

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 - 5782
Temple Sinai - Dresher, PA
Rabbi Sam Hollander
“The Cry of the Shofar: Releasing our Brokenness”

What do you hear when the Shofar is sounded?

The first year I celebrated the High Holy Days in New York City was September 2018. By then I had lived in New York for several years. Each year on September 11th, when I would walk past 100th Street on the Upper West Side, I remember hearing the sound of bagpipes playing at the Fireman’s Memorial at 100th and Riverside.

The synagogue I worked for during rabbinical school was Anshe Chesed, located at 100th and West End, just down the street from the Fireman’s Memorial. While the events of 9/11 were just days before Rosh Hashanah in 2001, in all of the years that followed, 2018 was the first time that 9/11 and Rosh Hashanah coincided on the same day.

That Rosh Hashanah in 2018, as I walked to Anshe Chesed and reached the corner of 100th, I saw the manifestation of these two dates, Rosh Hashanah and September 11th coinciding. On the very same street, there were people walking into the synagogue wearing their finest clothing, and across the street there were New York Firefighters and NYPD officers wearing their finest uniforms gathering at the memorial. This collision of joy and grief was perplexing to see.

Rosh Hashanah should be a time of new beginnings. Our tradition reminds us to have an optimistic outlook on the new year in front of us. The ritual of dipping apples into honey represents our wish to experience only sweetness in the new year. Yet, as I watched New York’s finest mournfully walk towards the memorial with the sound of bagpipes bellowing in the distance, that day felt like the opposite of joy. How is it possible to hold joy and sadness at the same time?

It would be a lie, if I were to tell you that this Rosh Hashanah service in 2018 felt like any other year. Yes, we sang the same joyous melodies that we sing each year, but if you looked

around the room, although everyone was physically present in the sanctuary, you knew their hearts and minds were somewhere else, traveling through the memories of that day.

As the Torah was placed on the readers table in preparation for the Torah reading, the Rabbi paused the usual flow of the service and spoke from the heart. The rabbi said, “Today, all throughout the city, churches have rung their bells to observe moments of silence that mark the events of that very tragic day... we, as a synagogue, do not have a church bell, but today, on Rosh Hashanah, we do have the shofar.” And just at that moment, as the clock hit 10:28am, marking the time when the North Tower fell, the rabbi blew the shofar.

Tekiah... We all know the sound of the shofar. But I will always remember the sound on that day in that sanctuary. As we stood in a moment of silence, the shofar was the collective loud cry that we all needed. The sound echoed like the sirens of emergency responders that gave their lives that day. The shofar’s unadulterated sound transported us across time, to the experience of the brokenness we felt that day years before. The shofar was the cathartic release that we all needed.

On Rosh Hashanah, on this day of joy and hope for the future, we are reminded of how fragile life can be. The Talmud and the prayers in the Mahzor refer to Rosh Hashanah as Yom HaZikaron, the “Day of Remembrance.” While sharing the same name with the modern Israeli commemoration of Yom HaZikaron, Israeli memorial day, remembering the lives lost in protection of the State of Israel and those killed in acts of terrorism, when we speak of Rosh Hashanah as Yom HaZikaron, it is because we want God to remember us in the coming year.

But I think there is more to this idea of Yom HaZikaron, of remembrance on Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is not just about recalling the sweet moments in life. According to the Talmud, the sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to remind us of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac, also known as the Akeda, which we read in the Torah this morning. In Jewish tradition, we recall Abraham’s actions that day in a uniformly positive light. Many biblical commentators argue that the binding of Isaac was a test of Abraham’s obedience and true faith in God, but in reality this story is a traumatic experience in which a son is almost killed by his

father. Today, we sound the shofar to remind God of the sacrifice made by Abraham, who instead of killing his son, sacrificed a ram. The sound of the shofar reminds God of this covenant, that God should show mercy upon us because of Abraham.

But like the cry of the shofar, the trauma inflicted by the binding of Isaac is not easily forgotten. Commentators note that on the way to the mountain top, twice the Torah says:

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו

“The two of them walked together”

The number two specifically referring to Abraham and Isaac. But after the incident of the Akeda, as Abraham returns home to Beersheva, the Torah says:

וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו

“They walked together”

This verse omits the word שְׁנֵיהֶם, “the two of them”, or more specifically, Abraham and Isaac. According to the 15th century commentator Abarbaranel, Isaac did not return home with his father; instead he returned to his mother in Hevron. This traumatic event led this family to separate. Isaac never again spoke to his father. And according to Midrash, Sarah died upon hearing that Isaac was almost killed by Abraham.

So why is such a troublesome text chosen to be read on this joyous day of Rosh Hashanah? On Rosh Hashanah, on this day that we call Yom HaZikaron, we focus not only the sweetness in life, but we also remember that which has harmed us. To engage in the process of teshuva, we have to look back and remember the past, both the good and the bad. While the sound of the shofar can be jubilant, the fragmented notes can remind us of brokenness and the sound of crying. On Rosh Hashanah, instead of remaining silent with the pain we experienced in the past, the blasts of the shofar allow us to break the silence and express our pain.

Last year on Rosh Hashanah, we told ourselves that next year would be different. Yet, as we enter into this new year wanting to be optimistic for the year ahead, how can we not feel the pandemic's continuous stress, and now the trauma, the destruction, the loss of life we experienced this past week from the storm?

I wish we could just simply forget, to move past the brokenness we feel in our hearts, because pushing it out of our minds and hearts just sounds easier. But on this day, on Yom HaZikaron, this day of remembrance, we recall that which may be hard to address.

In the Book of Proverbs it says “If there is anxiety in a person’s heart, let him quash it.” Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi have different ways to understand this verse according to the Talmud. One said, “you should forcefully push this anxiety out of one’s mind.” The other said, “One should tell it to others.”

It is important that we find ways to release our anxiety and the heaviness that weighs on our hearts. To not remain silent, but to speak with others. In this period of repentance, we are called upon to engage with others, even when the conversation is difficult and painful. If we can learn anything from the experience of our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Sarah, when we feel hurt or anxious it is important to call out instead of remaining silent. When we experience challenges, it is important that we find ways to talk with others.

Rosh Hashanah... Yom HaZikaron, the week leading up to Rosh Hashanah will forever remind me of the traumatic experience of 9/11 and the recent storm that devastated our community. As we stand to hear the call of the shofar, let it be the collective cry for us all. A reminder that we should not feel alone in the anxiety that we feel, but that it is okay to let out our tears and to share the weight that we feel on our hearts with others.

But let us not forget, that the Shofar is not just a cry, it is a call to action. We can never replace the lives lost 20 years ago and last week. Both the Manhattan skyline and the Upper Dublin skyline are forever changed, a constant reminder of these traumatic experiences. While the tree topped skyline is no longer in view from so many of our homes, the call of the Shofar reminds us to move forward, to plant new trees one day.

Yes, this Rosh Hashanah is bittersweet. We hold both the sweetness and hope of a better year ahead, and on this Yom HaZikaron we also remember the brokenness in our lives. May the

sound of the Shofar hold us in this bittersweet moment, allowing us to express both our cries and our prayers of hope all in one singular blast.

Tekiyah - Shofar Blast