

Hearing the Voice of God: Thoughts For the New Year

David Silverman

September 13, 2007

With the coming of Rosh Hashanah and the start of the Asereth Y'mei Tshuvah, we enter into the process of coming clean for all of the rotten things we've done during the past year. It is a bittersweet period. While we are happy to have reached another new year, we know that God holds us accountable for our actions and that this is the last chance to try to make things right. We must approach God and ask for mercy, invariably for the same sins we committed in previous years. And we worry. How much longer can we continue to disappoint God? How much longer will His patience last? During Musaf, we chant the frightening opening stanzas of U'ntetanah Tokef, with its message of the awful outcomes awaiting those who do not repent. But at the very end of the prayer, the possibility of redemption is offered:

U'tshu'va, U'tfi'lah, U'tzedakah, Ma'avirin et Roa Ha'gzei'rah...

But, repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil decree...

In that moment, when every congregation raises its collective voice in a grateful cry, there is hope, even though humankind's track record suggests that nothing much changes from year to year, from generation to generation.

It seems like it would have been a lot easier for us all, had God created a world in which we did what we were told or, at least, a world in which there was no temptation. In his book, "Free Will and the Purpose of Creation" Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains why God had no choice but to imbue man with free will and allow for the existence of evil.

The argument is as follows: The ultimate good in the world is God Himself, and since God desires to give man the greatest good possible, He gave man the ability to resemble God. But, if man is to become Godlike, he must have the ability to act without prior restraint, as does God. This is the meaning of the phrase that man was created “btselem Elokim”...in the image of God.

Furthermore, in order for man to have true free choice, he must not only have freedom of will but also be challenged by an environment in which the choice of obedience or disobedience exists. Therefore good and evil must be able to freely operate in the world. If God banished evil and temptation, there would be no purpose to creation, as man’s devotion to God in such a world would be assumed. This is so contrary to God’s plan that He allows evil and temptation to exist, notwithstanding the risk—in fact, the certainty—that many will abandon Him, as a consequence. Instead, God has instilled within each of us the capacity to overcome temptation. This principle is a foundation of our faith and we are told, famously, in Devarim, Perek Lamed, Pasook Yod Tet, “...I have set before you today life and death, the blessing and the curse...therefore choose life, that you and your children may live.” So, God has given us the gift of free choice, but there are strings attached. If we do not choose wisely, we are in effect, choosing death over life, forcing God’s anthropomorphic hand.

Another view, is proposed by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, the author of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” and more recently, a beautiful volume of essays entitled, “Living a Life That Matters.” Kushner says that God loves every individual regardless of his or her failings. God, he suggests, does not expect perfection from us, and therefore, we

cannot expect perfection from ourselves or those around us. As human beings we are imperfect, by definition, and our job is no more than to do the most we are capable of. Kushner believes God speaks in two voices: one, the stern commanding voice that thunders: “Thou Shalt Not,” summoning us to reach higher, forbidding us to use the excuse, “I’m only human,” because to be human is a wondrous thing. God’s second voice is one of compassion and understanding...a forgiving voice, assuring us—not unlike we do with our children—that when we have aimed high and fallen short we are still loved and worthy of praise. It is this voice that recognizes that when we give in to temptation it is a temporary lapse and not a true reflection of our character.

God addresses man in both of His voices. Look at the case of Adam and Eve. In banishing them from the Garden of Eden for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God spoke in his admonishing voice and punished them grievously. He did not allow them to avoid responsibility by claiming “they were only human.” But, as severe as God’s punishment was, He could have done worse. He could have snuffed out their existence and created another couple to take their place in the Garden. God’s forbearance in the face of Adam and Eve’s defiance, is an act of love as great as any in the entire bible. This act of love shouts out at us across the millennia in God’s other voice, the one that soothes us in our time of need and gives us hope that if we really listen, we can do better.

On Rosh Hashanah, with the blowing of the shofar, our sense of hearing and the need to listen carefully, becomes central to the observance of the holiday. The Torah calls Rosh Hashanah “Yom Tru’ah,” a day of blowing, but beyond that mention gives no specific

explanation for the act. Over the centuries, a variety of rationales have been suggested by our sages:

- R.H. marks the anniversary of the creation of the world, Just as a king would be coronated with trumpets on his inauguration, so too—with the blowing of the Shofar on RH—do we proclaim God’s sovereignty
- R.H. initiates the Aseret Yemai Teshuvah—the Ten Days of Repentance—and the Shofar reminds us that the time to repent is upon us
- The Shofar reminds us of the Akeidah—the binding of Isaac—when Avraham sacrificed a ram in place of his son
- The Shofar was blown at Mount Sinai when God gave the Jews the Torah and they proclaimed “Naaseh VeNishma” or “we will do and we will listen.” We blow the Shofar on R. H., therefore, to remind us of our obligation to fulfill that promise
- Blowing the Shofar reminds us of the admonitions of the prophets who warned us that if we hear the sound of the Shofar and do not repent then we shall be punished. The sound of the Shofar alerts us. It is meant to inspire fear and lead us to repentance
- The sound of the Shofar commemorates the destruction of the Beit Hamikdosh and reminds us to pray for it to be rebuilt speedily in our days. It reminds us that when we

are worthy our exile will end. All will be united in Jerusalem and the sound of the Shofar will be heard

- Some say that we blow the Shofar to confound and frighten Satan who seeks on Rosh Hashanah to prevent the penitent from returning to God
- Others say the meaning of the Shofar is found in its shape. It reminds us that, as a ram's horn is bent, so we must bend our will to that of God's
- Finally, it is said that each of the notes of the Shofar describes the state of the soul during a lifetime. The initial Tekiah denotes that the soul was created pure and straight. The wavering sounds of Shvarim allude to the crookedness that all human souls succumb to in their lifetime, while the staccato sobbing of the Treuah recalls the weeping over the death of a loved one. But the Tekiah is repeated to remind us that God is ready to receive the penitent who seeks to return his soul to its original state of purity.

These are interesting explanations, I suppose, but I want to tell you two stories, one in the form of a poem, that bring these explanations out of the texts they came from and into the real world. The first story, like so many of our people's stories, arises out of tragedy. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, the Veiznetzer Rav, who survived the Holocaust and moved to Chicago after World War II, somehow managed to smuggle a shofar into Auschwitz, where he was interred in 1944. On Rosh Hashanah, he went throughout the camp, from one prison bloc to another, and blew the shofar for the inmates. Between

bribing the kapos who guarded the prisoners, and what can arguably be called divine providence, the Nazis did not catch him.

At that time, there was a group of fourteen hundred boys in the camp who had been condemned to the crematoria. They were confined in a restricted area and Meisels could not enter. The boys, however, knew that the Rabbi was blowing the shofar throughout the camp and when he passed by their area they begged him to blow the shofar for them. Meisels knew he could gain entry by bribing the kapos, but that if the Nazis came while he was still there he would certainly be executed. His son, Zalman Leib, who had accompanied him from one barrack to another pleaded with him to not put his life in danger. They had blown the hundred blasts of the shofar twenty times that day and somehow not been caught. Hadn't they done enough?

Rabbi Meisels knew that it was strictly forbidden by halakhah to risk one's life for the mitzvah of blowing the shofar. But, when he heard the cries of the doomed boys, he decided he could not deny them. Some of the boys begged the rabbi for a morsel of food. Not simply because they were hungry, but because they knew it was forbidden to fast on Rosh Hashanah and they had not eaten for days. Rabbi Meisels had no food to give them. He had nothing to give them but the sound of the shofar, hoping that as they went to their deaths the merit of the mitzvah would comfort and protect them; that the sound of the shofar would open wide the gates of heaven in honor of these holy, martyred boys.

The second story isn't quite as dramatic and while some of you here today have heard it before, I had a few requests to tell it again. My daughter Jessica was born on Rosh

Hashanah twenty-one years ago, and so the holiday, and in particular, the blowing of the shofar, has taken on a special importance in my life and Jessie's. As a child, she always seemed fascinated by it; asking me questions, critiquing the ba'al tokea's performance, and offering me really neat opinions about what exactly she heard... seeing how seriously she took this element of "her holiday," impressed upon me that even if my mind wandered during the rest of the interminably long service, I needed to pay close attention to every one of the 100 blasts of the shofar, in case something miraculous happened... somehow it seemed to me that if ever a miracle could occur it would be during the blowing of the shofar.

This story, my poem, is called What Jessica Hears:

My daughter was born on the
first day of Rosh Hashanah.
And on that day, instead of hearing
the 100 blasts of the shofar in
my synagogue, I listened to
Jessica's cries—at least 100 of them,
with the other members of her
first congregation; a minyan of doctors,
nurses, and orderlies, her mother leading
the service, in an elegant hospital gown.

It is taught that the notes of
the shofar—the single, uninterrupted *t'kiah*,
the wavering calls of *shvarim*, and
the staccato sobs of *t'ruah*—describe
the condition of the soul during a lifetime.
We are born clear and straight, succumb to
to crookedness as adults, and grieve for our mortality
in old age. But the final blast of the shofar,
the breathtaking *t'kiah g'dolah*—an extended *t'kiah*,
powerful and pure—reminds us that God
receives the penitent, who seeks to return
to a state of innocence.

Walking to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah
when Jessica was 10, she told me that
the shofar sounded like a starving child.

Where she got this, I do not know,
my daughter, who has never gone to bed hungry.
But that day, I prayed for all of the world's
starving children, and for my daughter,
her soul still *t'kiahlike*. And as the sound
of the shofar filled the room, I could not stop
thinking about her. Holding back tears, I hoped
that one final time she might hear, in the sound
of the shofar, that which becomes hidden;
the sweet, uncomplicated voice of God.

As we begin another Jewish year, I hope that we all use our free choice wisely, and
that when God speaks to us—in whatever voice He deems appropriate—we choose to
listen.