

Rosh Hashanah

1 Tishrei, 5770; Saturday, Sept. 19, 2009

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Shanah tovah!

My parents are here today - they flew in from New York for the holiday, and it means a lot to me to have them here. And hopefully they'll forgive me for telling a little story about them!

My mom occasionally asks my dad why he goes to shul each and every week, wondering, "Didn't you say the same prayers *last* week?" And my dad will sometimes respond with a story about Billy Joel concert that a friend of his attended. The finale was "Piano Man" – and everyone in the audience knew the words, they had all heard that same song a hundred times before. And they all sang along, and it was the best and most moving part of concert. And my father says, the prayers we pray each shabbas are *our* music – these are the words & tunes that move us.

And some of us here today come to shul every week and love those words and that music, and it works for us every time. And some of us here today don't come so often, and some of us *only* come for high holidays, and some of us find that the words of the traditional Jewish liturgy can actually get in the way of the prayers in our heart. But I think that people with all degrees of observance and connection can find meaning and a particularly soulful way to pray in this whole extra service we do on Rosh Hashanah with *no* words, but with a musical instrument – the shofar.

All of us may find that at this time of the year we have *too* much to say to constrain ourselves with words. Our hearts are full, and we want the prayers of our heart to be heard, and words are just not quite adequate. The shofar provides the music for that kind of yearning to connect.

And today's torah portion ties in to this concept of wordless prayer. Isaac is born to Sarah, and Sarah grows jealous of Ishmael, Abraham's first son by their servant Hagar. At Sarah's demand, Abraham sends Hagar & Ishmael into the desert, with only a little bit of bread and water, which quickly runs out. Hagar becomes despondent & sits them both down to die. But Ishmael cries out. He cries out, but without words – and the parsha tells us that God hears the cry of the youth and God heeds it, and provides water for him and his mother, and God is with the youth as he grows up and thrives.

In the haftarah, too, we encounter wordless prayer, and perhaps the most well-known example of it. Hannah, wife of Elkanah, is barren, and she prays near the door of the temple at Shiloh for a son. And the parsha tells us, "she was speaking from the heart, only her lips moved but her voice was not heard."

Hannah is questioned by the priest Eli, who accuses her of being drunk. But she says no, she is not drunk but praying: "I have poured out my soul before God."

The traditional interpretation of the story is that she was saying specific words to herself, and in fact this moment is sometimes pointed to as the origin of silent prayer. But another interpretation is that her prayer transcended words. The Berkeley interpretation might be that she was saying a mantra and meditating. In any event the depth of her yearning transcended words, and the prayer was in her heart. And Hannah's prayer, like Ishmael's, was heard, her prayers were answered, and she bore a son.

And the liturgy tends to suggest to us that God has a special connection to the shofar, that God hears it better than other prayer. The liturgy says that it's when God hears the sound of the shofar that God arises on Rosh Hashanah from the Throne of Judgement to the Throne of Mercy: our repentance is accepted, judgement is removed, and we're written for a good year. Psalm 47, which opens the shofar service, says, "God has ascended with a blast; Hashem has

ascended with the sound of the shofar. Make music for God, make music, make music for our King, make music.”: (Zamru elokim zamru; zamru l'malcainu zamru)

זמרו אלוקים זמרו ; זמרו למלכנו זמרו;

(Which is itself a lovely little rhythmical song.)

But I'm left a little unsatisfied by such a direct connection between deep yearning and the fulfillment of our desires that the Torah and Haftarah might imply. In modern times, we know that life is not always so simple, and that cries and prayers and meditation, no matter how earnest, are not always enough. We might enjoy the fantasy that blowing the horn is enough to remove judgment and bring mercy into our lives, but we're also a little suspicious of a world that would work that way. So let's take so far that the shofar has an extraordinary power to *express* our hearts' yearning; but perhaps it has other uses as well.

And as we look at its history and its uses, we see that the shofar is not just about yearning and prayer. It's also a call to action. Its traditional functions make this clear.

- It was blown as a call to war; in fact, at Jericho, the blast itself was an act of war, shattering the walls so the Jewish soldiers could enter.
- It was also blown – and I wish this function were as well known as the last one – to herald the coming of peace.
- The shofar is a call to economic justice – it was blown to mark the beginning of the jubilee year, when debts are forgiven, and its call on Yom Kippur of the jubilee year marked the actual moment of the release of debts.
- It was also the call to the temple for sacrificial services – and one of the really cool archaeological finds in Israel in recent years was a stone found at the southwest corner of the temple that was marked with לבית התקיעה, l'beit ha-tekiyah, To the place of the shofar blast.

- The shofar also introduces shabbat.
- And the shofar is a call to gather as a community.

So the shofar blast is a call to action, but to potentially so many different kinds of action. And perhaps one of the lessons of the shofar is that **we** decide what kind of action it is calling us toward.

Psalm 47, which I mentioned before, opens the shofar service; in fact, it's traditionally said seven times at the beginning of the shofar service. And it opens with these words: "for the conductor, a song. למנצח מזמור. Lamnatzeach, mizmor. All you nations, join hands – sound the shofar to God with a cry of joy." I find the symbolism of the opening words very sweet: "for the conductor, a song." This word for conductor, "me'natzeach," meant the conductor of the orchestra of the court of the temple in ancient days, and it's used today in modern Hebrew for the conductors of secular orchestras.

This opening may be telling us that our lives and our actions are **our** songs, we decide on the tune, the key, the rhythm; and God is the conductor, guiding us as we carry out our plans, helping to keep our lives balanced.

This may seem like a very modest role: "play a little louder in this part of your life; slow down a little on that." Except the words are **for** the conductor, a song: we make the decisions, but we are living our lives **for** God, whatever that means to each of us: making our decisions and living our lives **for** a higher purpose, singing a song of greater good for the community, or for the earth, for our children & families, for humankind.

As my parents would proudly tell you, brother plays the trombone, and he also blows the shofar. And he shared with me once a piece of music by Wynton Marsalis called "The Majesty of the Blues," which set to music a sermon by music & cultural critic Stanley Crouch. Although

it's written about the blues, it sounds to me like it's written about the shofar. Listen, and judge for yourself.

"...It was a noble sound. It had majesty. Yes, it was majestic. Deep down in the soul of it all, the notes themselves provided the levels of revelation we can only expect of great art. It formed a bridge. That's right, a bridge. A bridge that stretched from the realm of dreams to the highways and byways and thoroughfares and back roads of action.

"To be even more precise, let me say that this sound was itself an action. Like a knight wrapped in the glistening armor of invention, of creativity, of integrity, of grace, of sophistication, of soul, this sound took the field.

"It arrived when the heart was like a percussively throbbing community suffering the despair imposed by dragons.

"Now, if a dragon thinks it is grand enough, that dragon will try to make you believe that what you need to carry you through the inevitable turmoil that visits human life is beyond your grasp. If that dragon thinks it is grand enough, it will try to convince you that there is no escape, no release, no salvation from its wicked dominion. It will tell you that you are destined to live your life in the dark.

"But when a majestic sound takes the field, when it parts the waters of silence and noise with the power of song – when this majestic concatenation of rhythm, harmony and melody assembles itself in the invisible world of music – ears begin to change, and lives begin to change, and those who were musically lame begin to walk with a charismatic sophistication to their steps.

“You see, when something is pure, when it has the noblest reasons as its fundamental purpose, then it will become a candle of sound in the dark cave of silence. Yes, it was a noble sound.”

So what did you think, is this about the shofar?

I would offer to you that like the trumpet is Wynton Marsalis's instrument, and like the piano is Billy Joel's, the shofar is our instrument, our music for our prayers. Of course you won't hear the shofar today, because it's shabbat; but you'll hear it tomorrow if you come then, and you'll hear it at the end of Yom Kippur, that amazing tekiyah gedolah.

And I hope that it calls you to your own best actions for the future year – my wish for each of you is that it calls you to compose the song of your life in a way that infuses your life with meaning, with spirituality, with the presence of God.

Shanah tovah. A sweet and happy new year to you all.