

**“HEARING THE ALARM”**

**Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon**  
**September 21, 2017 - 1 Tishri 5778**  
**Rabbi Daniel Treiser**

During the final week of our year in Jerusalem, my rabbinic school roommate Josh and I headed down to the Old City. Winding our way through the cobblestone streets, we found ourselves in the Cardo, an ancient Roman street that divided the City in antiquity. Today, it is lined with shops and restaurants. We were on a very specific mission- to purchase the one item we both wanted all year long but had never bothered to get... a shofar. Josh had scouted out one shop unlike any other on a previous excursion. When you stepped inside, you were surrounded by *shofarot*. Some were in baskets, others lined the shelves, and still more hung from ropes in the ceiling. Dozens upon dozens of *shofarot*. How could we pick? Well, there was only one answer. We tried them all. For two hours, Josh and I stood there, trying nearly every single shofar that piqued our interest. The horns blared with our *tekiyahs*. The shopkeeper didn't mind... we were free advertising for him- Federation missions and tourist groups all came by to see what the ruckus was about and they shopped there, too. Finally, with very tired lips, I settled on the shofar that was to be mine. This one. The notes that come from it are sharp and clear, ringing beautifully in my ear. I actually purchased a second one that day, a twin to this, to give as a wedding gift to dear friends. Can you imagine me flying home with two *shofarot* like these wrapped in bubble wrap in the overhead bin? I don't think I would make it through TSA today. This shofar has lived in my homes and my offices, traveled with me to student pulpits, parks, beaches classrooms and more. It is, in fact, one of my most favorite Jewish possessions.

Apples and honey may be the food of Rosh Hashanah, but I don't think there is a greater symbol associated with these holy days than the shofar. One could argue that it is one of the most recognizable symbols of Judaism overall, and I think it's probably one of the most beloved customs in our tradition. That moment when the shofar is sounded is always a highlight of the service, whether it's the joy of watching our children hear it, the excitement of wondering whether the *ba'al*

*tekiyah*, the shofar blower will actually make the sounds, or if it is just a break from all that talking and praying.

In the Bible, the shofar served a variety of different purposes. Shofar is mentioned 47 different times. It might announce a procession, be used as a signal, a call to war, to induce fear, and other uses.

But for our purposes today, the most significant one comes in Leviticus 23, and repeated in Numbers 29. There, we are told

“בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זְכָרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מְקֻרָא-קֹדֶשׁ:”

“In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.” That’s it... that’s all the Bible has to tell us about Rosh Hashanah. It’s a *Yom Teruah*, a Day of Loud Blasts.

What are these loud blasts calling upon us to do? The Bible isn’t clear at all.

For that answer, we turn to a later teaching in our Jewish tradition. In the Middle Ages, Maimonides was one of the greatest scholars, teachers, and minds, and remains our finest teacher. When he wrote his great legal commentary the *Mishneh Torah*, he taught his meaning and purpose for the shofar’s blasts. He taught that the shofar calls to us, saying “Awake, you sleepers from your sleep. Arouse you slumberers from your slumber and ponder your deeds; remember your Creator and return to God in repentance. Do not be like those who miss the truth in pursuit of shadows and waste their years seeking vanity. Look well to your souls and consider your deeds; turn away from your wrong ways and improper thoughts.”<sup>1</sup>

For Maimonides the shofar is an alarm clock, waking us from our daily routine, to pay attention and perform acts of *teshuvah*, repentance, at the start of this New Year. The question we must ask ourselves then, is do we hear that alarm clock, or do we hit the snooze button?

Reflecting on repentance, my colleague Rabbi Richard Levy once wrote,

“The day has come to take an accounting of my life.

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<sup>1</sup> MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah 3:4

Have I dreamed of late of the person I want to be,

Of the changes I would make in my daily habits.

In the way I am with others,

In the friendship I show companions,

In the assistance I offer my neighbors?

I have remained enchained too often to less than what I am.

But the day has come to take an accounting of my life.”<sup>2</sup>

We hear alarms and warnings all the time and, all too often, we ignore them. We hear a car alarm going off, and unless it sounds like ours, we dismiss it. If a home alarm goes off on our street, MAYBE we check to see if something is wrong, but otherwise we pay no attention. This past July, three different friends unknowingly sent me the same article. It was in the Washington Post, and it was titled “Tampa Bay’s Coming Storm.” In the article the author speaks to climatologists, experts, building developers, local government leaders, and residents of communities throughout Tampa Bay, including many in which I know you live. And the conclusion they all came to is that Tampa Bay is woefully unprepared for a major storm.<sup>3</sup> I received that article in July. I dismissed it. So when the forecasts first came, we prepared a little bit. Bought some water, bought some tuna. Nutella, oddly enough. As the track shifted, we dug out the gas cans, bought batteries, pulled out the synagogue’s hurricane plan. As the cone moved west, I found myself thinking of Rabbi Levy’s poem again. What papers need to be protected? What comes with me? What items do we as a family want to preserve just in case? Is it time for us to leave or should we wait it out? “The day has come to take an accounting of my life,” indeed.

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<sup>2</sup> As found in Levy, Richard. “On Wings of Awe: A Fully Transliterated Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur” KTAV Publishing, 1985. Pgs 105-106

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/health/environment/tampa-bay-climate-change/?utm\\_term=.7c33ff1fbbae](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/health/environment/tampa-bay-climate-change/?utm_term=.7c33ff1fbbae)

We sit here today less than two weeks since Irma struck, less than a week since some folks here had power restored, a day after we watch another powerful storm decimate an island paradise. And we breathe a sigh of relief because we “dodged a bullet.” And yes, we did. We’re the lucky ones. I can tell you that right now the members of Temple Beth El in Fort Myers are celebrating their New Year at Cypress Lake United Methodist Church, because their building is unusable. Temple Emanuel in Lakeland is also worshipping in a church because of damage. I cannot tell you where Rabbi Michael Feshbach is leading services today. He is the rabbi of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, heavily damaged in Irma, and we have yet to hear about Maria’s impact. We pray for their safety as we give thanks for ours.

So what do we do? Do we heed the call, look around us and see that our world is changing? Do we acknowledge that sea levels rise and storms become more powerful because of our impact on the earth, or do we hit the snooze button? Will we learn the lessons of the last two weeks to make ourselves safer and be better prepared, but at the same can we do our part to help prevent further damage to our fragile world? “The day has come to take an accounting of my life.”

Alarm clocks have evolved over the years, from the town crier of old and the rooster on the farm into technology. If I ask you to think of an alarm clock, you probably envision the wind up analog clock with two bells on top. That’s the most common icon. But we evolved to digital ones, too. They’re ubiquitous and everywhere. The funny thing is, I don’t have an alarm clock on my nightstand. Like many of you I imagine, I just use my cell phone. Open up the alarm feature on my phone and you’ll find at least 15 different preset times I may use as an alarm. Some are set to repeat, some don’t.

But never did I imagine that my phone would be the alarm clock I heard on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. How could I think that a simple phone call would alter the path of my life forever because something didn’t look right?

I might not have expected it for myself, but I know what those calls are like. I know many of you have received the calls like I did. I’ve been through them with some of you. The call from the doctor’s office, the hospital, the emergency room - the alarm we dread. It comes filled with questions, so many fraught with fear. What does this

mean? Will I be cured? How long do I have? There's questions upon questions upon questions. Treatments, healing, recovery, positive attitude, alternative therapies, all of them are important questions to consider, and trust me, they've been on my mind non-stop.

But this alarm raises other questions, too, questions that have been on my mind just as much as the ones about my treatment, questions that are equally important for each and every one of us. What have I done with my life? How do I use my days? How do I treat others around me? Do I give thanks for the myriad blessings I encounter every day or do I forget to acknowledge them? Did I offer the caring hand, the supportive shoulder, the gentle chuckle to ease the hurt? Did I say I love you enough? We often live our lives as if we have all the time in the world to get around to changing, even though we know our time is short.

Why do we wait for that alarm to ask these questions? Why do we need the cancer diagnosis, the tragedy, the loss of a friend or loved one to make us wake up?

“The day has come to take an accounting of my life.”

“I need to come in touch with my own power,” the poem continues, “...To be a comfort, a source of honor,

So strong that I can risk the love of someone else

So sure that I can risk to change the world...

So long as I have breath, I know I have the strength

To transform what I am to what I can be.

The day has come to take an accounting of my life.”

The shofar does more than simply call upon us to wake up and take stock of our lives. It calls upon us to act as well. To act as individuals for the betterment of our world.

“The Talmud teaches, ‘If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not

protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.’ As Jews we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One chutzpadik medieval commentator teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for ‘the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.’”<sup>4</sup>

I’m often asked if every rabbi just goes to some website to download their sermons so that everyone is saying the same thing. The answer, obviously I hope, is no. But today I do want to share words with you written by others. Today I am one of several hundred Reform rabbis around our country, sharing this call in one form or another.

“Today I speak words in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication in our nation that sees us becoming more divided and fueled by hatred.

This is not a political statement. We, like the prophets of old and generations of rabbis before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: ‘You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’

On this Day of sounding the Shofar, may her four distinct notes compel us to respond with a resounding call for justice.

The single Tekiah, The Sound of Certainty:

As rabbis we are speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically

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<sup>4</sup> “One Voice 5778 Statement” written by Elka Abrahamson, et. al, for use by members of the CCAR.

and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on all our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values articulated in the founding documents of our country, the “immortal declaration” that all [men] people are created equal. We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country’s history and advance its noble visions of tolerance. On this first day of the New Year we are ‘Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land’ [Lev 25:10].

The second note, the three blasts Shvarim, The Sound of Brokenness:

Something crumbled inside us when we watched the televised images of Charlottesville’s beautiful streets filled with hate-spewing marchers. It reopened the wound we felt here when thugs marked our sidewalks with Nazi graffiti, when criminals desecrated the mosque in New Tampa. How much more vandalism, how many clashes, which other cities? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of ‘normal,’ of racist and anti-Semitic acts or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles. Let us never grow numb to the brokenness, but let our pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities. Neither silence, nor complacency, nor waiting anxiously and fearfully for the next wounding event are options. Not for us. The words of Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, sound a warning to us today, ‘We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.’ May we never be neutral, never silent in the face of threats or of discrimination toward any. Let us interfere as healers of the broken[hearted], and binders of their wounds. (Psalm 147:3)

The third shofar blast: Truah - 9 short notes- The Sound of Urgency:

The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Racism is wrong whether it seeps into explicit anti-Semitism or not. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first Adam so that no human being could ever say, ‘my lineage is greater than yours.’ But just in case we thought the white supremacists were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that most – but

certainly not all - Jews in America are white, those fiery torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King taught us, 'We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny,' whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.

The final shofar blast: The Tekiah G'dolah The Endless Pursuit of Justice:

Torah admonishes: 'Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, God, give to you.' Our sacred text reminds us that for a community truly to inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and to unity. Every community relies on passionate and engaged citizens; it relies on you to be insistent advocates for tolerance and enduring kindness between the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and enlivens every citizen. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our county and in our country – in this New Year.”<sup>5</sup>

My friends, in so many ways, it has been an interesting year since we last gathered to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. There have been reasons to celebrate, reasons to cry, and reasons to express great concern. If there is one thing I have found in this year, it is that I need to listen to the shofar's call more than ever. I cannot simply sit back, hit the snooze button, and let life go on without me making a difference. A difference in how I view myself, how I view others, how I view the world.

In this New Year, let us all hear the shofar's call. Let us hear the alarms others have heard and wake up to be our best selves. Let us plan and prepare to make our world better.

Let us hear the call to action to defend the rights and needs of others. Let the hundred notes we are about to hear from our shofar remind us of the command to offer thanks 100 times each day for the many, many, blessings in our lives.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



Let's not wait for another alarm, because "TODAY has come to take an accounting of all our lives."