

Hearing Beyond Words  
Rosh Hashanah 5774  
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### *I. The Shofar Through a Baby's Eyes*

For the past month, my children have heard the sound of the shofar every morning. This is part of the ritual of our home and of our people, to begin sounding the shofar on the first day of Elul. The practice has multiple rationales: first and foremost, to help us awaken to the teshuva we need to begin, to remind us that so great is the work of teshuva that we can't wait until Rosh Hashanah to start, but must prepare and begin ahead of time. Second, for shofar-blowers, it's training camp: time to get our facial muscles and our lungs in shape so that we can sound all 100 *kolot* at kickoff.

In our home, shofar blowing during Elul serves both these purposes. But this year, with the presence of a new baby in our family, *tekiat shofar* during Elul has taken on an additional element. As many of us know, but as we also may need to be reminded, a nine-month old baby like our son Toby is a perfect shofar listener. Every morning as I take out the shofar, Toby, sitting there in our living room, begins to smile and wave his arms and shout in anticipation. He loves the sound of the shofar. He loves it so much that when I'm finished with a *tekia-shevarim-terua-tekia*, he gives a "Ha!" which clearly signals "Again!" He lights up from the sound of the shofar, and were it not for my own limitations of endurance and time, I would blow the shofar all day, just to see the excitement it arouses in him.

It's the season of confession, so I'm going to confess. Despite all the shofar blowing, despite the fact that I'm highly conscious of the month of Elul, despite the fact that I have a gorgeous shofar that took me years of shopping to find, I have a hard time getting nearly as excited about the shofar as Toby. I've given *drashot* about what the shofar is supposed to do, what its sounds are supposed to represent, what intention we should have when we hear it. But, honestly, most of those words really don't work for me. To me, the *teruah* or the *shevarim* doesn't sound like a cry; the *tekiah* doesn't sound like the blast of the trumpets at a coronation. When I hear the shofar, I'm not moved to cry, I'm not moved to feel God's majesty. Perhaps, and I shudder to say it, I'm not moved.

### *II. What Does Music Mean?*

Many of you know that I was a musician growing up. I played the tuba. I majored in music in college, and I conducted an orchestra there too. Playing a brass instrument is good physical training for shofar blowing, of course. But I've also come to realize that musical thinking is good training for shofar listening too.

One of the biggest issues in music history is the relationship between sound and meaning. Does wordless music convey a meaning? Take the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, notes we all know: G-G-G-Eb. What do those notes say? Some might say they convey a sense of foreboding, opening an entire movement of heavy-sounding C minor. Or maybe they're about power, as the orchestra plays those notes loudly and in unison. Or perhaps they're saying something about inevitability, as the whole movement that comes after those four notes simply and ingeniously builds on and modifies the four-note motif in a way that seems almost predetermined, as though the piece couldn't have unfolded any other way.

The question of what those notes mean is a classic question. But what if the question of meaning is the wrong question to ask? What if G-G-G-Eb doesn't *mean* anything? My philosopher rebbe, Vladimir Jankelevitch, wrote about this. "We declare that music shall be, like all other languages, the bearer of meaning and an instrument of communication," Jankelevitch observes. When we decide that music means something, we suggest that "it explains certain ideas, or suggests certain sentiments, or describes landscapes or things, or narrates events."

"Under these circumstances," Jankelevitch says, "one is led to ask whether our ears, far from being organs of hearing, are not rather more the cause of our deafness." What does Jankelevitch mean? He means that, in being so invested in the idea that these sounds communicate meaning like some kind of prose essay, we are, ironically, becoming deaf to what's really going on. This is music. It's a collection of sounds. It isn't prose, and we shouldn't think of it that way.

If we're going to look for a kind of language to compare music to, poetry might be best. Poetry, like art, and like music, isn't about communicating a meaning through symbol as much as it's about allowing ourselves to enter a different kind of way of being in the world. The point of all the *piyutim* we recite during the Yamim Noraim isn't to make us bored, and it's not to earn a reward for reciting every word. The point is, as Jankelevitch says about the Psalms, to arouse in us "religious obsession." The point is to put us in a state of mind and heart and body in which we can *be*, in which we can *be* in the presence of God.

A couple of weeks ago, our *kehilla* had the pleasure of learning with Samuel Klein, a student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. During a limud Shabbat afternoon, Sam asked us to think about and then share with each other a prayer from the *machzor* that is particularly evocative for us. And I was amazed, and yet wholly unsurprised, to find that the vast majority of people named a prayer not on account of the meaning of its words, but because of the power of its melody. The tunes for *Avinu Malkenu* or *Ki Anu Amecha*, the melodies of *Unetaneh Tokef* and *Mareh Kohein*—these are the things we remember. They are what make the High Holidays for us. They're so powerful that, if we don't hear them, we might even feel like the Yamim Noraim didn't happen.

Now that isn't to say that the words aren't important. They are. *Mi yichyeh umi yamut, uteshuva utefilla utzedakah maavirin at roah hagezerah, aseh imanu chesed v'hoshienu*—these are powerful words, and they have powerful effects. Yet the music seems to resonate even more for us. The music taps something deeper inside our brains, farther inside our hearts. The music, which has no meaning. The music, which we don't think about, but simply experience.

### *III. The Limits of Language*

You may be familiar with the Talmudic story of Moshe ascending on high to find God sitting and affixing crowns to the letters of the Torah. Moshe asks God, *Ribbono shel olam*, Master of the Universe, why are you doing this? God ultimately shows Moshe the image of Rabbi Akiva, who, 1,000 years after Moshe's death, interprets even the crowns of the letters into Torah. This leads Moshe to ask, "*Ribbono shel olam*, you have such a man, and yet you give the Torah through me. Why?" God answers in a seemingly thunderous tone: *shtok, kach alah b'machashava l'fanai*; Be silent! This is how the idea came to me!

In many readings of this story, God's answer is understood as a rebuke to Moshe for asking too many questions. I read it less as a rebuke than as a statement to Moshe that there are things that God simply can't explain. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav offers a wonderful variation on this theme: *Shtok*, be silent, *kach aleh b'machshava l'fanai*, And through silence, ascend to the level of my thought. For Rebbe Nachman, the point of the story is that Moshe and God can only go so far with language. At a certain point, God can't communicate through words, and Moshe has to get past words if he wants to understand God. They—we—have to find another way of communing beyond, or perhaps before, communication.

Rebbe Nachman, of course, was one of the Jewish people's greatest creators and teachers of and about *niggun*. He wouldn't have been surprised by our conversation at the *limmud* a few weeks ago. Of course, he would say, the melodies have a greater effect on you than the words do! The melodies are vastly more powerful than the words. Wordless sounds—the notes of a *niggun*, the blast of a shofar, the cry of a baby—take us where words cannot, into the realms before and beyond language, the higher and deeper places.

*Vayehi kol hashofar holech v'hazek me'od; Moshe yidaber v'haelohim ya'aneinu b'kol*: And the voice of the shofar grew louder and louder; Moses spoke and God answered him in a voice. The moment when not only Moshe, but every Jew, heard the voice of God was a moment not of speech, but of sound. Sound that was intense. Sound that was intimate. Sound that went beyond what words could express, and tapped a deeper part of our souls. The Torah was given, not in words, but in black and white fire, in lightning that was audible, in thunder we could see. God spoke to us in an ineffable, inexpressible way.

To ask what the meaning of that moment was, what the sounds meant, is to ask the wrong question. It's not about meaning. It's not about symbol. It's both before and beyond those things. Ultimately, I would suggest, the experience of the shofar is simply about listening and opening ourselves to hear. "Just pay attention," writes Mary Oliver about prayer.

this isn't  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

And so I return to the image of my 9-month old son, who is quite literally pre-verbal. Toby isn't applying labels to the world. He isn't yet giving names to things, sorting them, dividing them. Those will all come by next Rosh Hashanah. But right now, at this delicious and wonderful moment, he is old enough—and young enough—to be genuinely moved by the experience of hearing the shofar. I can't tell you what's going on in his mind or his soul. All I can tell you is that something powerful happens when I blow the shofar for him in the morning.

And I can tell you that every morning, as I gaze into the pure joy on his face, the radiance of his *tzelem elokim*, I grow more attuned to the presence of God. My infant son is teaching me, as I hope he can teach us all, to let go of what I'm *supposed* to hear in the shofar, and instead simply experience its voice.

*Ketiva v'chatima tova*, May we all be inscribed and sealed for a year of listening and hearing, of looking and discovering, of beholding God's presence and God's image in the world.

