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“The Shofar, What it Means to Me”

by Murray Rosenbaum

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For all of the people who don't know what a shofar looks like, this is a shofar... The first time I ever heard a shofar played was here at St. Hildas and St. Hughs in this room. My music teacher, Mr. Hirsch, played it for the Rosh Hashanah chapel talk he gave when I was nine. When I heard him play it I was surprised at the sound of it because it looked like something that a spiritual leader would carry, like a cross bearer who is a person who carries the processional cross at the beginning and end of Eucharist, rather than a musical instrument. The sound the shofar made was this fascinating raw, natural sound that had a scratchy smoothness to it. I'll play you a note so that you can see for yourselves...

A shofar is an instrument that is made out of a ram's horn and is used by the Jewish people in services and holidays, particularly the High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah, which is a celebration that marks the beginning of the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, which follows 10 days later, and is the Day of Atonement and repentance. For traditional Jews it is used to call upon God to listen their prayers. For secular Humanistic Jews like my congregation, the shofar is blown as a kind of personal wake-up call and to make a connection to all the generations that have come before us that have also blown the shofar. We also say in our Rosh Hashanah service, “The blast of the shofar is a call to action, challenging us to resist evil, to strive for justice, to create peace.”

The first time I ever played the shofar myself was when Rabbi Peter came over to my house to discuss my final project. I had a different idea in mind at first, but Rabbi Peter had heard that I played the trumpet so he thought I might be interested in the shofar. We discussed this idea for a while before he brought out a bag holding three of his own shofars. Rabbi Peter offered me the chance to blow the shofar, and when I did, I got a note on the first try! Like this...

Rabbi Peter told me that getting a note on the first try was difficult and that I had some skill with this horn, and that was when I realized that learning about the shofar was what I wanted to do for my final project. I also thought it would be interesting to learn about the different notes played on the shofar and their purpose at different points in Jewish celebrations.

After my first note I started to play with ‘lipping’ up and down notes, and found out that there are higher and lower pitches that are possible on the shofar. Let me show you what I mean...

Rabbi Peter said that there was a very talented musician who was part of the congregation a long time ago who could play songs on the shofar but, to his dismay, he had a hard time playing the traditional shofar notes used at services which I'll demonstrate later. Then I was surprised when Rabbi Peter said I could borrow his shofars. He said if I got good enough at playing it, he would let me be the shofar blower during the High Holidays, which would be a very high honor for someone my age.

The origin of the shofar is connected to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. The story says that Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to God, but God stops him and says that because he was faithful, he does not need to sacrifice his son. Abraham sacrifices a nearby ram in Isaac's place in thanks to God. Afterwards, blowing into a ram's horn in the future was intended to remind God of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and that God ought to be forgiving to future generations on behalf of Abraham.

During the days when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, various musical instruments were used in the services, including flutes, drums and trumpet, but after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 by the Babylonians, the Jews were forcibly exiled from ancient Israel to Babylon and now they were allowed to play only the shofar, to show that they were in a time of mourning.

The destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 CE was even worse than the first. This second attack left the Jews scarred and scared because they didn't have a house of worship any longer. The Jews were so frightened and traumatized that they again banned all instruments except the shofar because they believed that the more the shofar was played, the more likely it was that God would hear them and help them.

After the destruction of the second temple the Jews finally gave up on the idea of one centralized house of worship where sacrifices could be made. They created a new institution called the synagogue, which served as a gathering place for study and prayer. Synagogues were built throughout the land, and eventually also outside of Israel, and allowed Jews to meet wherever they lived. The leadership also changed from priests who offered sacrifices in the one Temple in Jerusalem, to rabbis who now lead prayers and taught classes in the local synagogues

Historically, the shofar was sounded on Shabbat in the temple in ancient Jerusalem, but this practice was later prohibited by Jewish law in the time of the synagogue. This restriction is based on a ruling that prevents fixing things on Shabbat as a kind of work. If the shofar blower accidentally broke the shofar while carrying it and tried to fix it on Shabbat it would be considered work, which is forbidden on that day. So there was really nothing wrong with playing the shofar on Shabbat, but to avoid the risk of breaking other Shabbat rules, it became prohibited to play it.

The job of a shofar blower is very important to celebrations in the same way that a Cantor is important to a Synagogue prayer. The Hebrew name for a shofar blower is a Tokea, which literally means "Blaster." Being a Ba'al T'kiah ("master of the blast" or "shofar sounder") is a very highly honored office in the Jewish community. Traditionally, while only men could blow the shofar and all men were eligible for the office, only a chosen few have the required skill to be accepted into the office. These days women are also welcome in non-Orthodox communities to blow the shofar, but they still have just as hard a time as the men.

According to the Talmud, a shofar may be made from the horn of any animal from the Bovidae family except that of a cow or calf, although a ram is the most preferred. Bovidae horns are made of keratin (the same material as human toenails and fingernails). An antler, on the other hand, could not be used to make a shofar since it is not a horn but solid bone and, thus, cannot be hollowed out because it is too strong and thick. The Bovidae family is most closely related by the way the horns are grown from the animal itself.

There is no requirement for ritual slaughter (*shechita*) of the animal from which the shofar is to be made. Theoretically, the horn can come from a non-kosher animal because under most interpretations of Jewish law the shofar is not required to be *muttar be-feekha* (literally: permissible in your mouth). The mitzvah is hearing the shofar, not eating the animal from which it came. The shofar falls into the category of *toshmishai mitzvah*, objects used to perform a mitzvah that do not themselves have inherent holiness. Moreover, because the horn is always inedible, it is considered *afra be-alma* (mere dust) and not an unkosher substance.

I believe the idea of using a ram's horn as an instrument is unique and creative, I can't imagine having thought of that myself. I think it's the perfect instrument for a religious ceremony or community whether or not it holds traditional beliefs. That's because it's a completely natural and organic instrument that connects us to nature and to our very basic, core feelings. Unlike a guitar, which is mostly calm and soothing, the shofar's raw sound is jarring and wakes you up and really catches your attention.

For me, the shofar also represents the diversity of humans in the way that no two shofars are the same, just like all humans are unique. I directly observed the uniqueness of every shofar in the three shofars that Rabbi Peter let me borrow. The first thing I noticed about them was their physical differences. (Pick up #1) One of them had only one curl and was pale, (#2) another was dark with a pale strip with half a curl, (#3) and the third was also dark but with more of a curl and no pale strip down the side. Each shofar also has a very different sound. The first has a nice rough sound... The second, which is my personal favorite, has a smooth sound to it... And the third has a rough and natural sound.... Rabbi Peter also had another shofar that he didn't bring over that night, which is called a Yemenite shofar. It's really beautiful and has full sound to it....

The way the shofar makes me feel whenever I play it is a kind of Zen connection to the entire world, and what I mean by that is I get a sense of everything that is going on in the world. I think I get this raw and natural connection to a higher power, which normally I don't believe in. Whenever I play the shofar, I feel this perfect Zen, and alignment, to everything. I also think it is a great statement of how creative humans can be to have come up with the idea of the shofar in the first place.

Another reason why I like to play the shofar is that I get this connection to everyone before who had played it in all situations. I think the most painful Jewish experience was after the destruction of the temple. Since then, there have been many other tragic and terrible times in our history when we have been persecuted and might have given up the strength to stay together as a community.

But despite all that our ancestors went through, the Jewish people had great strength and courage and did not disappear. The shofar's sound is symbolic of this perseverance and connects us to those ancestors. The blasts declare loud and clear that we are here and celebrating our Jewish identity today.

To end this paper, I want to re-enact for you the four main types of shofar blasts or series of notes that are played at the High Holidays. The first blast is called Tekiah. It is a long blast that is used as a call to the community. Next comes Shevareem, three separated blasts, and it is supposed to be a mourning or sad sound. Third is Teruah, a series of short blasts that are used to sound an alarm. Finally, there is Tekiah Gedolah, a long note that ends with a note going up and is the sound of hope. The object of the shofar blower is to make that last blast, the Tekiah Gedolah, last as long as possible.

And now, in keeping with the practice of how we do this in our synagogues and temples, Rabbi Schweitzer will call out each of these notes and I will blow them for you.

TEKIAH

SHEVARIM

TERUAH

TEKIAH GEDOLAH

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