

Rosh Hashanah 5768 – Beth Am Library Minyan – The Cry of my Shofar by Meyer Shwarzstein

I want to thank Norm Saiger and the High Holiday committee for allowing a shofar blower to speak.

When a blessing is said before drinking wine or eating bread, one is not supposed to talk until the act is completed. The blessing is to be connected with the act. The act of sounding the shofar isn't considered complete until the last tekiah is sounded, so the Ba'al Tekiah, the person who blows the shofar, isn't allowed to speak from the moment the blessing is said until he sounds the last tekiah. I hope these words will be received as prayer and not as an idle interruption.

My grandfather was born in Palestine just over 100 years ago. His 1st wife and children were killed in an accident, after which he emigrated to Chicago. He married my grandmother and had two sons. He was a learned man, a shochet and a scribe. He once took me with him to a synagogue where I helped him fix a torah – my job was to clean between the words. He is the one who taught me how to sound the shofar. He also taught me to ask questions.

Like every Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashanah starts at night. But, unlike other holidays, it starts at the beginning of the month. The moon is completely covered in the sky. Rosh Hashanah is the only Jewish holiday that begins in darkness.

Today, we commemorate the beginning of the world. Like Rosh Hashanah, it started in darkness. The first words of Genesis begin:

“Bereishit barah Elokim et ha'shamayim v'et ha'aretz.”
“When God began to create heaven and earth.”

“V'ha'aretz haytah tohu v'vohu...”
“The earth being Tohu and Vohu...”

“...V'choshech al p'nei t'home...”
“...with darkness upon the surface of the deep...”

“...v'ruach Elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayim.”
“...and a wind from God sweeping over the water.”

“Tohu and Vohu.” Nachmanides says that everything in the universe is made from them. Tohu is something without form and Vohu, he says, is a contraction of the words that mean “in” and “it” – “in it” - something with form. Tohu is potential – like an architect's plan – and Vohu is the actuality, the result, the building. These are what make up the universe in the darkness.

Perhaps this is not unlike the darkness inside of us. We recall the potential we had when we were young and who we thought we'd become, what others expected of us. We know the reality of where we came from, what obstacles we faced and the obstacles that now stand in our way.

There's a familiar and uncomfortable intimacy in darkness. As Paul Simon said, "Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again." When we close our eyes, each of us hears a different noise in our heads. We feel our own fears, protect our own secrets, and suffer our own loneliness.

Our Biblical heroes knew darkness. In today's reading, we heard the stories of Sara, Hagar and Hannah. They were caught between their pasts and their uncertain futures. They, like us, were also caught in difficult family conflicts - at odds with each other and themselves.

I have a good friend who worked in the same company as his father for years but neither would as much as nod to each other as they'd pass in the halls. There was a time when my sister and I didn't speak to each other – it was a painful divide. Within every family, there is a façade of normalcy that hides deep divisions and secrets.

I know the darkness of hopelessness. When I was in my late teens, my father and mother fought miserably with each other while living in the same house. I had trouble at college and ended up suffering a complete emotional breakdown.

My mother is even more familiar with darkness. From age 7, when the Nazis invaded Poland, she was forced to hide to survive. She was an only child in a town, which allowed almost all of its Jews to be killed. Today, thousands are buried there in mass graves. She had to pretend to be a Christian in Church, watch as loved ones were whisked away, and witness unspeakable violence and its effects. Both her parents were killed. She strove to make a new life here, only to face other difficult challenges.

Our world suffers in a pall of darkness.

Since February 2003, the Sudanese government and the Janjaweed militia have used rape, displacement, organized starvation and mass murder to kill more than 400,000 and displace 2.5 million people.

Since Katrina, New Orleans area hospitals are struggling to survive. People are still not getting the aid needed to fix their homes.

The UN says about 2 million people have fled Iraq, and another 2 million have become internally displaced. Many soldiers who return home alive suffer with severe brain injuries, severed limbs, and post-traumatic stress. We must be sure to acclaim their sacrifice and we must be there to welcome them home.

The UN estimates that there are now 14 million AIDS orphans and that by 2010 there will be 25 million.

The UN reports that 3.8 billion people currently live on less than two dollars per day. According to one study, more than 10 million people died in 2006 because of starvation.

And what of the Jewish people? In 1939, the world population was just over 2 billion people and the Jewish population was 16 million. We know that we lost 6 million but, since then, the world population has more than tripled. There are now some 6.6 billion people but the Jewish population is only about 14 million – less than there were in 1939. Of these, 40% live in Israel and they now live under the threat of an emboldened and soon-to-be nuclear Iran.

World events can reach us here on La Cienega.

Many of us have debt; some have lost their homes and others are so deep in debt, they may never get out.

My 2nd cousin Allan Shwartzstein was working in the World Trade Center on 9/11 2001. He was killed. I never got to know him.

Darkness leads to despair, fear and anger. Many are angry at God. How can God let terrible things happen? Moses railed at God. Abraham fought with God. We will always fight with God – this is a part of who we are. Perhaps that's why we're called Yisrael – a word defined as “one who struggles with God”.

But some are angry at religion. Many of my close friends will look at my list of world problems and say these were caused by organized religion. There are people, like the bully in the Kite Runner, who do terrible things in the name of religion but that doesn't make religion itself inherently bad. I argue that any idea taken to an extreme is dangerous.

Look at the 20th century – the most violent in all of history - those who committed the most heinous crimes weren't religious – Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot. In fact, Mao and Pol Pot used purely secular ideals as an excuse to kill millions. That doesn't mean the secular ideals are inherently bad.

What matters is that people are hurting. Is there hope?

The holiday of Rosh Hashanah begins in darkness, but the New Year does not. Technically, the New Year begins as soon as the first sliver of the moon appears. That's what we call the “new moon”. All of the troubles we bring with us in the darkness are baggage we've brought from last year. In the New Year, we look at ourselves in the light. And, as the year changes, we too may change.

The Talmudic rabbi, Rav Yitzchak, says there are 4 things that can reverse a negative decree on Rosh Hashanah. Tzedakah (charity). Shinui Hashem (changing one's name – meaning starting anew, like a new person) and Shinui Ma'aseh (changing ones actions). The fourth one is Tza'akah (crying out).

As it says in the Psalms¹, “they descend to the depths, their soul melts with trouble, they reel, they stagger like a drunkard, and all their wisdom is swallowed up. Then they cried out to God in their distress and he would take them out from their straits.”

There are many ways to cry out. Hagar lifted up her voice and wept. Hannah’s lips formed words but made no sound. As for Sara, what did she do? When this 90-year-old woman overheard that she was to have a child, she laughed and said to herself in what I think may be a sarcastic tone, “After I have withered, shall I again have delicate skin? And my husband *is old!*” Later, God asked Abraham, “Why did she laugh?” Sara laughed and God heard her.

What do we do when we want to cry out? There are many clues in this Machzor. I’d like to look at the Shema.

There’s a new movie about the Shema and there’s a trailer on You Tube. It features interviews with soldiers from the recent Lebanon War. Just as dawn broke, after the last moments of darkness, Major Roi Klein’s troops were attacked from the rear. One of his men, Merhavia, took his men to outflank the terrorists but was injured. Klein took some men to rescue Merhavia but, when he arrived, he saw that Merhavia was wounded. 2 or 3 soldiers opened a stretcher and placed Merhavia on it. As they lifted the stretcher, a grenade was hurled at them. As soon as he saw it, Klein jumped on the grenade. It exploded and Klein was mortally wounded. Klein had saved those who were next to him and those who had just lifted the stretcher. A soldier who was there recalled that, as he was dying, Klein recited, “...a deep prayer of Shema Yisrael said with deep intent, Shema Yisrael Adoshem Elokeinu Adoshem Echad – like,” said the soldier, “in the legends.”

Like, I learned last night from my mother, my grandfather; when the Gestapo led him at gunpoint out of his house.

We are supposed to say the Shema when we go to bed, when we rise up, each time we pray and before we die. You may ask, what in the Shema gives us the opportunity to cry out? And why discuss it on Rosh Hashanah?

Like Rosh Hashanah and like the beginning of the world, the Shema starts in darkness. And when we remove our hand from our eyes, we recite, “V’ahavta et Adoshem Elokecha b’chol l’vovechah, u’vechol nafshechah, u’vechol m’odecha.” You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Love God? We’re angry, upset and lonely. This is a very big leap. Let’s take a look at when love is mentioned in the Torah. The first time it’s mentioned is in tomorrow’s Torah reading, when we read about the binding of Isaac – God says to Abraham, “Take your son, Isaac, whom you love.” The first time love is mentioned in the Torah. It is the love between Abraham and Isaac, a parent and child. The next mention of love involves Isaac again – this time for his wife, Rebecca. Eventually, we are instructed to love our neighbor and later to love a stranger. The words of the Shema don’t come until after all of these – not until Deuteronomy.

¹ Psalms 107:26 - 28

The commentary in Etz Hayim suggests the reason that love of God is mentioned so late is because we must first learn to love God's creatures before we can learn to love God. First we must learn to love our children - spend time getting to know them. Next we learn to love our wife or husband - not taking them for granted. Having accomplished that, we can love our neighbors. Then comes a bigger leap - loving a stranger. If they are strange to us, we can't understand them. That's what makes loving them such a challenge. But, if we can accomplish that, then we are ready to extend our love to God.

Perhaps that's why we uncover our eyes when we say the word "v'ahavta," and you shall love. Perhaps that's the only way we can get rid of the darkness. I know that was true for me. My wife, children, parents, sister, family, friends and community fill a void I felt as a teen and now my life is overflowing. My mother, once completely alone, is now surrounded by grandchildren and others who love and respect her.

But love alone is not enough. We can love someone and still find ourselves not speaking to each other. There are three more things we need – all of them ingredients of Rosh Hashanah.

First, there's compassion.

The name of God used in the first five days of creation is Elokim – translated by Nachmanides as the powerful of the powerful – this is the God that judges us. During the 6th day, before God creates the human being, the Torah reads², "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created." First God mentions Heaven – where God lives – and next God mentions Earth – the place where man will live. The verse continues, "when Adoshem Elokim – the Lord God – made earth and heaven." This is a transitional moment. This is the first mention of the name Adoshem. Adoshem is the name used to describe a compassionate God. Here, God first mentions Earth and then mentions heaven – for the first time, God looks at the universe from Man's point of view – even before God creates him!

Only if we look at the world from another person's point of view can we be truly compassionate.

Second, there's forgiveness – how can we ask God to forgive us if we can't forgive each other?

Third, we need to use our words. "The earth being Tohu and Vohu, with darkness upon the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water." The next verse reads, "God said, let there be light. And there was light."

Perhaps God was teaching us the power of words – God used words to create the world.

But, what if we can't find the words for people – or for our prayers?

I often have this problem with people and certainly with prayer. I was raised Orthodox and I'm here most Saturdays but I will tell you a secret I haven't shared with my wife – I can't say the

² Genesis, 2:4

prayers fast enough to keep pace with the service. So I use an English translation I like. I read it if I need to catch up. It also helps me relate to what is said in the Hebrew.

But there is one time I have no trouble praying. When I sound the shofar.

My grandfather knew darkness. I can't imagine starting life over after having lost a wife and children. Gently, he taught me that each kind of shofar call, though equal in length, is meant to emulate a different kind of sound we make when we cry.

Tekiah is the long wail. Shevarim are three sounds of moaning. And moaning leads to the 9 short bursts of the Teruah, the broken sounds of sobbing.

The 12th Century French rabbi, the Redak, suggests that the first shofar blast represents the newborn child, clean and pure. When the child grows, he struggles and is tested. He moans and sobs over the failures that taint his character. The order finishes with a final simple shofar blast, the Tekiah, which again expresses man's virtue and goodness, but this time after repentance.

While it isn't required, I always close my eyes when I sound the shofar – in the darkness, I have access to the sounds in my head. I am conscious of my insignificance and my feeble efforts, my breath, my mortality and my empty prayers.

The Shofar is also a unifying experience – we may talk during the service but for one moment we stand silently, shoulder to shoulder, as a community. Like we did at Mt. Sinai.

The Shofar announces the Year of Jubilee, was used to rally the troops, to usher in the ark of Hashem, when a king was anointed, to announce God's presence, as an alarm of war & danger and to break down the walls at Jericho.

But maybe it also recalls creation itself. Tohu and Vohu, - potential and reality which pervade the darkness turn into kinetic energy, the air flows thru the shofar like the wind which swept over the water in the darkness, signaling a new day...redemption.

“Shema Yisrael Adoshem Elokeynu Adoshem Echad.”

“Listen, those of us who struggle with God, the merciful God is the God who judges us, the merciful God is one.”

“V'ahavta.”

This year, may we each learn to give love and receive love compassionately and may we each reach our full potential.

L'shana tovah tikateyvu v'tichateymu.