity, the phrase “stay woke” has entered the popular culture lexicon. “Stay woke” is a phrase from African American vernacular that refers to being self-aware, but also questioning the dominant paradigm, and striving for something better. After the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown and the Ferguson protests, being “woke” became associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Today, it's often used to mean being attuned to racial issues in particular and injustice more generally.

But being on high alert, being “woke,” takes its toll. It can cause us to burn out, to lose focus, and to be unable to see clearly. Thus, the *Shevarim*, the next sound we hear from the shofar, calls on us to pause from our activity, look within and be with our feelings. The *Shevarim* is the sound of wailing. It calls us to have empathy with ourselves and others.

Over the year, I've had countless conversations with people about how they are feeling about the state of the world, and there are two dominant emotions that people bring up consistently—fear and anger. Fear of the meanness—bigotry of all kinds—that has revealed itself and is being expressed more openly and viciously than in recent memory. But also the fear that people might lose their healthcare, fear that members of our community will be deported, fear of nuclear war, fear that climate change is being dismissed by those in power, fear that people who don't fit into binary gender identities will be persecuted and harmed. The list goes on. This fear can also be accompanied by increased levels of stress and disbelief. We wonder, how has our society come to this? Where's our compassion? What should we be doing?

And let us not ignore our anger: anger that reasoned and thoughtful political discourse has given way to pandering, fear mongering, and xenophobia.

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According to a midrash, the *Shevarim* represents Sarah's cries when she hears that Isaac has nearly been sacrificed. (Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 31) They are the sound of her pain and grief. The psychologist Erich Fromm taught: "One cannot be deeply responsive to the world without being saddened." The *Shevarim* calls us to acknowledge that sadness. Sadness can make us feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, which may cause us to try and avoid it. But acknowledging sadness, however difficult, helps us remain engaged and effective. It also helps us grow in empathy. Anger can be energizing and lead us to action, but action motivated by anger is often unwise and mis-directed. When we express our anger without feeling the sadness behind it, we can harm others or ourselves or engage in activity that is fruitless.

Rabbi Alan Lew whom I spoke about earlier told a story about a competition held by the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, who was trying to find a shofar blower for Rosh Hashanah. In addition to having to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, competitors had to learn a series of *kavanot*—prayers to be said before blowing the instrument so that each blast would have the proper effect in the heavens. The prospective shofar blowers would practice these *kavanot* for months. There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar so badly for the Ba'al Shem Tov that he practiced the *kavanot* for years. But when it came time for him to audition, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy man. He choked. He couldn't remember any of the *kavanot*. His mind froze. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Ba'al Shem Tov in utter silence. When he realized that he had failed, he began to cry, sobbing so loudly that his whole body heaved. "All right," said the Ba'al Shem Tov, "the job is yours."

The Ba'al Shem Tov explained his decision to the bewildered shofar blower with the following parable: In the palace of the King, there are many secret chambers, and there are secret keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all, and that key is the ax. The King is the Lord of the Universe, the Ba'al Shem Tov explained. The palace is the House of God. The secret chambers are the sefirot, the ascending spiritual realms that bring us closer and closer to God when we perform commandments such as blowing the shofar with the proper intention, and the secret keys are the *kavanot*. And the ax—the key that opens every chamber and brings us directly into the presence of the King, wherever he may be—the ax is the broken heart, for as it says in the Psalms, "God is close to the brokenhearted." Admittedly, the ax is a strange metaphor; perhaps a master key or a 12-digit alphanumeric passcode might resonate more with us today. Still, the idea is that a broken heart circumvents all the painstaking steps that are needed to get close to God. A broken heart immediately brings us to the deepest spiritual place. (pp. 98-99)

I learn from this story that someone who is vulnerable can help open our hearts. This is why the Ba'al Shem Tov chose this particular shofar blower. And when we open our hearts, we can act with greater wisdom and compassion.

How can we productively get in touch with our emotions? For one thing, we can turn off our devices. The constant stream of news and commentary is as likely to distract as it is to inform. Checking our Facebook account or emails 24/7 is not healthy. This is not the first time I've encouraged people to power down for Shabbat, but in these times, doing so seems more important than ever to help us retain

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a measure of sanity. Additionally, prayer can be a haven to deal with the sadness and anxiety that we feel. I'll confess: I sometimes enter our worship services feeling tense...sometimes even unhappy. Worship gives me a chance (forces me, actually) to sit with these feelings and by doing so to ease their hold on my heart. My beloved NY Times crossword puzzle app is not near at hand to distract me from my emotions. Nor is my email or some YouTube clip of the latest John Oliver monologue.

The word *Shevarim* also translates as "cracks," like cracks in a wall. When we can acknowledge the fissures in our lives, we can begin to glimpse the hope that shines through the cracks. As the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen, who died last year, put it: "There's a crack in everything... That's how the light gets in." Some people tell me that, after prayer, they feel like a burden has been lifted and they see more clearly.

Next comes the *T'ruah*: Nine urgent-sounding staccato notes telling us we cannot be complacent; we must act. When *Shevarim* consciousness balances *Tekiah's* wakefulness, we can act with greater clarity and greater wisdom. Then the short, staccato notes of the *T'ruah* come to remind us that progress is made incrementally, seldom in great leaps forward.

Finally, the shofar blasts conclude with the *Tekiah Gedolah*—a long, sustained note. The *T'ruah* teaches us that progress is step by step; the *Tekiah Gedolah* calls to us that we need stability and discipline. Sustained growth doesn't happen quickly, but over a long period of time. We need to be in it for the long haul. Our online connected world pushes us for quick fixes. Although we need to pay attention and sometimes must act quickly, our efforts need to be sustained, not scattershot or one and done.

Rosh Hashanah in the Book of Leviticus (23:24) is called *Zichron T'ruah*—literally, the remembrance of a loud blast. The shofar—the ram's horn—recalls the binding of Isaac, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son. As he's about to slaughter his son, an angel calls out to Abraham. He lowers the knife that he has poised over his son's neck, and notices a ram whose horns are entangled in a nearby thicket. Thus, we read this story on Rosh Hashanah, and the ram who saved Isaac calls out to us annually with four distinct blasts that help us discern how God is summoning us and how we can heed that call with wisdom and compassion.

In Pirke Avot (5:8), the rabbis teach that there were ten or perhaps fourteen, things created before twilight (of the sixth day of creation) so that they would be in place when they were needed. One of them was the ram for the sacrifice. This teaching seems to indicate that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The ram was there all along from the very beginning, waiting for its moment to save Isaac. The test in the story is whether or not Abraham would see the ram. We'll read tomorrow that Abraham "lifted up his eyes," and saw something that he hadn't noticed a moment before: a ram caught in the thicket.

At that moment of discovery, Abraham had to redirect not only his own hand, which was preparing to strike Isaac, but also his perception that God really demanded he make such a ritual offering of his own child. What is the *malach*, the angel, that calls out to Abraham to spare Isaac, if not his own profound insight that there is an alternative to sacrificing his beloved son? In this reading, Pirke Avot isn't so much about animal vs. human sacrifice as it is about our own potential to grow in understanding and insight,

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to discover what we really are called to do in the world instead of what appears as the right action at first blush or what we've always done. The wisdom Abraham acquires in this story is the ability to see that God has endowed him with the moral authority and profound insight to make a different choice.

As we listen to the shofar tomorrow may we be like Abraham, able to see what really needs our attention in our homes, in our communities, and in our world. May we find and help create safe spaces where we can feel our emotions, develop our empathy, and find healing when what we see around us and in our lives breaks our hearts. And may we work diligently and with patience and fortitude to, step by step, heed God's call to build a world based on compassion and justice.