

Recently, I've been spending a lot of time on YouTube. At first, it was to help with the wedding planning, but I soon found myself gravitating to other types of videos. Most involved inebriated guys doing stupid things that usually resulted in injuries to their groins, which is always hysterical if it's not you. I also learned there is nothing cuter than a baby eating a slice of watermelon, that America does, indeed, have talent, and how to assemble a weapon from a bottle of Diet Coke and a pack of Mentos, a skill, which like a master martial artist who is capable of great violence but restrains himself unless provoked, I hope I never have to use.

I bring this up because while YouTubing around I discovered that there are hundreds of videos of poets performing what is known as spoken-word poetry or slamming. This type of poetry has been around in one form or another for as long as there have been poets and owes more to the skill of performance art than formal written verse. At a slam, the poet gets up before an audience and expounds on some subject about which he or she feels passionate. In most cases, the poets are young, angry at the world, and with vocabularies that would make Tony Soprano blush. Most of the poems are awful, but occasionally you will find a poet whose words and delivery attack your senses; experiencing a great spoken-word poem is like biting into a jalapeno pepper. It raises your temperature. It may bring tears to your eyes or even hurt a little.

After watching a number of these videos, it struck me that spoken-word poems are awfully similar in nature to divrei torah. In both, the speaker attempts to educate the audience, raise its consciousness, and inspire it to action. So, in delivering my New Year's dvar torah, I thought that I'd do something different this year, that is present my dvar torah as a spoken-word poem, without the four-letter words, of course. I'm not a prude, but there is no way I'm cursing from a pulpit in shul on Yom Hadin. I have never done this before and it could be a disaster. But, as much as I hope this is not the case, at least I know that if it is, you will have no choice but to forgive me in the next 10 days. My spoken-word poem/dvar torah is called:

The Kingdom of Memory

What would be the future of man, if it were devoid of memory?

Elie Wiesel

We are told that Rosh Hashanah is a day of remembrance, a day of shofar-blowing, but the Torah doesn't tell us why. Like the bath we do not give a kid in its' mother's milk, Like the purifying ashes of a red cow we sprinkle to cleanse, we blow the shofar, well, because God said so. His house, His rules, which seems fair enough. But to hear those plaintive notes—the single uninterrupted *t'kiah*, the wavering call of *shvarim*, the staccato sob of *teruah*, and the *t'kiah gedolah*, a final *t'kiah* powerful and pure, is to enter the kingdom of memory.

We remember that God created the world. We remember that He saved Isaac by substituting a ram. We remember that God raised Mount Sinai above us like a barrel and thundered: if you accept these commandments, fine, but if not, here your grave shall be. We remember our haughty behavior and prophets ignored. We remember the Temple, twice destroyed, the waters of Babylon where, exiled, we lay down and wept. We remember that, one day, we'll all meet on the Temple Mount. We remember that, with a blast of the shofar, dem bones, dem' bones, dem' dry bones will rise up and we'll hear the word of the Lord. We remember that God forgives but doesn't forget. We remember that we have ten days to make up for 355. We remember that the blurry lines between love and fear, good and evil, life and death are fluid as milk or honey.

I once heard this: the shofar shape reminds us to bend our will to God's. And this: the tiny mouthpiece resembles a yod; the inhale breath it takes to blow, a heh; the sound that emerges, a vav; and the exhale blow, another heh, spelling the sacred, unutterable name of God. And this one I really like: the shofar is the midwife of the New Year. From mouthpiece to opening, sound emerges as if from a birth canal, as if Shifrah, whose name evokes the shofar and who risked her life to bring Jewish babies into the world, were present, as if she herself extracts the sound with her purposed and practiced hands, always a middle finger secretly extended in Pharaoh's dishonor. The shofar is the sound of the crying child whom angels will swaddle in fine cloth and lay to rest in a crib of acacia and gold, twin cherubim standing guard against the evil eye.

And wherever the Jews went, we blew the shofar. We blew it in York and Mainz, Cordoba and Fez, Kiev and Bialystok, Hebron and Tzefat. We blew the shofar in Auschwitz. Yes, even in Auschwitz we blew the shofar. Wounded and bloodied, we blew the shofar. Confused and frightened, we blew the shofar. We blew the shofar with hope, we blew the shofar in defiance but, above all, we blew the shofar to remember. We blew the shofar to remember. And in '67, Har Habayit in our hands at last, we blew the shofar and our paratroopers wept and remembered.

My daughter was born on Rosh Hashanah. And this I remember: 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.

One Erev Rosh Hashanah, when I was ten, my friend Mike's house was destroyed by fire. I watched it burn from my bedroom window, the wild flames illuminating the evening sky. We used to trade baseball cards and I wondered if he was able to save them. That night, in a dream, I stood by my bedroom window and watched Mike blow a massive shofar again and again. With each blast, instead of sound, flames shot out, as if from the mouth of a dragon. Though only a boy, I knew I should keep watching, but the light from the fire hurt my eyes and I turned away.

And another Rosh Hashanah, during my first year of college, I remember getting a letter from my grandmother, a strange letter I did not understand. She had copied, in her spidery script, an entire chapter from a book on nutrition, twelve pages long, including complicated recipes for broccoli rabe, haricot verts, and butternut squash. Living on pizza and candy, without a stove, the letter made me laugh out loud, especially the way she signed it. Instead of, "Love, Grandma Sophie," she wrote, "Someone who worries about you day and night." How many hours did it take her, eyes straining like an ancient scribe? What went through her faltering mind as she struggled to think of my name? I wish I hadn't laughed. I wish I liked butternut squash. I wish I had kept the letter. To show my children or as a talisman. To remind me that there are infinite ways to say "I love you." To remind me that we hold on for as long as we possibly can. To remind me that the mind may falter, but the spirit...the spirit, forever, survives.