

## Sounds of the Shofar: Don't just hear, listen

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A Jew from a small shtetl in Poland heard about a tribe in the islands of the South Pacific from his son who was a sailor. One day, he accepted his son's invitation and he traveled to a distant island where the natives received him with great curiosity. A chieftain gave the Jew a hut beside his own. But in the middle of the night the Jew was abruptly awakened by loud drumming. He ran out of his hut and asked his host what was going on. The chieftain reassured him. "Do not worry," he said. "There is a fire on the other side of the island. But now that the drummers have been alerted, the fire will soon be extinguished."

The simple Jew was amazed by the idea of drums that could extinguish fires. For the rest of the night, he tossed and turned and thought of nothing else. There were many fires in his shtetl. Everything there was made of wood; everything there was heated with wood; everything there was cooked with wood. In the morning, he purchased a few sets of the native drums and, with the help of his mystified son, he loaded them on the ship for his return home. Eventually, he schlepped those drums all the way home to his shtetl. The day after he returned, he gathered his neighbors and told them how the island natives used the drums to extinguish fires. Now the people of the shtetl would have nothing to worry about when the next fire occurred. And, with that, he distributed the drum sets.

It was not long before the watchman came running, yelling "Fire! Fire!" Immediately, the Jew and his neighbors got out their drums and beat out a loud and long tattoo. The whole time, he kept telling everyone, "have no fear. Everything will be all right." But things went from bad to worse. One ramshackle shack after another burned to the ground. The drums were worthless.

Furious and ashamed, he forced his son to take him back to the island, where he confronted the chieftain who had been his host. He angrily described all that had transpired and claimed that the islanders had somehow cheated him. The drums they sold him had not put out the fires.

"You foolish man," the chieftain answered, "did you really imagine that the beating of the drums put out fires? The drums only signal our fire brigade to douse the fire with water."

When the Maggid of Duvno told this story, he always added, "Many of us are like that fellow from the shtetl. We foolishly believe that blowing the shofar, beating our breasts, and raising our voices in prayer will extinguish the raging fires of sin and evil that burn in us. How mistaken we are! All these are only alarms meant to rouse us from our spiritual slumber. Once aroused, we must actuate our repentance by rallying to the study of Torah and mitzvot [and gemilut Hasidim]. These are the waters that can truly extinguish the fires of sin!"<sup>1</sup>

The Maggid of Duvno is right, sometimes we feel like this man. We believe what we're told--that if we bang on our drum, then the destructive fire will go away. That if we come to services during the High Holy Days, and hear the shofar, then our obligation of doing *teshuva* will have been met. But it does not work like that. The unconscious act of hearing the shofar neither fulfills our commandment nor does it fulfill our spiritual need.

Our shofar services always begin with a prayer: "Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu lishmoa kol shofar". This translating to "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, sovereign of the Universe who commands us to listen to the voice of the shofar". It is our obligation, not to sound the shofar, but rather to listen to it.

Our sages tried to tweeze apart our shofar blessing to get at the nuance difference between hearing and listening. To hear something is an automatic audiological response to noise. However, to listen to something is a conscious choice made with the head and heart.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Essential Jewish Stories*, pg 377

Our sages gave an illustrative example of a person sounding the shofar from within a pit: "If anyone should sound the shofar within a hole, ~~a cistern, or in a large vessel of clay~~—if the person who listens to the sounding should plainly hear the sounding of the shofar, he will have fulfilled his obligation, but not when he only hears the ~~reverberation, or~~ echo of that sound. Thus, if a person passing by the synagogue, or living close to it, should hear the shofar... he will have acquitted himself of his obligation, provided he has paid proper attention, but not otherwise; and although one person should hear it as well as another, the difference is, that the first person paid due attention, and the other did not."<sup>2</sup>

Our sages bring our attention to something we don't often think about. That we can hear something and yet not listen to it. When we really listen, most often we need to have repetition. This repetition invites us to listen, not just hear. Such as radio commercials repeating telephone numbers, chorus of a song, a child repeating "mama" to get attention drives home the point of the speaker—or in this case, the shofar.

As I mentioned last week, during Rosh Hashanah we listen to three sets of the shofar blast, each set containing three distinct calls: tekiah, truah, and shevarim. When the Rosh Hashanah day was done, we had heard the shofar sounded around 100 times. Talk about repetition!

So what does it mean? Why do we sound the shofar in this way? How can we internalize these blasts? And how can listening to the shofar bring about our *teshuva*. Let us take a look at the sounds individually.

Tekiah is the bookend<sup>3</sup>. It opens and closes each phrase. In this way, it prepares us for what is next and wakes us up. Simultaneously, the tekiah sound gives us stability; at 35 repetitions, it is the most familiar. The tekiah is not too short and it is not too long; it is enough to snap us to attention and then allow space for what follows.

Tekiah is like our alarm clock; jostling us from our slumber, calling us to wake up; it gives us an awakening. It tells us to break out of the status quo, out of complacency, and look at ourselves and our world in a new way. This note calls us to ask ourselves where in our lives we are in need of doing *teshuva*. Tekiah takes stock of who we are. Who am I at the beginning of this phrase—and who am I at its conclusion? Have I done the repairs I have needed to do?

The next notes we listen to are fragmented. Shevarim is three broken notes representing the brokenness each of us feels. It calls us to look at that which we are habituated not to look at. Rabbi Lew points out that we "live in a culture that conditions us to avoid suffering."<sup>4</sup> We need the shevarim blasts to break through our avoidance and to call us to pay attention. Three times we hear its brokenness.

Shevarim forces us to realize that *teshuva* is not only with ourselves and God. Regrets and repentance and repair have to occur throughout our world. We are called to hear the suffering of ourselves, of our community, and of our world. We cannot avoid the pain—nor should we. We must seek it out, we must live with it, and then maybe, we can let it go; then maybe we can fix it. During shevarim, we can see the brokenness of all around us and that gives us the ability to empathize with the pain in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Maseket Rosh Hashanah 3:VII

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4SjhHOo8c0> [the general explanation for each sound came from this video, by Cantor Lori Shapiro at Temple Beth El in Boca Raton FL]

<sup>4</sup> *This is real and you are completely unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew, pg 158

Once we own that empathy, we are called to action. The nine staccato notes of *truah* can represent the many small steps we take from feeling to doing. In Judaism, repentance cannot be relegated to internal dialogue. *Teshuva* is a verb and it therefore takes action on our part. The notes of *truah* are sometimes slow and measured, and sometimes they are fast and hurried. Sometimes our actions need to be slow and measured, and sometimes they need to be fast and hurried.

And when we move from the brokenness of *shevarim* into *truah*, we may not see the end result right away. Nine steps from where we start can feel like forever. Repairing ourselves, repairing our relationships, repairing our world can feel the same way.

You see, *truah* begins the healing process. Emotional and spiritual healing and health are prime considerations for many of us on Yom Kippur. Time and consciousness bring healing. The old adage that “time heals all wounds” is really made possible by our awareness and action to heal those wounds. As we progress through the healing process, we hope to achieve happiness.

Which leads us to the final shofar sound: *tekiah g’dolah*. This long drawn out note is filled with promise of a new year, filled with hope and dedication, filled with hope for happiness. Rabbi Moffic defines happiness as “a feeling of a life-well lived. It is a lasting and justified satisfaction with one’s life as a whole.”<sup>5</sup> And how shall we pursue happiness? Through *teshuvah* and with hope. The blast of the *tekiah g’dolah* should be like our *teshuvah* going all the way to heaven. Full of intention, of action, of hope for the year to come.

Rabbi Marmur explains to us that “hope is a thread, however elusive, that links us to a *possible future*. It demands that we take hold of it; otherwise, it is just a loose thread”.<sup>6</sup> He continues and suggests that we: “...be part of initiatives for good. Let us be open to new encounters with people inside and outside our circle of acquaintance, if only to remind ourselves how much good there is in humanity. Let us remember that the alternative to hope is either despair or absolute certainty, and neither of them will get us to the possible future awaiting all of us just out of view. Let us seek out the thread and take hold of it<sup>7</sup>.”

As the sound of the *tekiah g’dolah* carries through our sanctuary later this evening, may we have the chance to see our future and envision what we want it to look like. May we take action to ensure the future we want is the future we make. May we hear and listen to the sound of shofar and “look forward to beginning the new year with a clean slate and with a personal commitment to become a better person, to grow emotionally and spiritually<sup>8</sup>” during *5777*. *Gmar chatimah tovah*.

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Evan Moffic: <http://www.rabbimoffic.com/what-really-makes-us-happy/>

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Michael Marmur: <http://rjmag.org/PrintItem/index.cfm?id=1470&type=Articles>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> <http://renewreform.org/sounds-shofar-meaning/>