Yom Kippur Day Drasha: Hearing the Shofar Beyond the High Holidays

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Even though I’m lucky enough to speak Hebrew, I struggle to connect to the prayers of our *siddur*, let alone understand them. Their allusions to biblical and rabbinic texts often feel foreign, unintelligible. I lose focus. But along comes *Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur*. We begin the special afternoon *musaf* service. I recite *u-netaneh tokef*. And I can’t take my eyes off the page.

For me, the power and poetry of this prayer, written over 1,200 years ago, lies in its simplicity and brevity. Who will live, and who will die. Who by water, and who by fire. Short, immediate, terrifying sentences.

Lately I’ve been thinking about eight words at the beginning of this prayer: *U’v’shofar gadol yitaka, ve-kol dmama daka yishama*. The Great Shofar is sounded, and the still, small voice is heard.

What connection did the author of this prayer want us to make between the sound of the shofar from without, and the still, small voice from within?

In Sefer Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, God tells Moses what to do if the people of Israel are being oppressed in their own land. Rise up, God says, wage war. But how will the people of Israel know when the time is right? God instructs Moses to sound the trumpets; the very sound of the *tr’uah—*that sound of panic and alarm, will rouse the people of Israel. The sound of the *tru’ah* inspires our souls to wake up and our bodies to spring into action before it is too late.

When the author of *u-netaneh tokef* linked the cry of the *shofar* to the inner voice it awakens, I think hegrasped something profound about the human experience. Moments of fear, of terror in our lives shake us to our very core. They shatter our illusions of ourselves and of the world. But crisis can bring clarity. All the noise of the world vanishes in an instant. And we can finally hear the *kol dmama daka,* that still, small voice inside. That voice tells us, over and over again: life is short. Life is fragile. Life is precious.

This past April, my husband and I became parents for the first time. It was the culmination of a very, very long and sometimes difficult journey. But when I first held my daughter in my arms a moment after she was born, terrified, watching her take her very first breath, praying that she was ok, the world stood still. And I heard that inner voice more clearly than I had ever heard it before.

Our lives are punctuated, and sometimes punctured, by these blasts of the shofar. Whether they are the turning points we hoped for or the turning points we prayed would *never* arrive, they have the power to transform us.

These sorts of experiences are the exception, not the rule. So too with the Jewish ritual calendar. We stand before God, terrified, during the *yamim nora’im.* We hear our *kol dmama daka*. But ultimately, the holidays draw to a close. The ordinary noise pollution that fills our days gets louder and louder. And the sound of the *shofar* becomes harder to hear.

This alienation from the call of the *shofar* not only takes place on an individual level, but communally as well. It’s no accident that we are obligated to hear the shofar together as a community. Like the sounds of the trumpets described in sefer Bamidbar, the blast of the shofar’s *t’ruah* alerts us to communal danger. How many of you thought you heard that call at some point this year? How many of you heard, even if just for a fleeting moment, that voice inside, that told you to act, and act now?

But most of us don’t. What stops us? We live in an era of profound divisions. Some of the most urgent issues for *our* community, and for the world at large, are also the most difficult, the most toxic to discuss. They can bring out the worst in us. So we fortify our echo chambers. We vilify those whose views differ from our own. Or we just bury our heads in the sand. We are experts at drowning out the cry of the *shofar*.

So is this just the way things are? Yom Kippur is supposed to be the day that God comes closest to humans. Are we fated, for the rest of the year, to lengthen that distance, time and again, between ourselves and God, the distances between ourselves and our inner voice?

The cynic in me thinks that this is just how things go. As a historian, I write about the lives of Jews in Poland on the eve of the Holocaust, and their tragic fate, too often at the hands of their neighbours. So to put it politely, my view of human nature is not particularly rosy. But, I *don’t* think that that is the message of Yom Kippur.

Throughout the day, we list, in sometimes excruciating detail, our sins. We request forgiveness. We find the resolve to be better and do better.

But what we *don’t* do is listen to the *shofar*.

There is, of course, a simple explanation for this. Yom Kippur is described as *Shabbat shabbaton*, the day of solemn rest. Like shabbat, the rabbis placed a prohibition on the playing of musical instruments.

I want to suggest *another* reason why we don’t hear the *shofar* today, even though we do recite *u-netaneh tokef*, with its description of the *shofar* blast.

Yom Kippur is the first day of the year where we practice how to hear the sound of the *shofar* when it is no longer there.

If the sounds of shofar in the month of Elul and Rosh Hashana are meant to awaken us, to stir something spontaneous, instinctive and sudden, the *tefilot* of Yom Kippur, set us out on the hard work of *teshuvah*, of repentance. It’s a long service. We’re hungry. We’re tired. We’re thinking about a flat white. Or two. Or several. But we persist in the painstaking work of reflecting on how our lives *should* change, and on how we can to take *specific* actions to make that happen.

When we plan and resolve to right what we have made wrong in the world, we draw closer to the inner voice we heard so clearly with the sound of the *shofar*.

Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik once wrote that Judaism rests on three attributes of the individual: the head, the source of our intellect; the hand, symbolizing what we *do* in the world; and the heart, the way we experience God emotionally. I think the heart is often the most immediate, direct way to encounter God, but it is only the starting point for real change. The sound of the *shofar* at Rosh Hashana stirs our hearts. From there, if we want to sustain that connection, it’s up to us to use our hands, to take action. And with any luck, our heads will be able to find the words and the logic to help others hear the blasts of the shofar that moved us to try to make the world just a little bit better this year.

This evening, at the end of the concluding service, *ne’ila*, we are going to hear a single, long, note emanating from the shofar. Tradition tells us that it announces God’s ascension back into the heavenly realms, and the gates of heaven close; but it is also a battle cry to continue the hard work of repentance, prayer and seeking justice, *teshuva, tefilla and tzedakah* we committed ourselves to during the high holidays.

One of the terms we use to describe God is *shom’ea tefilla*, the one who listens to prayer. My hope for this new year, my prayer for us all, is that we can become a people that can describe ourselves throughout the year, each and every day, as *shome’a t’ruah*—the ones who can hear the *shofar* and with it, our *kol dmama daka*, our still, small voices—even when all the noise of the world conspires to make us deaf to their call.