

The Shofar
Rosh Hashana Day 2
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Rabbi Stephen Wise – Shaarei-Beth El Congregation

My first high holyday as a young rabbinic student way back many, many years ago, I arrived at Temple Shalom in Waterloo, Ontario. Being my first time on the pulpit, I prepared the prayers and sermons and torah reading, though I didn't take control of all logistics, such as who would be blowing Shofar. In fact, I didn't realize until just before the service started that I was expected to handle this duty. Luckily I was married so I told the congregation that Cheryl could handle this honour. So there we were, I call up Cheryl to the bimah and sang, Tekiah, and without hesitation, she brought the ram's horn to her lips and the blasts lifted our prayers to heaven.

The Shofar is one of the most visible symbols of Judaism. It evokes power, raw emotion, tradition and history. I especially like this Yemenite one that I purchased in S'fat in Israel. When I blow it, I can just picture thousands of years ago men standing on the steps of the old temple in Jerusalem, announcing the holiday of the New Year. [Do a Shofar blast.]

During my second pulpit in Copenhagen, Cheryl was unable to take off 2 weeks from work, so I was there for Rosh Hashana alone and she joined me for Yom Kippur; so guess who had to take the honour that year? Yes, it was me. I was ok, but nothing like our good friend Evan Mendel.

The mitzvah of course, is to hear the Shofar blasts; there is no mitzvah in terms of quality and clarity of sound. Though with any mitzvah, the more you can beautify it the better. And as you hear the Shofar blasts, it's not simply a loud noise. I'm sure you can tell there is a flow and beauty to the Shofar ceremony. In fact, Rabbi Larry Hoffman likes to think of the Shofar service as a kind of symphony.

Like Beethoven's 9th or Brahms Symphony No. 1, which is recognized as exceptional in their entirety, but they are also made up of smaller musical themes or movements. One would not simply listen to a movement on its own, the symphony must be listened in its entirety to appreciate how the piece comes together in a grand scale to make a please whole.

The tekia, teruah, shvarim, are all distinct sounds; a three part movement making up the symphony. Embedded around each section of sounds are various readings, prayers and blessings; again in 3 parts. The first is malchuyot, sovereignty, the second is zichronot remembrance, and the third is Shofarot, revelation. Thus the sounds of the Shofar are not simply to wake us up to pay attention, they are deeper, to think conceptually of God as sovereign ruler, as God who remembers our ancestors as well as us, and God as reveller of Torah.

The Torah portion we read today also connects to the Shofar. In the Akeidah, we remember that when God told Abraham not to sacrifice his son Isaac, instead he was told to look up and see that there was a ram stuck in the bushes and he should sacrifice the animal instead. This is the first biblical reference to the ram, whose horns we use to create a Shofar.

As I hold this horn, I have to wonder, who first decided we should take this from an animal and make sounds from it? After all, Abraham did not blow the Shofar after the Akeidah. In fact the first time we hear of Shofar blasts was generations later at the crucial moment of revelation on Mount Sinai. When Moses ascended to receive the Ten Commandments, in Exodus chapter 20 it reads, "as morning dawned there was thunder, there was lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the Shofar, and all the people in the camp trembled". Notice that the Shofar was sounded, but it doesn't say who made the sound. Was it God blowing the Shofar? Or Moses? Or just a very loud noise?

Since the Bible is not a history book but rather a story of our people and the laws of how to live and worship God; there are no footnotes explaining where this Shofar comes from. But according to historian Marvin Lowenthal, the Shofar is one of the earliest musical devices of mankind. It was the loudest sound a human could make and so in trying to describe the auditory moment of Sinai, naturally our bible references the exceedingly loud blasts of Shofar to accompany the thunder and lightning.

Throughout the biblical era, the Shofar remains a constant source of pride and ceremony for our people. It was used at the battle of Jericho, the first battle of the Israelites as they entered the holy land after wandering the wilderness for 40 years. They circled the walls 7 times, blowing the Shofar 7 times and on the 7th day the walls crumbled at its sound.

The ancient Hebrews used the Shofar continually as a call to war and to gather the armies for battle, believing rightly that the sound would panic their enemies. As the prophet Amos declared "Shall a Shofar be blown in a city, and the people not be afraid?"

The Shofar was also the bearer of good tidings proclaiming peace and tranquility to the world. It was sounded during the Shmitta (seventh) and Jubilee (50th) year setting slaves free and returning everyone to their possessions. As it is written in Leviticus 25, "make the shofar sound and proclaim liberty throughout all the land." In the time of the messiah, the Shofar will be instrumental in gathering all the lost tribes onto the Promised Land, to live in eternal peace and safety.

The Shofar was resounded to announce the holidays from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as well as each new moon. In the book of Psalms, it is used to inaugurate the new king David. It gave the alarm in the case of siege, flood or pressing danger and even magically in rain-making ceremonies to draw life giving quench to the dry dusty earth below. As other nations took over the land of Israel, the Romans especially were bewildered by its frequent blowing and suspected its treasonable intent in the land of stiff-necked rebels who refused to yield to Roman power.

Many of these ancient uses for the Shofar were not carried forward through our history of dispersion and diaspora. But though the Jews loved music and adapted other instruments, we clung stubbornly to the primitive sound of the Shofar for our holidays. The way it was made 3,000 years ago remains the same today. Meir Baer-Sheshet still makes shofarot today in Israel, continues a family tradition that dates back to the 14th century Spain. The name Sheshet, comes from the Hebrew, meaning 6. It was his job in the middle ages to walk around his town and tell everyone the 6th day of work had ended and Shabbat had begun.

His family was expelled in 1492 during the Spanish Inquisition and they settled in Morocco. For centuries they continued their craft until WW2 ended. Then the family decided to make aliyah and boarded the infamous Exodus ship bound for Tel Aviv. As we know, the boat was turned back by the British and its occupants returned to Europe and placed in a DP camp - BACK in GERMANY of all places.

According to the family story, it was the day before Rosh Hashana. All the homeless Jews who were forced off the ship wanted to bring in the new year together. They collected 30 deutsch marks and bought a Ram. After the Ram was slaughtered, Meir drew out the bone, drilled and smoothed it, with everyone standing around watching. He made two Shofars, one for his camp and one for the neighbouring camp. As he writes in his autobiography, "When we blew my Shofars that year, all the worshipers asked God to remember us, survivors, to bring us together from the ends of the earth; and (finally) bring us in joy to Zion"

Meir Bar-Sheshet finally arrived in Israel during 1948, after the declaration of independence. He snuck in to the Wailing Wall plaza in Jerusalem – part of Jordan at the time and against the law – and blew the Shofar. Meir Bar-Sheshet settled in the city of Haifa and returned to making Shofars. Today, 655 years after founding the first family business in Spain, Meir's son, Zvika Bar-Sheshet continues the family tradition of making Shofars, and they still have that Shofar from the Exodus boat.

What does Meir do to make a Shofar? It's taken from a ram, a male sheep, at least one year old. Exceptionally long and twisted Shofars, like the ones popular among Yemenite Jews [hold up one on bimah], are made from antelope, living in the edges of the African deserts.

The horn covering must then be separated from the bone inside, which takes special skills not to break the Shofar itself. Any holes or cracks would make it unkosher. Then you sterilize the horn and straighten it, probably the toughest part.

The Sephardim prefer a very straight horn. This dates back to the days during the Inquisition in Spain where a Jew had to smuggle a Shofar in their trousers for fear of death or torture for being Jewish. The last step is to prepare the mouthpiece, as the Shofar's sound can be adjusted according to a customer's preference. This part is the Bar-Sheshet family secret.

And so, when you hold onto a Shofar, now you can think of its long historical journey. And while the Torah simply prescribes that it be blown to announce the new year; over the centuries Rabbi's have come up with more and more reasons to hear the sounds – beyond the historical connections and the ram from the binding of Isaac.

Maimonides would say, "Wake up you who are in sound sleep, and slumberous people stop hibernating, look into your deeds, repent and remember your creator" Saadia Gaon added that "It is in the nature of the Shofar to shake the blood, so that we shall have fear and anxiety and break ourselves before our creator".

According to Kabbala the sound goes up to heaven and as the heavenly court sits in judgement, when they hear the sound it is capable of changing the judgment from guilty to acquittal. If one we could do that in Rob Ford's throne room.

In Israel, the Shofar sounds remind veterans of 1967. During the miraculous 6 day war, the Israeli army finally captured all of Jerusalem including the Western Wall. The call went out on the radio to great cheers, "the wall is in our hands". In strode Rabbi Shlomo Goren, finally able to approach the Wall as we had done for generations, and as the soldiers prayed and wept, he blasted the Shofar there once more. In Israel today, the Shofar is still sounded at Jewish weddings, when a new Torah scroll has been completed, and at official government events, including the inauguration of a new president.

The Shofar. A simple ram's horn. Its sounds are like a prayer without words. Saul Liberman writes, "The sounds induce us a range of emotions that surge the heart, of thoughts that race through the mind". We are awakened by the awesome tekia sounds to the multiple dangers that threaten human life and make it so precarious. The plaintive notes remind us that human life is frequently the bearer of tragedy and frustration. But not for long are we allowed to wander in despondency. We are lifted to the heights of a bright hope as we hear the teikah gedolah, the prolonged concluding blast.

With the Shofar, God once called us together at Sinai and today God once again gathers us together here in shul. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch reminds us "It calls us to God, it calls rich and poor, it calls the most distant wanderer to his own home, it calls every heart and spirit to a glorious homecoming. It calls us back to the shepherd we have deserted. To leave up and fight against anything that blocks us". Let us take that message home with us today.

Shana Tovah