

2005 – ROSH HASHANAH – Shofar

If one were to conduct a survey of the most melodious musical instruments, it is unlikely that the shofar would come high on the list. Indeed, the Talmud itself compares the sound of the shofar to a donkey braying. Despite this apparent drawback in the musical stakes and attempts by some in the early days of Reform to replace it with the unquestionably more melodious trumpet, the shofar remains the undisputed pre-eminent symbol of Rosh Hashanah. For countless generations the call of the shofar has been inextricably linked with this time of year. Entire liturgies have been composed around it, enshrining the blowing of the shofar as central to the Rosh Hashanah service. Despite the fact that there are certainly grander and more tuneful instruments, it is the shofar, with its simple, clear, and powerful blasts, that our tradition has chosen as an integral part of these Days of Awe. Through the ages our sages and philosophers have been fascinated by the meaning and significance contained in those clear and powerful blasts of the ram's horn – seeking to find a depth of meaning in the simple notes it produces.

The Bible itself mentions the shofar on a number of occasions, showing it to serve a variety of functions:

- It heralds the divine revelation at Sinai.
- The prophets say it will be blown to usher in the messianic age.
- It is a signal for war.
- It announces the coming of the king at royal coronations.
- It announces worship and the celebration of festivals.

Interestingly, however, the biblical passages relating to Rosh Hashanah, while stating that the blowing of the shofar was an integral part of the festival, make no mention of a specific function particular to the festival. This leaves many biblical scholars to speculate about what exact purpose the shofar served in the ancient Rosh Hashanah of biblical times. Numerous commentators have suggested that the shofar was an instrument that announced the coming of great things and important times and was used to herald the upcoming festivals of the month of Tishri, Succot and Yom Kippur. The blowing of the shofar heralds the upcoming season of judgment – judgment of the harvest on Succot and judgment of the soul on Yom Kippur.

In providing advance warning of the upcoming need for repentance, the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah provides a valuable service to us in this season and a valuable lesson in life. All too often we wait until after we have done something wrong to consider the consequences of our actions. We ignore facts because we want to believe our own rosy version of the truth; we ignore our conscience because it is more convenient to do so; we do what feels right rather than what is right. And then, after the fact, we are left to pick up the pieces and deal with the consequences. In the introduction to his book, "It was on fire when I lay down on it!" Robert Fulgham explains the story behind this bizarre title, a story which provides a rather stark example of human beings' general lack of foresight. A small town emergency squad was summoned to a house where smoke was pouring from an upstairs window. The crew broke in and found a man in a smoldering bed. After the man was rescued and the mattress doused, the obvious

question was asked: How did this happen? “I don’t know” answered the man, “it was on fire when I lay down on it.”

On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is blown to remind us to look out for the fire before we lie down on the bed. It is a clear, clarion warning to stop and think before we leap into life, to take a step back and check whether we are about to leap off a precipice. On Yom Kippur we have the opportunity to repent for our sins and mistakes, but the shofar on Rosh Hashanah reminds us that when it comes to sin and wrongdoing, prevention is better than cure. A midrash tells that when Joseph was being seduced by his master’s wife, he nearly succumbed to her feminine wiles. But just as he was about to give in to temptation and accept her proposal, he saw a vision of the entirely unarousing face of his father, Jacob. Realizing then that what he was doing was wrong, he stopped. In the same way, perhaps we should carry the sound of the shofar around with us in our minds, allowing it to blow as a warning whenever we are about to do something wrong, reminding us to look and think before we leap.

The Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash rectified the lack of stated reason for the shofar, as the rabbis tended to do, by coming up with enough different, varied, and contradictory reasons and rationales to keep themselves and their descendants busy arguing for thousands of years to come. The most prominent of these ideas is that relating the blowing of the ram’s horn, the shofar, with the binding of Isaac. According to the rabbis, G-d is moved to mercy on Rosh Hashanah because the sound of the shofar reminds G-d of the binding of Isaac and his replacement by a ram as Abraham’s sacrificial offering. Rabbinic tradition sees Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son at G-d’s behest as the ultimate act of faith. On the basis of this ancestral merit of perfect faith on the part of Abraham, the rabbis understood that by sounding the shofar, we play the ultimate divine trump card.

Although this way of looking at the link between the shofar and the binding of Isaac has had meaning for many generations of Jews in the past, it rests on one particularly problematic assumption – the overwhelming merit of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own child in showing his faith to G-d. While we know that Abraham did not in fact sacrifice his child, the idea that he should be rewarded for his willingness to do so has troubled Jews throughout the ages. But while we may, and indeed should, feel profoundly uncomfortable with Abraham’s actions in this story, the idea of remembering the merits of our ancestors has great value.

We live in a world where new is always seen as better. Sometimes this is true. Computers, for instance, advance at such a dizzying pace that a brand new laptop is outdated as soon as you take it out of the store. But human nature, unlike electronics, doesn’t change that much, and has not changed significantly for thousands of years. As Reform Jews, influenced by this modern world, we are often quick to reject the mistakes of our ancestors – slavish devotion to the minutiae of Jewish law, the treatment of women and gays as second-class Jews, exclusive insularity, etc. But we have often been too ready to throw out the baby with the bath water, rejecting tradition and the wisdom of those who came before us. Today, as modern Reform Jews, we are reconnecting to our

tradition. But we must be wary of doing so in a superficial manner. Many are seeking a spiritual connection through traditional rituals and practices but do not seek to learn about the background of those traditions. Like many who have jumped on the recent Kabbalah bandwagon, they concentrate on how the practices make them feel without understanding the background and context in history and tradition that give those practices meaning. For that we need to learn, as children and as adults. One of the things that has impressed me most here in this congregation has been the insatiable desire for learning. The work of our joint religious school is inspiring and a joy to behold. And week after week I have participated in Torah study and adult education that have shown this congregation's commitment to learning and knowledge, its desire to connect with the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors as well as the benefits and pitfalls of modernity. This love of learning, this willingness to delve into the merits of our ancestral tradition and learn from it, has been the basis of Jewish life and continuity throughout the ages. It continues to be so today and is essential to our ongoing efforts as Reform Jews to not only understand our tradition, but to adapt it to today's realities.

Moving forward in time to the Middle Ages, Maimonides in his "Guide to the Perplexed" stated that the shofar is blown to rouse people from their forgetfulness, to awaken them from their slumber in this season of repentance. Primarily the shofar is a wake-up call to finding our own true selves. It calls for us to wake up to who we really are and to return to the path from which we have strayed. It rouses us from our every-day complacency, in which we ignore our faults and mistakes, and calls us to finally take up the challenge of self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-improvement. But the shofar also acts as another kind of wake-up call. Judaism is a religion of action. We are told by the Rabbis that it is more important to do a mitzvah than to understand its meaning. From such action, the understanding will follow, and the good that the mitzvah was intended to produce will be done, in any event.

Thus the shofar on Rosh Hashanah wakes us up, not only to spiritual introspection, but to practical action. This was perhaps one of the driving forces behind our predecessors in the Reform Movement rejecting much of traditional practice. Inspired by the social passion of the prophets, these early Reformers contended that focusing on the minutiae of Jewish rituals distracted us from the true work of Judaism – to engage in social action to uphold G-d's justice and compassion and improve the world. This call to action on behalf of divinely inspired social justice was central to the formation of the Reform Movement, and it rabbis and lay people to act on the social and economic injustices of their time – against slavery, against McCarthyism, against segregation, and against Vietnam, and in favor of civil rights for all. Arguably, in so doing, those early Reformers may have been too willing to throw out traditional ritual practice, and in recent years the modern Reform Movement has sought to reclaim such practices as choices that can connect us with G-d and our ancestors. But in our modern Reform pendulum swing back to tradition and spirituality, we have sometimes sidelined the early Reformer's greatest legacy – the focus on action in the form of agitation for social and economic justice for the poor and oppressed. While the Reform Movement's renewed focus on spirituality and reconnecting with traditional practice as a way of creating meaning in our lives is positive and should be encouraged, the shofar's call arouses our social conscience. It jars

us from our introspection and reminds us that central to Reform Judaism is the concept of tikkun olam – repair of the world. It wakes us from our apathy and calls us to play our part, however small it may be, in making the world around us a better place for those less fortunate than ourselves. It calls us to practice the morality we preach and do what we believe to be right.

The shofar calls us to learn from our tradition's ancient wisdom. The shofar calls us to be willing and able to act upon these teachings in our daily life and in helping others. And the shofar calls us to be considerate in how we act. Taken together, these three lessons are a powerful guide to living as a good Jew, indeed a good person, contained in a few cacophonous notes of the shofar, and they should be understood together. To value only consideration without recognizing the need for action leads to a life in which we accomplish nothing, too scared of adverse consequences to act. A life in which we value only action without considering the consequences leads to thoughtless and rash deeds that lead to disaster. And a life in which we value only the past cannot provide us guidance for the future or for acting as good people in the present. But taken together, these lessons act to balance each other and serve as a model for an ideal way of living as a modern Jew and human being. The shofar calls us to act in our lives, and to do so while thinking ahead to the future and also staying grounded in the teachings and experience of those who have gone before us, learning from their mistakes, their wisdom, and their example.