

## “Shofar So-Good.”

Rosh Hashanah 5785/2024

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The best sermons start with a joke. But, this morning, we’re going to do this collaboratively. The punchline is “Sho-far, So-good.” So, I’m going to ask you: How is your new year going and you’re going to respond... Sho-far, So-good. (Do it!)

That was really great. And important...The Shofar is not only the heart of the new year celebration, its call contains within it the most important messages of the year.

Long before the BCC Band, before the tradition of eating apples and honey, before prayers about the Book of Life, even before the creation of Rosh Hashanah as we know it, we had the Shofar. One ancient source<sup>1</sup> says that even before God created light and darkness in Genesis, God created the ram from which the first shofar was made. The shofar came first, and then...much later, Rosh Hashanah as we know it. In the Torah, there’s actually no mention of Rosh Hashanah. We read in the Book of Leviticus:

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זְכָרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ:

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.

The other place in the Torah that mentions this holiday, the Book of Numbers, also says nothing about Rosh Hashanah; it only calls this day, “Yom Teruah.”

So, we know from the Torah *when* this holiday should occur during the Jewish year, and we know that we shouldn’t work. And...we know that it is called Yom Teruah.<sup>2</sup> Day of Teruah...Teruah...one of the Shofar calls - made of nine quick blasts - that you will hear shortly.

Today is the day for sounding the shofar. The meaning and the purpose of this day only took shape as the rabbis gave form and structure to those initial Biblical instructions. But Yom Teruah...that was there from the beginning.

The English translation of Teruah is basically: the sound the shofar makes...more concisely you could say that Teruah means, “shout” or “blast.” But one of our most important historical rabbis, Rashi, taught that the Hebrew word Teruah is related to another Hebrew word, “Reut.”<sup>3</sup> Which means friendship or connection. If you read it this way, it suggests that Yom Teruah– the day of

<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 5:7

<sup>2</sup> Lev 23:23-25, Num 29:1-6

<sup>3</sup> This comes from the Rashi on Num 23:21

the shofar blast, is meant to be a day of community and connection between people who care about each other.

Ted Rosen was our longtime *ba'al tekia*, or shofar blower, at Temple Sinai. He sadly passed away this past Spring. Ted loved to sound the shofar. Each year, he stood in the main sanctuary of Temple Sinai and sounded the shofar for that huge crowd, with all the doors open, chairs going all the way to the back of the social hall. But Ted told me that his favorite place to sound the shofar was not in the sanctuary at Sinai, but in the community room at an assisted living facility, for their elderly residents. He said that when he sounded the shofar there, he could really see it on their faces. Even when words failed them, he saw this recognition and appreciation, that this was the sound of the new year.

Ted's experience captures the essence of Rosh Hashanah: Yom Teruah, is a day that asks us to sit with our friends and family, to listen to the shofar blast and to be enveloped by a sense of belonging.

We need that. We need that sense of community every year, but we particularly need it this year. This year, Rosh Hashanah comes at a time when being Jewish can feel different, can feel uncomfortable, perhaps even lonely. Yom Teruah reminds us that we are in this together.

That may feel like a strange message, at a time when there is great discord within the Jewish community. When our families and our Jewish friends can feel more divided than ever over what is happening in Israel, over what it means to be a member of the American Jewish community. When people with whom we ordinarily feel close and connected express views or share ideas that make them feel like strangers.

But Yom Teruah...this day, this call into community, it is a day unlike many others on the Jewish calendar. It is not a day for discussion or debate. On Passover, we ask four questions and discuss the possible answers until everyone's too hungry to continue; on Hanukkah we light candles and try to shine light into the darkened world for everyone else to see. The mitzvah that we are called to perform today, on Yom Teruah, is a mitzvah of presence and a mitzvah of listening. The commandment is *lishmoa kol shofar*...to hear the voice of the shofar...with the Hebrew word "shema" at its center.

The shofar, the teruah, contains within it a multitude of emotions. It has been a wail, a cry, a warning. In the Bible, the shofar signals a new year, the jubilee...it is the sound of revelation. And, the sound of the shofar is the sound of mourning, a signal of unrest. Today, we are called to find our way back, in spite of that which divides us, to listen. We are called close by the commandment to listen, and hear all that is contained in the wordless call of the shofar.

We need this Yom Teruah to bring us a little joy, because it has been a difficult year. Many of you have shared stories about experiences of antisemitism or a sense of isolation because of your Jewish identity. When a teacher asks you to explain what's happening in Israel and Gaza because you are the only Jewish student in the class. When a friend posts something online that seems like it crosses the line. When allies in work for justice sign onto letters or statements that seem to oversimplify this painful and difficult moment. When a presidential candidate suggests that Jews will be to blame if he loses the election.

It is a scary and disorienting time. When being Jewish in public makes a different kind of demand: when you wonder if you might need to explain yourself, or if it's up to you to push back. It might make you question if you want to be Jewish in public at all, if it's easier to conceal this part of yourself.

Yom Teruah calls us into community for support, to remind us that we are not alone. And, Yom Teruah calls us together for celebration.

There is a text from Psalms that is part of the traditional Shofar service: "*Ashrei ha'am yodei teruah*"<sup>4</sup> Happy is the people who know the Teruah. It's a hopeful and uplifting verse...oftentimes, it is true.

When we survey Jewish history, we, often, reasonably, focus on the darkest moments. But that is not a complete or accurate portrayal of who we are and what we are about. Judaism has always been a faith grounded in joy and celebration: oneg shabbat, *z'man simchateinu*, 35 minute horas, spirited debates and lots of *l'chaims*. We come together, on Yom Teruah, to be reminded of the joy that we generate when we're together.

A few weeks ago, I officiated at a wedding at Dock 5, at Union Market in Northeast DC. It's this big warehouse space with giant doors that open up to a public walkway. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and the area was crowded with people enjoying the late summer Sunday. The celebration began with a tisch. A tisch is a traditional Jewish ritual when the groom, and in this case...grooms, sit at a table and their friends and family sing and drink and bang on the tables. It was loud, and raucous, Hebrew singing quickly filled the space, drifting out onto the sidewalk and it felt like the sound of Hebrew song and celebration was reaching all around NOMA. As I stood there surrounded by joy and singing, I felt overwhelmed by the sense that we are so blessed. To be able to celebrate in this way: to rejoice together, in public, proud and very, very loud.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 89:16

*Curiously*, Jewish law requires a shofar to be curved and never straight, like a person bent in prayer.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary scholar and teacher Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg offers another explanation. She explains that the shofar is crooked because, “We don’t want to use an instrument that could give a false impression of the immaculateness and coherence of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Though it reminds us of chaos and complexity, Zornberg’s wisdom complements the psalmist’s teaching, “*Ashrei ha’am yodei teruah*” “Happy is the people who know the Teruah.” We know life is not always that simple. It is the nature of the world to be messy and incoherent, where joy is so often intermingled with sorrow.

Perhaps, what the Psalmist is saying, is that the Teruah is not a promise that you will never know sorrow, nor the assurance that each new year will be greeted with only good fortune. In spite of all that the Teruah can signal, it is better to experience it...all of it...together. Listening to all that is contained in those blasts, the cries and the celebrations, the rejoicing, and the pain, in a crowded auditorium, surrounded by your community, **that** is its own kind of happiness.

It’s a simple joke...How is your new year going? “Shofar, so good.” A little silly. But it’s got layers: this past year has been twisted and sad, but it’s also been joyful and exciting. It’s been a lot like a shofar and also...so good.

Yom Teruah...a day of connection. May it be a year of healing and growth, of strength, and support, of pride and resilience, and through it all, let us remember that we are in it together.

*Shanah tovah u’metukah*. May it be a good and sweet year for all of us.

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<sup>5</sup> Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 26b

<sup>6</sup> *Beginning Anew*, p 200