

Rosh Hashanah Shofar Sound Sermon

by Rabbi Mira Weller

Ashrei HaAm Yodea Teruah . Happy are the people who know the shofar blast.

Over two thousand years ago, our Psalmist reflected on the same sounds that we hear today on Rosh Hashanah, Yom HaTeruah, the day of the Shofar Blast.

“Happy were the people who knew that ancient tone”—its breathy and primitive sound captured their hearts, moved them towards creative expression, and elevated their spiritual consciousness.

Shofars filled God’s final refrain during creation. Shofars accompanied processions at God’s coronation. Shofars sounded with God’s voice at Mt. Sinai. Israel’s greatest moments, moments of celebration, revelation, and redemption reverberated with the shofar’s call.

Preserved in ephemeral mediums like sound and memory, however, the instrument wears a shroud of mystery. It calls to us through the ebbs and flows of Jewish history, the cycles of violence and renaissance. We no longer know the sound of that ancient call. Maimonides, the great medieval sage, asks, “What is the sound of the shofar?” We no longer know. For with the passage of time, we are suspended in doubt. Maimonides turns to rabbinic literature, where sages from the fourth and fifth century ponder the same question. “Does the shofar groan or does it whimper?” The rabbis ask.

These rabbinic descriptions of the “truah”. Depart from that joyful tone described by our Psalmist— in fact, they are surprisingly somber. In his own exploration on the shofar sound, Maimonides examines three options from the sages Talmudic discourse: the anacha, a groan, the yevavah, a sob, and the yelala, a holler.

The anacha - a weary exhalation or a resigned sigh. “The way that a person groans when their heart is oppressed from a great ordeal.” Think of the Tekiah’s blast - a single sob that ends with a sharply drawn breath.

A second option that the Talmudic rabbis present: the yevavah - a sob, or as Maimonides writes, “the wails, the howls of women as they cry with gasping, panting breaths.” The yevavah is a woman’s cry in labor as she sits between the cusp of new life and her own death. It is the breathy, broken gasps we make while hyperventilating - a sound we recreate with the 3 consecutive blasts we call “sh’varim”.

And finally, the third: the yelalah—a yelling-- a hollering-- that accompanies a profound loss of faith or the negation of divine providence, God’s ability to intervene and ameliorate our suffering.

In a midrash on the shofar’s sound and the binding of Isaac, an angel tricks the homebound Sarah. She is told that her son has been sacrificed and that in the final moments of his life when he realizes God will not intervene, he yells out a yelalah – a wail - a desperate kind of hollering. A scream cried out before an absent God.

Sarah in turn echoes Isaac’s wails with three sharp cries that the midrash equates to the shofar blast. The force of her shofar-like yelalot knocks the wind out of her so powerfully that her soul pours

out with her breath and Sarah dies. The story depicts Sarah as both a living and dying shofar in the face of her horrific loss.

Anacha, yevavah, yelalah: three words in the robust Jewish vocabulary for suffering. These words capture aspects of an indescribable experience—that the rabbis affiliate with the shofar blast - the experience of profound suffering and grief. As onomatopoeia, the words themselves mimic universal human expressions of terror, pain and helplessness - hollers, sobs, and wails. Infants use these sounds from the moment they enter the world. These sounds are part of our DNA. Hollers, sobs, wails —-These sounds offer a basic, universal indication that something is wrong the world needs to be set right again. The sound of the shofar marks a similar notification that the world is out balance and we need it set it right again.

So what happened? How did the shofar's blast transform from something so joyful to something so desperate: a groan, a sob, a holler. The sound of an infant crying out for its life at the heart of our High Holy Day worship.

Can we find joy within such a dreadful sound? Jewish tradition tells us that we can. From its spoken vocabulary to its rituals and literary forms Jewish tradition turns towards suffering and see its memory as a path towards joy.

Yom HaZikaron HaTruah – the day when we remember what it's like to cry to be desperate to be at rock bottom wholly at the mercy of the universe. That's the moment, when we realize it's time to return, to make t'shuvah.

We find echoes of this theology in the 12 steps. Before any person can commit to the difficult work of reconciling a destructive addiction they must experience rock bottom.

I once worked in a Jewish rehab clinic - Beit T'shuvah. The rabbis of taught me that t'shuvah works similarly. We need to remember our lowest of lows in order to reestablish our commitment to climbing back up.

Like the shofar's happy sorrow, the idea of rock bottom moments is paradoxical. You find the source for your own healing from the darkest corners of your life. Here, you remember what it's like to be utterly hopeless. You recall your own position - you are Smaller than an atom in an infinite universe. As pitiful as you may feel in this place, you may also feel its generativity. At rock bottom, you see the big picture more clearly. You more readily invite a helping hand. You open your mind out of necessity.

My most successful clients experienced rock bottom moments so viscerally painful that they realized that sobriety was the only answer.

Their rock bottom moments forced them to see the big picture of their lives and the inordinate suffering that they had both caused and experienced through their addictions. After these jarring confrontations with their own suffering, they willingly gave away their freedom to consume whatever vice they wanted in exchange for a more profound freedom gained through acceptance and commitment to change.

One of my clients, Mike, spent ten years in prison, reflecting on his mistakes so that when he was finally released, he came to recovery with complete focus. Many residents struggled to give up the freedom demanded by recovery in rehab. They pushed back in whatever way they could and invented novel excuses not to engage. Mike reminded us /time and time again that true freedom comes when we acknowledge our pain, the pain that we've caused, and the calling it ushers towards us. See me, hear me, make a commitment to me - live differently.

It was Mike that made me realize that I wouldn't survive this life without listening more deeply to my suffering. You see, I've lived my whole life with intense, chronic pain. It can be excruciating. And for most of the year I have to ignore it. I have to compartmentalize just to stay sane. But the year I came to Beit T'shuvah, I learned that I can't square my pain away and just ignore it because if I do, eventually, I will destroy my body. If I keep ignoring this pain, it will smother my heart completely. That's what pain unseen can do to us.

Mike helped me turn to that pain like a shofar's blast calls us to see our grief. I made a commitment - I would come to know my body to study its anatomy and its physical structures, to pay more attention to the pain while it's happening, and to take it seriously - to go out of way to find specialists that actually can help. In other words, I would learn to love and care for my body in pain.

And that's our task today - we have come to know our suffering. "Happy are those who know the shofar blast," - yodea. Biblically, the word yodea suggests an intimate kind of knowledge like conocer in Spanish or connosais in French--to know someone or something as an old friend, or a frequent guest in our experiences and inner lives. Yodea - to cultivate that intimate understanding and care of the sorrow woven through the course of life so that we cultivate the resilience to be with our pain and to feel through our pain as it passes through us. This is how we start to comprehend why we hurt, what our suffering asks of us, and the commitments that our lives demand.

In Neilah, you can find a poem that asks "Mah anu" - who are we? What are our lives? What even is our righteousness when we are here alone on this earth numbed because we can't handle the pain. Without purpose. The shofar's sound calls us and asks us to take our human condition seriously. It compels us to find purpose in pain to line our hearts in the face of loss and to usher forth transformation through attention and commitment.

Any person who has experienced grief understands the necessity of the shofar's call. Grief overwhelms the system, it shades every hue of our experience, and try as one might, it cannot be squelched down. This kind of pain must be hollered out, acknowledged in community, sounded towards the heavens in hopes that God in turn is listening.

This sound - that illusive shofar sound - has carried through the millennia of Jewish history from heights of creativity - the Talmud, Kabbalah - to the bottomless pits of loss - Exile, Holocaust. Its meaning underlies the story of the Jewish people. Seek spiritual purpose in pain. Find the call that carries you through your suffering. Sow in tears, reap in joy.

"Ashrei Ha-am Yodea Tru'ah." Happy is the people who knows a sound that carries meaning Through a world filled with chaos, happy is the people who knows the joy of a commitment that blossoms from despair. Happy is the people who finds redemption in loss. Happy is the people who knows the sound of the shofar.