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The Shofar Top Ten from the Tenth Century

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L'shanah tovah!

Its wonderful to see you tonight, everyone in the same seats as last year, as we enter this new year of five thousand seven hundred and seventy-nine. As I know you know, one of the conventions of the High Holy day sermon – going back, like so much, to Mt. Sinai – is the opening joke. And, as you may recall, this is my biggest anxiety all year long – how to begin this d'rash with a good joke! So let me just try this: Did you hear the one about the rabbi who walked into a bar?... Rabbi jokes are not funny.

The high holy day season is a time of renewal and reconnection. We are summoned to engage in *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, a, spiritual accounting, or, as some teach, a searching and fearless moral inventory. The process and the outcome alike of this spiritual project are called teshuvah.

There are three axes of this teshuvah project: internal, within the self; external, with others; and transcendent, with God. I speak of these three axes as distinct realms, which is how many of us think and experience them; for others of us, though, they emanate from each other or, in Martin Buber's imagery, the internal, external and transcendent dimensions of teshuvah are, in fact, fractals, each a microcosm of the next.

Regardless, teshuvah does not come easily to us. In the Torah, the first humans are not in the garden long before they break some rules. God wants to check in about this and comes around, asking, initially in Yiddish: "Nu? Tell me, Adam, in this moment—what's going on for you? It's a new creation, time has just begun - it's a New Year! *Aiyecha?* Where are you at?" God's question to אדם (*Adam*) – to humanity – resonates in us: "*Aiyecha?* Where are you?"

Created in the divine image, like God we love to ask questions. What's more important at Passover than the *fir kashas*, the four questions? (Charoset, I know.) Questioning emerges from curiosity and from caring – and it emerges too from discomfort. God's question to us – "*Aiyecha?* Where are you?" – is rooted both in open-hearted curiosity and in distress about what has happened to אדם, to humanity.

The *Yamim Nora'im*, these ten Days of Awe, are a time for questions. The summons to and the preeminent symbol of the New Year season is the Shofar. But why? **Why** do we sound the shofar?

I thought, "Hey what a good question for a Rosh Hashanah d'rash!" But, it turns out, its not a very original one. My best buddy, Maimonides, addressed a while ago in his wonderful book, *Mishneh Torah*, best rendered in English as "Jewish Law and Practice for Dummies." It was a best-seller in the 12th century.

Why the shofar? Well, says Maimonides, it's a *mitzvah* in the Torah! The answer to the question, therefore, dummy, is "I told you so!" It's one of the many things that Jews do because God said so. Have you ever noticed that what we mistakenly call "the Nike swoosh" is, actually a shofar? "Just do it!"

But, then, interestingly, Maimonides says a bit more ...He's apparently not quite satisfied with his own answer! Even for a rule-driven guy like him, "Because I said so" just isn't enough. So in the middle of an otherwise mostly dry, factual legal code he waxes – dare I say? – sermonic. He writes:

Even though the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a Biblical decree, it hints at something, i.e., 'Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! Slumberers, arise from your slumber! Search your ways and return in teshuvah and remember your Creator! Let each of you abandon their evil ways, and one's thoughts which are no good'[Laws of Teshuvah 3:4].

For Maimonides, the Shofar is an alarm clock, a call to wakefulness and attention to priorities and purpose. But why? It's got an awesome sound but why does the Torah specifically require the Shofar? Wouldn't Alexa be a better choice?

About two hundred years before Maimonides, Rabbi Saadia Gaon, head of the top rabbinic academy in Babylonia, also published a book. Saadia's work, *The Book of Belief and Opinions*, was all about how to integrate Jewish faith with Aristotle and Greek philosophy. It was not a best seller in any century.

In the year 920 CE or so, Rabbenu Saadia listed The Top Ten reasons for why we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. So, with the permission of my colleague Rabbi Letterman, here's the Shofar Top Ten –from ten centuries ago:

10. Rosh Hashanah is called *yom ha-rat olam*, the conception date of creation – and therefore is the anniversary of God's sovereignty. The sound of the shofar, said Saadia, is comparable to the trumpets, horns and shofars that blast when a ruler is coronated.

The Shofar invites us, as Maimonides said, to wake up to mystery and wonder. The Torah begins with the letter Bet, and in a famous midrash, the rabbis explain that the shape of the "bet" is itself a caution – do not seek to know what comes before the world that we can experience. But the mystics and their descendants, the modern scientists, yearn to know what is yet hidden, to go back to the beginning, to find out how it hangs together – is there a unified field theory that explains both particles and fundamental forces? The shofar is a call to notice what we too easily overlook; to lift our eyes and minds to the horizon of wonder, to observe and rejoice at the mystery of creation itself, ever renewing and still expanding – indeed, on this very day, the creation event whose mythic beginning we celebrate today is still unfolding as the universe expands.

[We listen to the sound creation itself and its echoes in **tekiah.**]

9. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance. The shofar is blown to wake people up to do teshuvah.

The Shofar is not about nature and the cosmos; the sound of the shofar is an **internal** summons. The sound it makes is broken – shevarim means “shards” – because it is an invitation to name the brokenness, within ourselves and in our relationships with others, paying attention to what we might otherwise overlook, turn away from, or deny. Truth begins with naming. With this renewed awareness and attention, we might begin to seek to restore and heal. The shofar is both symbol of and opening to overcoming distance, gaps, exile, alienation, separation.

We hear this is the sound of the *shevarim*, the sound of brokenness. [Right now ...in the present, we lean in and hear.... **Shevarim**]

8. The sound of the shofar, wrote Sa’adia, is like the voice of the prophets that rang like a shofar.

In our haftarah for Yom Kippur, Isaiah urges us to speak out for justice: “Cry out with full throat! Raise your voice like the Shofar!” The sound of the shofar is *teruah*, wailing, the cry of pain of injustice and oppression; we hear the cry and we raise up our own voices for justice.

[We listen now but hear into the future.... **Teruah**]

7. In the Book of Exodus, chapter 19, we read a vivid description of how, when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, blasts of the shofar filled the air. Sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, he taught, reminds us of our acceptance of the Torah and its *mitzvot*.

I come to hear the Shofar because ...this is what Jews do. It connects me to four thousand years of Jewish history and community. This community of practice extends back to a time before history. My language, my imagination and way of seeing the world, my sense of personhood are bound up in this Jewish self. Honestly, I’m not so sure about the shofar’s deep meaning...but its really important for me to participate in the mitzvah of hearing its call.

[We enter into – and become part of – our people’s history ...**Tekiah!**]

6. The sound of the shofar reminds us of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

The sound of the shofar is the sound of brokenness in the world, it is the legacy of exile, it is the pain we carry with us, it is the remnants of communities destroyed and generations of trauma. Over two thousand years, Jews have internalized our remembered mythic trauma and we also recall, just a generation or two ago, the historical trauma of communal destruction and genocide. Our Jewish experience of trauma and destruction –mythic, historic and in in our own families’ lived and remembered recent past – can create in us a deeper awareness, empathy and resonance for other displacements, trauma and oppression – whether impacting us directly, or because we can hear and bear witness to the historical experiences of others.

[We acknowledge the brokenness of history and the legacy of trauma in the broken sound of the shofar...**shevarim**.]

5 on Saadia’s list: The shofar, made of a ram’s horn, is a reminder of the binding of Isaac and symbolic of the ram which Abraham ultimately offered in his place.

The shofar thus is a two-fold reminder: on the one hand, the shofar calls to us—speaking of the demand sometimes to risk everything we have for the sake of the highest goals; and, yet, the shofar is the horn of the ram which replaced Isaac – it is an urgent reminder that while we can make our own sacrifices, Judaism never asks – and, in fact, forbids – the realization of our own highest aspirations at the cost of the other. As the Talmud asks: “Who is to say that your blood is redder than theirs?” Teruah!

4. The sound of the shofar causes people to tremble in awe. As the prophet Amos declared: “*When a shofar is sounded in a town, do not the folk tremble?*” [Amos 3:6]

[Tekiah!]

3. The sound of the shofar, explains R. Saadia, is a foretaste of Yom ha-Din, the Day of Judgment.

The prophet Zephaniah announces: קָרוֹב יוֹם־יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל קָרוֹב וּמִהֵרָ מָאֵד ... יוֹם־שׁוֹפָר וּתְרוּעָה *The great day of the Eternal is approaching, Approaching most swiftly. A day of the shofar and Tru’ah...*[Zephaniah 3:14]

Tomorrow, when we blow the shofar, its first set of blasts are called “Malchuyot” – sovereignty. What indeed is sovereign in our lives? What do I say are my highest values and my life-purpose, and how am I living this out in my life? Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin – the day of evaluation, and ask ourselves, as we anticipate the great Yom ha-Din: how are we spending the time given to us?

[Yom shofar u’Teruah – A day of the Shofar and **Tru’ah**]!

#2. The shofar points to the in-gathering of the exiled. The prophet Isaiah declared:

הָיָה אֲבִיּוֹם הַהוּא יִתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל וְבָאוּ הָאֲבָדִים בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשׁוּר וְהַנְּדָחִים בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם ..

And in that day, a great shofar shall be sounded; and the strayed and the exiled shall return (Isaiah 27:13)

The sound of the shofar is the sound of hope. Like the afikomen at Passover, the shofar is symbol and summons for the exiled to return, for the lost to be found, and for all those in hiding to come out and claim their proper place.

The sound of the shofar is penetratingly loud and eerie precisely because its task is to reach the hidden, unwelcomed, ashamed and exiled dimensions of ourselves and our histories. We become **shalem** and **shalom** – more whole and more at peace – when we allow all the parts of who we are to find a place of dignity and honesty.

[Tekiah!]

1 on Rabbi Sa’adia Geon’s Top Ten - According to tradition, the shofar will be sounded when God revives the dead.

Central as it was for many Jews over many years, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead has never been part of my faith. Maimonides, distressed by the problematic logistics of the idea, explains that it's not entirely clear if this is supposed to happen in the material world or is entirely metaphoric.

This year gone by was a time of immense loss for so many, I take comfort in the Reform Jewish teaching that the mystery we call life does not end in the mystery we call death.

I do believe, because I have experienced with you, that the parts of selves which have been deadened can be restored to life. We have labored to show how marshes and rivers and habitats and even species that appeared to be gone can be summoned back to life. We have seen that friendships and family connection which were once life-giving to us but later withered can be restored. We have learned that even in our dying, we can be renewed and filled with life. We can be open to mystery, to the possibility that there is more than we understand; we can be open to faith.

For myself, "All of our hopes, all of our dreams/*b'tzelem elohim*" are reflected the powerful language of the closing blessing of the Shofar service tomorrow morning:

*Sound the great Shofar – teka b'shofar gadol – to proclaim our freedom;
raise the banner for the redemption of the oppressed;
signal liberty for all who are in exile;
bring lasting joy to Zion and to Jerusalem, Your holy city.*

The blessing ends: *כי אתה שומע קול שופר ומאזין תרועה* *You are the one who listens to the shofar's call and hearkens to its blast.* *ואין דומה לך* *and there is none like You.*

Perhaps the goal of this prayer is to leave us with this very question *ואין דומה לך*? Is there any like you?

Indeed, who is imprinted *btzelem v'd'mut* with the spiritual image and likeness of the Holy One, Blessed Be? ¹

Surely, it is **atah, you...**the ones who listen to the shofar's call and hearken to its blast.

[Tekiah g'dolah]

¹ Gen 1:26.