

## **Erev RH 5778** **New Heart, First Breath**

Shanah Tovah.

As we stand at the threshold of another new year, it is natural for us to look back over the year that has just gone. I think it is fair to say that whatever has gone on in our personal lives, it has been a turbulent one in this country, and in the world.

This year more than ever I am grateful for the wisdom of the Jewish calendar and the fact that it gives us a whole season in which our work is to renew our hearts, our hearts that may be so depleted. The Hebrew word *shanah* means 'year,' but also 'change' - an opportunity in the 10 days beginning tonight and concluding with Yom Kippur to address what we have taken into our hearts this past year, to sort through it, to decide what we wish to carry over the threshold into this new year that is coming.

My theme for the Selichot service last week was the idea of *lev hadash*. Using a modern Israeli religious-pop song, other melodies and meditation, we began to pay attention to what it means to renew our hearts. Those of you who attended that session will hopefully bring with you to these services your own *kavvanah*, your own written intention, to remind you of the work you wish to do this season.

But Rosh Hashanah itself offers us another instrument to help us - a unique instrument, the Shofar. This evening I want to offer some preliminary thoughts about its significance, and in the coming two days we will explore more deeply how the Shofar itself can help us renew our hearts.

I spent some time over the summer studying in *havruta* - partnership - with Rabbi Gabe Greenberg of Beth Israel. At his suggestion we worked through a *meimar* - a long teaching - by the 20th-century Hassidic teacher Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, who went by the name of *Pachad Yitzhak*.

Rabbi Hutner teaches that the mitzvah of the Shofar is unique. On the one hand, it is external and communal - any shul you enter on Rosh Hashanah, anywhere in the world, you will be sure to see and hear a Shofar; but on the other hand, the

Shofar is the instrument by which we perform the very deepest internal spiritual work of Rosh Hashanah. So the Shofar speaks to each of us personally as we attempt to evaluate the year just gone, set intentions for the year that is coming and renew our hearts.

And according to Rabbi Hutner, the mystery of the way the Shofar speaks in that personal dimension is to do with the fact that it is the only mitzvah that is performed with the human breath.

Where does our breath come from? According to Jewish tradition, it is a part of God that was gifted to human beings on the day of their creation - the sixth day of the creation cycle. Rabbi Hutner teaches that when we speak of Rosh Hashanah as being 'the beginning of God's works,' we are talking about that sixth day; and the greatest act that took place on that day - which was a busy one - was the infusing of breath into the new human creature. It is that moment that we recall when we in turn infuse the Shofar with that breath - and Josh will confirm that there are some notes that, in order to be kosher, must be infused with a single breath - a breath that recalls the first one that humans ever 'took' - that we actually literally took, from God.

I would add to this thought that while I am not a doctor, the human body is constructed in such a way that our breathing and our heart rate are connected in some ways. So it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to think that the breath being infused into the Shofar, the one that makes it sound, is also capable of affecting our hearts.

And if so, then how much more so metaphorically! The sound of the Shofar reminds us that our hearts are not immutable, that our wounds are not fatal, that we have resources we never imagined. The Shofar can break down the categories of time and space, returning us to a dimension of absolute potential - not only a new year but a newly minted reality; not only a newly minted reality but a new heart with which to inhabit it.

So as we stand on the threshold of Rosh Hashanah with the aim and the intention of renewing our hearts, let us prepare to attune ourselves to the Shofar, the instrument that marks these days. Actuated by breath, recalling the primordial breath - the gift that still resides in us - sounded on the very day human beings were created, the Shofar is our partner in preparing us for the year that is coming.

Are we ready to hear it?

For that, we need to come back again tomorrow...

Shanah tovah, and may our hearts be renewed.