

The Call of the Shofar

By Rabbi Shefa Gold
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Tomorrow we will listen to the call of the Shofar. It's not a sweet or soothing sound. It is meant to startle us awake, to stir up memories, conscience, and resolve. It is meant to awaken us to our own power, so that we can rise up in partnership with God and do the work of beauty and justice.

The sound of the shofar penetrates our defenses and demands an awakening. It calls us to reveal to ourselves, to each other, and to God that which we long ago buried. It urges us to give voice to those parts of ourselves that we have silenced. While we live our lives by routines – routines are helpful when we're trying to get things done – the shofar breaks through our every day patterns and calls us to think anew about who we are and where we are going. It can bring to the foreground questions about ourselves that we have avoided, that we have silenced, for too long. It can break open the well of our passion and courage, free us from drab convention, and send us to our true work.

The shofar calls us to our shared responsibility for Justice.

We live at a moment when people are being held in prison without access to the courts. Congress has enacted a law which allows the President to declare any foreign national an 'enemy combatant' and be detained without the right of habeas corpus. This new law exempts CIA officials from being prosecuted for violation of the Geneva conventions and our own laws of what constitutes decent human treatment of detainees. We are participants in a society that is turning its back on fundamental principles of justice.

We live at a time when our natural resources are being depleted, and where catastrophic climate change is endangering God's precious diversity. We live at a time when our country has chosen war as the first resort, before diplomacy, before compassion, before wisdom.

Most of us live in protected environments where we don't have to witness the wrongs that are committed in our name. We are complicit in our silence, and the shofar calls us to account. Its voice is raw, unrefined and not very polite. It cares only for Truth.

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. -

Ex. 23:9

The call of the shofar reminds us that we know the heart of the stranger. As Jews we recall the Exodus from Egypt every day so that we can remember that we were all strangers once. That knowledge, that memory is buried in our hearts and is awakened by the plaintive cries of the shofar.

The sound of the shofar has the power to break through our defenses:

The defense of Denial says, "It's not really happening."

The defense of Minimization says, "It's not really so bad."

The defense of Justification says, "It must be done."

and the defense of Dehumanization says, "They must deserve it."

These defenses are in Reality, the weapons that have been used, all too often, against our people throughout a long history of oppression. That history allows us to see through these defenses, and then to shatter them with the blast of the shofar.

The sound of the shofar reminds us that the heart of the stranger is our own heart; the humiliation of the stranger is our own humiliation; and the persecution of the stranger is our own persecution.

The shofar calls us to commit ourselves to action to ensure that no one under our government's jurisdiction be made to suffer torture and torments like those our ancestors endured.

The shofar calls us to hope. In this time leading up to the election it's so easy to be numbed by the cynicism of politics, to protect ourselves from disappointment by giving up our idealism and giving in to sarcasm.

And yes, for all of us there have been moments of clarity, when the true light at our core burst through the clouds of denial and confusion, when we each risked comfort to face an uncomfortable truth. How can we support each other to grow those moments as seeds of an awakened world? It will not be guilt or shame that will empower us, but rather a vision that is bright and compelling and shared in sacred community.

We blow the shofar at the time of the New Moon. The Moon in our tradition represents Shechina, the Divine Presence that is always present but sometimes hidden in shadow. The sound of the shofar calls Shechina out from her hiding place and welcomes her back into our awareness. She is coaxed from her hiding place by small acts of kindness, and by the sound of our honest prayer.

And what does it mean to call Shechina out from her hiding place? It means that each of us is called into our wholeness and power as we reclaim lost pieces of ourselves, the pieces that broke off at times of disappointment or trauma. We are given our work in the words of Deuteronomy, "Justice, justice thou shalt pursue." (why say justice twice?)

Perhaps the first call to Justice is the one that calls us to look out at the world- the inequality, cruelty, danger and prejudice.... And be moved to speak out and act. And perhaps the second call to Justice beckons us to the Inner Landscape where we can look at the parts of the Self that have been silenced or ignored; we can look into our hearts and see where we have judged ourselves cruelly, where we have lost touch with our true feelings or dismissed our own precious dreams, where we carry resentment and bitterness.

The Outer Justice cannot be pursued without the Inner Justice. When we try to fix the world without healing ourselves, we end up re-creating injustice in a new form. The Inner Justice cannot be pursued without the Outer Justice. When we try to

heal ourselves while ignoring the injustice out there in the world, we end up isolating ourselves from that world, and cutting ourselves off from our own compassion.

אֲשֶׁרֵי הָעַם יוֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה יְהוָה בְּאוֹר-פְּנֵיךָ יִהְלְכוּן

Psalms 89:16 says, “Oh God, Happy are the people who know the blast of the shofar; they walk in the light of your presence.”

What kind of “Happy” is this? Certainly not the happiness of superficial pleasure—a lifestyle of Denial that masks a terrible truth, and not the la-di-da happiness that keeps life bland and safe.

This is the kind of “happy” that is a dynamic force waiting quietly at our center, the deep joy for existence itself. The blast of the shofar can break open the shell that imprisons that inner joy. When that joy is freed, it becomes a light that shines regardless of circumstance. And that joy is our power. It is the power that moves us as “we walk in the light of God’s presence,” as we walk with integrity, courage, commitment, as we walk in beauty.

May the blast of the shofar shatter the rigid walls that imprison our true joy.

May the wail of the shofar open our hearts and send us with compassion to profound forgiveness.

May the call of the shofar inspire each of us to respond with our unique love as we rise to the challenge that is set before us this year.