

“Sound the Shofar Masked”
Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020
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I.

In the last several years, but long before the COVID pandemic, I started noticing some people wearing masks in public. My racist self would whisper, “Asians. This is an Asian shtick.” My macho-baby-boomer-nothing-can-hurt-me self would whisper, “Germaphobes. Scaredy-cats. Nuts. A little off.”

Shame on me. *Al cheit shechatai*. For the sin I have committed by judging others and looking down on others; by categorizing others negatively instead of positively; by needing to see myself with respect to others’ shortcomings.

To wear a mask in our historical moment is to heed the Rabbis’ profound dictum that overrides the Torah’s own mitzvah system: *pikuakh nefesh*. The saving of life, as the Torah proclaims, *v’chai bahem*, “and you shall live by them,” i.e., by the mitzvot. “Live by them and not die by them,” say the Rabbis.

And there you have at your fingertips the difference between Biblical religion and the Judaism the Rabbis’ bequeathed to us: Not *commandments*, per se, which would be Biblical, but a *process or system* by which we *adapt* the commandments using our *sekhel*, our common-sense intelligence; our *da’at*, our rational scientific knowledge; and our *binah*, our inborn intuition for the deeper meaning behind the mask of perceived reality.

The Rabbis bequeathed to us an approach that is flexible, though not *too* flexible, in the face of the only thing we can reliably expect, which is the *unexpected*.

If all we could say about our Jewish survival is that we survived because we allowed ourselves to adapt, we would not be telling the whole story, and therefore we would be falsifying our history. Rather, we allowed ourselves to change and adapt specifically in order to remain Jews, and in order to keep our Jewish practice Jewish. As Rabbi Akiva’s fish tell the fox: We’ll stay here in the dangerous stream of Torah, thank you, rather than come up on the dry land at your sly behest.

Whenever we survived, we did so by trying to make whatever we had to do in the face of the unexpected authentically Jewish: true to our customs and our sense of self, and most importantly, true to our ethics and our ethos. We wanted always to be able to recognize ourselves in the mirror, or on a Zoom screen, even if our faces were masked up to our eyeballs.

II.

In the last seven months we Jews have used a range of strategies for adaptation and survival. Some of those involve our religious practice. Those who felt that the physical presence of the congregation overrode other concerns found ways to gather publicly. Many of those Jews are meeting in person at this very moment, observing this holy day in ways that for them feel most true to their Jewish selves.

We pray that they will be overly-meticulous in their precautions; that they will follow the Rabbis' dictum of *pikuach nefesh* in order to avoid a repeat of the rampant spread of virus in the Jewish community and beyond that we all experienced in the days leading up to last Purim.

Purim, the holiday in which the mask is a plaything. Purim, the first holiday of 5780 to be eclipsed, perhaps an ironic warning that in 5780 a mask can be a deadly serious thing; that a mask can itself become a mitzvah, an affirmation of pikuach nefesh.

Many Jews, ourselves included, opted for virtual services, virtual Torah study, virtual funerals and virtual shivah minyanim. Virtual b'nai mitzvah and weddings! We chose to sing the prayers at the top of our lungs from the epidemiological safety of our living rooms rather than whisper Barchu, Mi Chamocha, the Kedusah, and tomorrow, Avinu Malkeinu and the blasting of the shofar, so as not to aerosol others and spread disease. We emphasized the religiosity and spirituality we derive from gathering in big numbers and singing fervently even on a screen, over the equally meaningful experience of being physically present as mourners recite kaddish or couples exchange wedding vows.

The fact that Jews from the various movements supported one another's different approaches tells us something good about the condition of our people today. We are learning to respect each other's carefully-arrived-at *different* ways of staying affirmatively Jewish. If this is one take-away from 5780, then it was in

some way a *shanah tovah*, not a “good year,” but a year that contained sparks of goodness, of *tovah*.

Of course, Jews of every stripe, from the most traditional to the most progressive, made themselves at home on the screen as they attended virtual meetings and seminars on topics related not to COVID-19 but to race and racism, inequality and insecurity, institutional and private violence, discrimination against immigrants and immigration, gender persecution, the denial of voting rights and the suppression of the national census.

We teamed up with our religious neighbors of other faiths and, yes, other races, to march, speak out, advocate, feed the long lines of hungry Americans, and do all kinds of large and small acts of *tikkun olam*.

That is to say, we Jews did not, for the most part, hide behind our masks. We could easily have done so. But across the land and across the world, we did not. This could have been our golden opportunity as American Jews to make ourselves invisible, to fly below the radar of the culture wars, to use not our “privilege,” though that, but our unique vantage point as white-ish, well-educated, professionally accredited, politically connected, physically and financially comfortable people to hunker down and live off our hard-won resources.

No one would have noticed. One day, when the proverbial and literal smoke cleared, we could have reemerged and resumed espousing our time-honored principles of Jewish values and American ideals. Baruch Hashem, we would have said, we are back to normal.

Not that such masking has not gone on throughout the land, and not that we have not been part of it to some degree. It has been painful for us to look in the mirror, to see only our eyes above the mask line, and then to realize the truths our eyes have tried not to see. Our own discrimination, certainly against others, but also, to our disgrace, against our own selves. Against our own Jewish sense of pride and worth.

III.

Over the centuries, the masters of Jewish religious practice consistently turned to the ritual of the shofar to try to get Jews to “wake up,” “own up,” “fess up,” “take

stock,” “commit,” “change,” “return.” *Shuvah Yisrael.* Though Rosh Hashanah is not a big thing in the Torah – it is Yom Hazikaron or Yom T’ruah, a day of blasting a shofar to “remind” Israelites of the advent of Sukkot two weeks hence – it evolved into the day our teachers could rely on to rouse us from our spiritual and moral slumber. They penned magnificent liturgies. They composed soaring melodies. They innovated inspiring *minhagim* or customs.

But when all else failed or fell short, they turned to the shofar. Pre-verbal, pre-conscious, pre-literal, the shofar does the job. It does not preach or explain. It does not cajole or lecture. It does not even “warn,” in the traditional sense.

The shofar “calls.” It penetrates. It wakes us from a slumber deeper than sleep, the slumber of irresponsibility. It doesn’t just coax us out of hiding; it rips off our masks and exposes our raw emotions, our honest selves. We love to hear the shofar, especially our kids. But in fact we should dread it.

How ironic that in the year of masking, our Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, when tradition tells us to put off the shofar until the following day. It is as if the tradition, and the shofar, are telling us that this year the call of the shofar is masked, and that we will have to try especially hard to achieve on our own what it usually comes to do for us.

We will have to call out to one another, in addition to wishing each other a year of blessing and sweetness and good health and prosperity and so forth, “wake up and see and hear all that is broken and unjust. Wake up and help one another to own our own negligence and complicity. Wake up and help one another go from here to a higher place, so that when our masks finally come off, God willing, we can honestly look each other in the eye and promise to do what we still remember being told to do at Sinai, when the first shofar blast rang forth. When the Torah says *v’ro’im et hakolot*, when we didn’t so much “hear” the shofar call as we “saw” it – saw the unmasked truth and trembled before it.

IV.

I will close with a word of Torah. Psalm 82 employs a word that only appears in this particular form twice in the entire Hebrew Bible. The word is “*keseh*,” “*kaf-sin-hey*.” Its root, I think, means “to cover,” as in “to conceal,” “to mask.” As in “*kisui rosh*,” to cover one’s head when entering a sacred place.

The psalm declares (and it is truly a declaration): *tik'u va-chodesh shofar* – “blast the shofar at the new moon” – *b'keseh l'yom chageinu* – and here there is a debate between those who think *keseh* means “full moon” since it apparently refers to *chageinu*, “our festival,” probably Sukkot, and those who, like me, believe it is a parallelism, a synonym, for the word *chodesh*, “new moon,” in the previous clause. For everyone knows that the moon appears “covered” in darkness at the beginning of each lunar month.

If I am right, then the verse translates “Blast the shofar at the new moon, *covered* in anticipation of the full-moon festival that is soon to come.” As if to say, we cannot enjoy the fullness of our festival of ingathering, Sukkot, until we fully explore our “covered-ness,” our “masked-ness” – until we do the inner work that will allow us to deserve the reward of ingathering and homecoming.

And this is the very verse the ancient liturgists chose to “declare” the day to be Rosh Hashanah, just as they use “*V'shamru*” from the Book of Exodus to “declare” the day Shabbat.

Which leads me to a realization that jumped off the page at me over the summer, when I was allowing my wandering mind to do the kind of syntactic tricks that the early Chassidic masters were fond of playing. What if the verse says, *tik'u vachodesh shofar b'keseh* – “Sound the shofar *covered*. Sound the shofar *masked*.”

Meaning either “sound a shofar that *itself* is masked,” or “sound a shofar while *you yourself* are masked.” *Tik'u vachodesh shofar b'keseh*.

And though one might argue that the *p'shat* or plain meaning of the verse is otherwise, I am not so sure. Especially in a year when we have masked the shofar on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and when we ourselves are still ambivalent about fully removing the masks that allow us to go back into hiding. I think it is telling us to announce this new year precisely as it presents itself to us: *covered*. Enigmatic. Yet to be fully understood.

I believe it is telling us to sound our inner shofar *before* we turn to the much-beloved ram’s horn tomorrow. To uncover the hidden beliefs and feelings that

keep us from being the *mentschen* we know we want to be, and that so often during these pandemic-cursed months we *have been*.

More often than not, we have tried to be *mentschlich*. More than not, we have acted on that instinct. But more often than not, it has been hard. And because the pandemic will not end soon, and because we will need to continue to practice *pikuach nefesh* by covering our outer faces to one another, and because our political and societal realities will not miraculously change overnight – not here, not in our beloved Israel, not anywhere in the world - we will therefore need to work even harder to stay *mentschlich* in the months ahead – in the year we officially announce day with a covered face and a covered shofar: *Tav-shin-pey-aleph*, 5781.

We will need to do large acts and small ones to combat racial prejudice, census undercounting, and voter suppression; to right the gaping inequities in our public schools and the discrimination in our housing practices; to call out anti-Semitism regardless of which “side” of the political world it emerges from; to empathize with our neighbors of color, and to believe them when they tell us what they experience when they try to navigate our society;

to work hand in hand with our police to reimagine the relationship between law enforcement and the citizens they protect; to help those who are enraged to find to strength to protest in the great and indefatigable non-violent tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King;

to once and for all change the way we live on this precious, this endangered, *gan eden* [Garden of Eden] of a planet Earth;

and to insist – now and forever more - on truthfulness, transparency, and integrity from those we elect to lead us, and, of course, from *our own selves*.

In the year 5781, may only our outer faces, our *panim*, be masked. May our inner hearts and minds, our *p'nimi'im*, be exposed, free and clear, open to one another and to the truths of the world looking us in the eye, and calling us home.