

Rosh Hashanah 5778 Day 2 The Cry We Must Hear

Shanah tovah.

All through this HHD season I have been thinking about how it presents us with the opportunity to renew our hearts - a *lev hadash*. We first explored this idea at our Selichot service, and yesterday I spoke about one way we might hear the Shofar calling to our hearts at this season. Today I want to explore another.

The shofar's sound is unique. I remember a wonderful photograph from the ECC my shul in London; in it Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg is obviously blowing the Shofar and the little boy in front of him, his eyes like saucers, has his hands clasped firmly over his ears. It's a hard sound to describe. It's harsh, we might say. Or, it goes right to the heart of you. Or, it's the least musical thing you could possibly imagine.

The traditional teachings about the Shofar also explore the noises it makes. If we look at the Gemara, there's even a word for the barking sounds a person makes when they are just trying to get a note out of the thing. But the weight of the traditional understanding of the Shofar's sound is that it represents - grief.

And the Rabbis' reasoning is interesting, because it's not obvious. Only one of the notes sounds like it should be a sad one – shevarim, the broken note. Yet, when the Rabbis are trying to work out how long each of the notes should be, the Mishnah teaches that the shortest note, the teruah, should be equal to three yevavot. They use that measure for the longer notes also. And the word yevava means, 'a sob.' The sound of the Shofar is measured by tears.

And the person who first sobbed is not a member of our family. We encounter her in the Song of Deborah; she is the mother of Sisera, the Canaanite general, waiting in vain for him to return from battle.

We might know the story. The Canaanite army under Sisera's command attacks Israel. At the promptings of Deborah, the judge, Barak forms an army which utterly routs the Canaanites. Sisera flees for his life, seeking shelter in the tent of Hever the Kenite. And while he is sleeping, Hever's wife, Yael, puts an end to Sisera by driving a tent peg through his head.

At the end of the song, we hear:

*Through the window peers Sisera's mother:
Behind the lattice she is sobbing.
Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?*

The irony is cruel. We know that Sisera is dead, probably still awash in his blood in Yael's tent; but his mother does not.

Why would the Rabbis choose Sisera's mother - we never know her name - to measure the sobbing of the Shofar? It's not as if we don't have some famous sobbers within our own tradition. We know that Sarah wept; we know that Rachel cried. We know that the other two matriarchs also suffered sorrow and frustration. I'm sure that Deborah herself had some bad days. What drove the Rabbis to pick this particular woman - who, by all accounts, was neither morally upright, nor even kind, whose son was a murderous barbarian - as the measure of the Shofar's sound?

I think the point the Rabbis are making is that our world reverberates with grief and weeping that for the whole of the rest of the year, we simply do not hear. And the purpose of the Shofar is to help us hear it.

Maharat Rori Picker Neiss writes:

Despite the fact that Sisera's death may be justified, Sisera still has a mother. And that mother has a son who will never return home. It is her cries that we are obligated to hear, and to listen for—the cries of unintended consequences, of innocent bystanders, of unknown victims. Hers are the cries of a woman we have no idea we hurt. Hers are the cries of a woman we do not even know exists. Hers are the cries of a woman whose name we never learn. We do not need the shofar to think of the tears of the people we know we hurt...The cries of the shofar are for the cries that we cannot hear.

[Take a moment and turn towards someone you don't know...think about it - make some suggestions to each other for unheard cries...?]

I could think of many, many examples of such cries to share with you today - all of them testaments to how broken our world is and how we spend most of our time barricading our hearts against that brokenness. When the Rabbis want to develop a thesis, they choose the most challenging example they can think of, and so for today I have done that. (Feel free to hold on to the example you just thought of also...]

During 2016, conflict and persecution forced an average of nearly 29,000 individuals per day to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere, either within the borders of their own country or in other countries. By far the greatest majority of these people presently come from four countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia. They include refugees - people who have fled their home countries because of persecution and are usually offered some kind of legal protection at their destination - asylum seekers - those who flee but have no protection or status - internally displaced people, who flee but within their country of origin, and other migrants, who might not be fleeing persecution but seeking better lives. There are over 65 million such people on the move worldwide.

David Milliband is the President and CEO of the International Rescue Committee and himself the child of refugees who fled to England. In his talk for TED, he stated:

This is not just a crisis, it's a test. It's a test that civilizations have faced down the ages. It's a test of our humanity. It's a test of us in the Western world of who we are and what we stand for. It's a test of our character, not just our policies.

We might ask ourselves: what are we, sitting here in New Orleans, supposed to do about such a huge phenomenon? How can we possibly do anything?!

We feel powerless - and maybe that's why we rush to make so much noise. Pundits and opinion pieces, arguments and rationalizations. And conversations around difficult issues have their place.

But the lesson of Sisera's mother, the lesson of the Shofar, is that our first reaction shouldn't be to talk. We should be listening. Today is the day we are bound to listen. To stand in the holy space of this day, to hear the voices the Shofar calls to our attention, is to begin to allow our hearts to open. And as we break open, new possibilities emerge.

I'm not saying this is easy work. It isn't. It is challenging to turn towards the pain of others, especially if we think of them as our enemies, if they are unfamiliar. It's a lot easier to stick with the idea that the High Holydays are all about ourselves and making ourselves better.

And it seems to be contradictory too. Yesterday I was speaking about how to be courageous - how to keep our hearts strong. Today I seem to be asking to make them soft and open. Isn't that a paradox? How can we do both at once?

But David Milliband argues that the work is one and the same.

Refugees are a hard case. They do come from faraway parts of the world. They have been through trauma. They're often of a different religion. Those are precisely the reasons we should be helping refugees, not a reason not to help them. And it's a reason to help them because of what it says about us. It's revealing of our values. Empathy and altruism are two of the foundations of civilization. Turn that empathy and altruism into action and we live out a basic moral credo.

Rabbi Sacks, in another very worthwhile TED talk, argued that the future itself depends on moving from 'self' to 'us.'

And that move is possible if we can make our hearts both strong and open.

I think of the density and tartness of the Rosh Hashanah apple and the flowing sweetness of the honey. In its wisdom our tradition has assigned both foods to us at this season, and we bless and eat them together.

You'll notice that I am not recommending a particular course of action. That's deliberate. There is no shortage of actions that we can take – individually or as a community – to move from 'self' to 'us'. But that move only becomes possible when we first truly hear those cries in the first place.

So for today, for the year that is coming, let the voice of the Shofar, even though it is speaking to us, also belong to Sisera's mother. Let us challenge ourselves to hear the weeping to which we never listen with new hearts. Let us first listen - really listen. Let us hear the weeping of others not only because we hear in it the sound of our own weeping; not only because in the ugly rhetoric of our times it is important to make it heard; but because it is the right thing for us, as Jews, to do.

And for the rest of the year, let us pull that strength into action. We are not powerless. Whether it's the massive scale of the refugee issue or something you discussed with someone today on a smaller scale, let the Shofar's voice today inspire the year that is coming. And perhaps even Sisera's mother will find some comfort.

Shanah tovah.