**Shofar: One Horn, Many Meanings**

Before you begin, briefly discuss with your chevruta what the blowing of shofar on Rosh Hashanah has meant for you. You’ve probably heard multiple explanations over the years, which one has been most meaningful for you?

1) The Torah basis for the shofar:

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| דַּבֵּ֛ר אֶל־בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל לֵאמֹ֑ר בַּחֹ֨דֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִ֜י בְּאֶחָ֣ד לַחֹ֗דֶשׁ יִהְיֶ֤ה לָכֶם֙ שַׁבָּת֔וֹן זִכְר֥וֹן תְּרוּעָ֖ה מִקְרָא־קֹֽדֶשׁ׃ | *Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts (zikaron t’ruah)*. (Leviticus 23:24) |

2) An early midrash:

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| רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בְּרַבִּי נַחְמָן פָּתַח (תהלים מז, ו): עָלָה אֱלֹהִים בִּתְרוּעָה ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר, בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹלֶה עַל כִּסֵּא דִּין, בַּדִּין הוּא עוֹלֶה, מַאי טַעַם, עָלָה אֱלֹהִים בִּתְרוּעָה, וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל נוֹטְלִין אֶת שׁוֹפְרֵיהֶן וְתוֹקְעִין לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, עוֹמֵד מִכִּסֵּא הַדִּין וְיוֹשֵׁב בְּכִסֵּא רַחֲמִים, דִּכְתִיב: ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר, וּמִתְמַלֵּא עֲלֵיהֶם רַחֲמִים וּמְרַחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם וְהוֹפֵךְ עֲלֵיהֶם מִדַּת הַדִּין לְרַחֲמִים, אֵימָתַי בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי. | Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Nacḥman began: “*God (Elohim) ascends with a blast (t’ruah), YHVH with the sound of a shofar*” (Psalms 47:6). When the Holy Blessed One sits upon the throne of justice, God ascends in justice. What is the source? “God [*Elohim*] ascends with a blast.” When Israel take their shofars and sound them before the Blessed Holy One, God rises from the throne of justice and sits on the throne of compassion, as it is written: “YHVH with the sound of a shofar.” (Psalm 47:6) God is then filled with compassion for them and then shifts the attribute of judgement to compassion. When? In the seventh month. (Lev. Rabbah 29:3) |

3) The Maggid of Mezritch offered this parable before the shofar sounding: A king sent his beloved children to a far-off country. They spent long years there, exiled from their father’s table. But they were constantly concerned with how to get back, how to come to dwell again in the restful home of their father’s innermost royal court. How happy they had been when sharing in their father’s joy!

They began to send affectionate messages to their father, hoping he would have compassion on them and bring them back. But once they got close enough to the royal court, they saw that their father’s countenance was not the same as it had once been. They kept calling out and begging for his compassion/mercy[[1]](#footnote-1), but they were met with silence.

After a long period of receiving no reply, the king’s children began to wonder what they might yet do to reawaken their father’s former love. “Why is it that we call out and received no answer? Surely our father has no lack of compassion/mercy! There must be some reason for this.”

They decided that maybe over the course of their years in that distant land they had forgotten the king’s language. “We became so mixed up with other nations that we took on their ways and started speaking their language. We have no way to communicate with the king. That’s why our words are not heard in his palace!”

So they decided to stop calling out in words or language. They would just let out a simple cry to arouse his mercy, since a cry without words can be understood by anyone. (R.Zeev Wolf of Zhitomir, Or Ha’Meir, late 1700s)

Rabbi Arthur Green comments on this parable: What is the heart’s forgotten language? Is there a language of God, once known to us, but now forgotten? What do we do when we realize we’ve lost the words of our heart’s most native tongue?

4) Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Torah decree, it does hint at a message: Awake – slumberers ***–*** from your sleep, and drowsy ones ***–*** stir from your doze, and search your ways, and turn in *teshuvah* and remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the meaningless things around us and err throughout their life in nonsense and emptiness which offer no benefit: Look to your souls and improve your ways and your actions, and let each of you abandon negative paths and thoughts that serve no purpose.

(Maimonides, *Laws of Teshuvah*)

5) The sound of the shofar penetrates our defenses and demands an awakening. It calls us to reveal to ourselves, to each other, and to God that which we long ago buried…It can break open the well of our passion and courage, free us from drab convention, and send us to our true work. The shofar calls us to our shared responsibility for Justice.

We blow the shofar at the time of the New Moon. The Moon in our tradition represents *Shechina*, the Divine Presence that is always present but sometimes hidden in shadow. The sound of the shofar calls *Shechina* out from her hiding place and welcomes her back into our awareness. She is coaxed from her hiding place by small acts of kindness, and by the sound of our honest prayer.

And what does it mean to call *Shechina* out from her hiding place? It means that each of us is called into our wholeness and power as we reclaim lost pieces of ourselves, the pieces that broke off at times of disappointment or trauma. We are given our work in the words of Deuteronomy, “Justice, justice thou shalt pursue.” (Why say justice twice?) Perhaps the first call to Justice is the one that calls us to look out at the world — the inequality, cruelty, danger and prejudice… And be moved to speak out and act.

And perhaps the second call to Justice beckons us to the Inner Landscape where we can look at the parts of the Self that have been silenced or ignored; we can look into our hearts and see where we have judged ourselves cruelly, where we have lost touch with our true feelings or dismissed our own precious dreams, where we carry resentment and bitterness.

May the blast of the shofar shatter the rigid walls that imprison our true joy.

May the wail of the shofar open our hearts and send us with compassion to profound forgiveness. May the call of the shofar inspire each of us to respond with our unique love as we rise to the challenge that is set before us this year.

(Rabbi Shefa Gold, “The Call of The Shofar,” 2008)

**Questions**:

* Which of these teachings about the shofar most resonate with you this year? Why?
* Which of them are you most curious about?
* Do you think that any of these teachings about shofar could be a *kavanah* (intention) for you for our shofar service in a few minutes? If so, which one?

1. The Hebrew word here, *rachamim*, can be translated as compassion or mercy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)