

Rosh Hashanah 5770/2009

Meaning to Hear

Today is that occasional Rosh Hashanah when we honor its coincidence with Shabbat by not blowing the shofar. The shofar is the most identifiable ritual of this day. But we leave it out. Tomorrow we'll hear it loud and clear, but today we imagine it.

So, in lieu of sounding the shofar, let me start with this Mishnah *about* the sounding of the shofar, from the tractate on Rosh Hashanah: “If the shofar was blown in a cistern or in a cellar or in a large jar, and a person heard the sound of the shofar, he has fulfilled his obligation. So, too, if a person was passing behind a synagogue, *or if his house was near to a synagogue and he heard the sound of the shofar*, or the reading of the Megillah, if he directed his heart he has fulfilled his obligation, but if he did not he has not fulfilled his obligation. Though one may have heard and another may also have heard, the one may have directed his heart and other may not have directed his heart.”

I want to analyze this text in a moment, but first let me tell you why I chose it.

Several weeks ago, I sat in on one of those mass phone calls for rabbis that always take place either right before a big holiday, or in conjunction with some pressing social or political brouhaha.

This particular phone call concerned health care, and the Jewish tradition on matters of healing and social responsibility, and the need for us to be conscious about all of the obvious issues swirling around that subject. And the lead speaker in this phone call to about a thousand rabbis was none other than President Obama. So naturally the president was pleading with rabbis to get up on the Holy Days and argue the merits of universal health care, if not the specific points of his proposal.

A couple of his comments struck me. One was his reference to our central prayer for the Days of Awe, Un'taneh Tokef. In that prayer – and he didn't say this exactly, but I'm saying it – in that prayer God is the “death panel,” as it were, but also the “life panel.” Only God decides who shall live and who shall die, and how, and when, and ...why. Our task is to remember NOT to play God, but rather to *partner* with God in caring for the divine image in each person, in this case by providing adequate resources for staying healthy, for restoring good health, and for

comforting those we simply can no longer help with medicine. There's a good sermon in a nutshell.

But something else he said struck me harder. He happened to mention that in Chicago he lives across the street from a synagogue. That much I knew. My former Hillel rabbi, Arnold Jacob Wolf, *alav hashalom*, served that congregation, and died only last Chanukah. But here's what the president told us: He said that there were years when his family would be sitting at home and suddenly they would notice the call of the shofar emanating from that synagogue across the street. Whenever they heard it, they realized that an important call to conscience was being put forth. And so they stopped and listened.

Immediately I thought of our Mishnah about *unintentionally* hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. No one else mentioned it during the call or afterward, but I couldn't get off of it.

So let me take you back into that Mishnah for a bit, and then let's ask some questions about its application to the present state of our society and our world.

First of all, this Mishnah shows that the early Rabbis wanted to emphasize the idea of obligation, *chiyuv*. We *must* hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. That's the law. That's mitzvah. That's commandedness.

But the Rabbis seem equally concerned with the idea of intention, or in Hebrew, *kavvanah*. If one simply hears the shofar on the right day by accident, it isn't good enough. One must intend to hear it, and to hear it for the purpose of fulfilling one's obligation to hear it on Rosh Hashanah.

What if some random Jew – some alienated random Jew – wanders by the shul on Rosh Hashanah “accidentally on purpose,” as we used to say when we were kids, half hoping he *won't* hear the shofar? But then suddenly hearing it, and noting that he hears it, he moves on? Is his hearing of the shofar somehow “on the way” toward counting for something?

Or what if some random Jew walks by with full *kavvanah*, or even enters the synagogue, and hears the shofar loud and clear, but hasn't the foggiest idea what he's hearing? What if the sound he hears is nostalgic, but nothing more? No call to *teshuvah*, no urge to make changes in his own life or in the state of the

community or the world; just a quaint custom, a reminder of the sweet days of childhood, or of grandpa, or of tayglach and honey cake? (Shofar?)

Now another question: What if the person who hears is not a Jew, but this person feels nonetheless stirred by the stark shrillness of the sound and by what he perceives to be a call for meaning, a call for action, a call for responsiveness?

Does his hearing “count” for anything, especially if in his hearing and reporting the incident it reminds a few of us un-hearing Jews to try to hear the call of our own tradition?

The Rabbis lived in a time of total *halakhah*, a time of law, and the law they spelled out shaped a world. And that world is vastly changed. Nowadays we might want to ask: If one of our own made even the slightest effort to hear the shofar, wouldn't we want it to count for something?

And, by the way, why is this Jew outside? If he really wants to hear the shofar, what is he doing lurking around out there? Can't he muster the maturity to come in for a few minutes? What is he trying to prove? Does he not come in because he can't get in? No money? No ticket? Or does he intentionally not come in?

Maybe he assumes that the sound of the shofar is just so much nostalgia to the

people inside, and not the true call to conscience he seeks? Does he fear that those inside use the shofar to *drown out* the painful call of conscience? Does he imagine the adults inside tugging their children and grandchildren closer to the *ba'al tekiah*, sharing their oohs and ahs of fascination, but hiding behind that fascination so as to avoid the confrontation of the pure sound itself?

As the Mishnah says, “though one may have heard and another may also have heard, the one may have directed his heart – mustered his *kavvanah* – and the other may not have directed his heart.” Or in our own late version: one may have directed one’s heart, and thus intentionally *not* heard the shofar, *so that* one could hear *more clearly* that which the shofar so easily disguises.

One is tempted here to talk about the small personal daily acts of hearing and listening - listening we all need to do more of: listening to our spouses and partners, to our children, to our aging parents, to our friends, and especially to our own selves. To our bodies. Our stress levels. That’s all important. But that’s a different sermon.

I think that that’s a sermon we’d rather hear – and I would rather preach – because in the end it’s *apolitical*. Painful maybe, but apolitical, so not offensive. Rather,

I'm asking us to use the silence of the shofar today to think about the kind of hearing that cannot but devolve into politics. Not partisan politics, but politics nonetheless.

I'm thinking of the myriad of anger-invoking issues that make such a racket that hardly any shofar blast could drown them out, and yet we still find ways to tune them out and go about our merry business. I should give you a hundred such items to correspond to the one hundred shofar calls we won't hear today, the *me'ah kolot*. But here is a short list of sins, far short of a hundred, followed by a roll call of some heroic things Jews are doing to repair the broken world:

The first of these sins concerns health care. I won't bore you with quote after quote from traditional sources to "prove" the Jewish point of view on this. I'll just say that it is unconscionable to allow the status quo to continue in a country without universal health care and health insurance, especially in light of our own prosperity, and in light of the huge influence we American Jews have in both the legal and medical fields.

This year someone very close to us – someone whose job *does* grant him health insurance – wound up not being able to cover expenses, and wound up not being

comfortable criticizing certain workplace policies for fear of losing his job, yes, but more important, losing his health coverage. We don't stand idly by the blood of our neighbor. *Lo ta'amod al dam rey'echa*. We need to speak out, not because one day it could be us, but because if our neighbor bleeds, it *is* us.

The second sin we need to work on is our failure to hear the sometimes silent agony of the unemployed. We need to feel within our own hearts the indignity of the millions who have lost work and can't imagine their future ever coming together again. Lost work means much more than lost earnings, or even lost health insurance. It means lost self-image; not the self-image that impresses others or puts on airs, but the self-image deep within that reflects the *divine* self-image, the *tzelem elo-him*, that stands behind every living face.

Then, we need to intend our hearts to hear the disgraced cries of those victimized by financial piracy, by economic promiscuity, by outrageous monetary practices – private and public, illegal and legal, watched and unwatched. And no, there is no international Jewish banking conspiracy *a la* the Protocols of the Elders of Zion; but we Jews are somewhere near the middle of this tragedy. We did not cause it, but more than a few of us contributed to it, just as most of us proudly do more than

our share to create responsible, healthy economic activity around the world. Can we singlehandedly change the way the world does business? Of course not, but that's not a good enough answer. We know we have influence. "Just weights and just measures," says the Torah. *Efah tzedek v'hin tzedek*. In the world of financial back-and-forth, we have a Jewish job to do.

We need to train our hearts to listen to the cries of hunger around the world, and of exploitative labor and child slavery. Regimes still play politics with the food supply. States still block children from obtaining minimal nutrition. Even in places where there is a will to feed one another, the means are unreachable. And you and I will throw away the leftovers from our lunch this afternoon. Of course we need to think about the ongoing starvation and genocide in Darfur; the cruel toll it takes especially on women and children.

We need to train our hearts to listen to the worried sighs of thousands of American parents with children serving in our two endless wars, while most of us move through our lives as if these wars neither mattered nor existed at all. We can argue all night as to whether these operations are justified; or whether one is and one is not. But neither supporters nor detractors pay much attention to the day-to-day fighting. Parents of soldiers think of nothing else. The most I worry about is

whether my kid in college is keeping up with his reading. That's as it should be in an ideal world, but an eight-year stalemate and a six-year stalemate and four-thousand plus deaths is no ideal world.

In a similar vein, we need to tune in to the anguish of the Shalit family, whose son Gilad has been held prisoner without contact in Gaza for over three years. As a comparison, convicted terrorists in Israeli prisons get conjugal rights. The Shalits are parents like you and me, except that they happen to live in Israel, and so their son went to the army at eighteen to protect the country you and I have lots of fun visiting on our Jewish identity renewal trips, as do our college students on their Birthright excursions, and he just happened to be the one whom Hamas operatives apprehended, and his parents haven't heard from him since. In the silence of this shofar-free Rosh Hashanah, we who barely know Gilad Shalit's name should try whispering it to ourselves a time or two.

And in general, we should pay a lot more attention to Israel, and quit thinking it's not our project and not our problem. I tell you this in one way or another every Rosh Hashanah. What I wish we could do is hear the frustration and near-hopelessness our Israeli brothers and sisters feel, because they are caught in a vise

between the crippling politics of Hamas on the one hand, and the cynically immoral politics of settler-ism on the other hand. I wish we could hear their desperation over what they know to be a real existential threat from Iran, and from an Iran-backed Hamas and Hezbollah. I can tell you this: they sure don't hear us begging them not to attack Iran or to try coaxing America into doing it. And they're sure we can't hear them – or at least we liberals can't hear them – when they tell us why even most of their human rights people advocated the operation in Gaza, and why the infamous blockade is about halting life-threatening munitions and not about choking off humanitarian needs, even though that is sometimes the result. And why it wasn't "the war in Gaza," but rather "the war in Gaza and southern Israel." We must try to hear that point of view. We also must not ignore the very real evidence of humanitarian abuses in the prosecution of the operation – on *both* sides according to the U.N. report – but still we need to try harder to hear that point of view.

At the same time, more than a few Israelis wonder why American Jewish organizations continue to espouse a policy that fuels a dangerous codependency with the settler movement, making it next to impossible for the United States as a loyal ally to Israel to throw its support behind reasonable territorial compromises

that a majority of Israelis have supported – and voted for - and begged for - for a generation.

As I mentioned before, there are Jews who don't even pass by the outside of the shul for fear that the folks inside would only use the shofar – and the singing – and the majestic beauty of the rituals – to drown out the call of Jewish responsibility. Lots of Jews – and not just younger Jews – want a Judaism less obsessed with survival and more committed to *tikkun* olam, to the time-honored Jewish mandate to repair the world in God's image. If any of those disaffected Jews happen to be passing by right now, I'd like for them to know that great Jewish things are indeed going on.

Example of Jewish listening with intention: In our own synagogue, the BAS Cares Chevra created a truly compassionate and effective response to unemployment. The UJA-Federation came up with their Connect to Care center, and as a result people are finding work every day, and dignity, and a sense that the community takes their pain seriously.

Example of Jewish listening with intention: Our Social Action Chevra continues to go out on Midnight Runs. They brought hundreds of grocery bags here today, hoping you'll fill them with food and bring them back on Sukkot to feed the hungry right here in Westchester's tony back yard.

Example of Jewish listening with intention: The American Jewish World Service has launched a world-wide hunger action project. They've sent Jewish activists to Africa, Asia, and Central America to try to turn desperation into hope.

Example: The Avodah Service Corps – which my niece is now working for – does remarkable work in poor American urban environments.

Example: Another group called Hazon is one of the most creative enterprises to emerge on the Jewish scene in years. They educate for environmental awareness; they sponsor community-based sustainable agricultural projects; they create exciting Jewish learning opportunities; and of course environmental bike rides in America and in Israel.

All three of these groups – American Jewish World Service, Avodah Service Corps, and Hazon – are largely populated by young Jews under thirty, who have suddenly and dramatically been given concrete ways of putting their Hebrew school values into play.

Example of Jewish listening: For Jews wondering whether a Jewish voice has spoken out against our now-infamous use of torture, I would point to Rabbis for Human Rights USA, who've sounded a clear, constructive, responsible call for America to return to moral leadership in the world.

Example of Jewish listening: *Israeli* Rabbis for Human Rights has stood bravely by Palestinians when their land is expropriated or their homes unjustly demolished; *and* they've stood solidly with fellow Israelis to defend themselves against Palestinians bent on nothing short of the destruction of Israel. They haven't shied away from the paradox of modern Israel, and neither should we: *Im eyn ani li mi li* – “If I'm not for myself, who will be?” But also, *lo ta'amod al dam rey'echa* – “don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,” and not just your Jewish neighbor.

What would those disaffected Jews hear if they swallowed their pride and came indoors? More and more, they would hear the voice of a Jewish community that cares; that sounds its shofar not only for the love of tradition, but also as a call to conscience.

That Mishnah about walking by the synagogue, about accidentally hearing the shofar, about intending one's heart or no – that Mishnah has a companion text. The adjacent Mishnah tells us that a shofar that has been split and stuck together again is not valid; that if the broken pieces of a shofar have been stuck together again it is likewise not valid; and that if a hole had been made in it and it was stopped up again, if it hinders the blowing it is not valid, but if it does not hinder the blowing it is valid.

In our time, it's as if all we really have to work with is the broken pieces stuck back together – reconstructed from the remnants of an ancient Jewish people looking to find its voice again in a quickly changing context. Does that pieced-together shofar, full of gluey cracks and stopped up holes, still call us to tikvah, to hope? To ultimate matters?

Indeed it does, but we have to work all the harder to make that stirring sound.

Tomorrow we'll give it a go. Today, we use the silence to listen to our hearts; to

intend our hearts; to fulfill our obligation, our *chiyuv*, on this day of Shofarot

without the shofar, to recognize ourselves in that magnificent verse in the shofar

service: “*ashrey ha-am yod'ey t'ruah, a-do-nai; Happy are the people who truly*

know the shofar blast, Eternal One; b'or panecha y'haleychn; they walk about in

the light of your presence.”