

Rabbi Jon Roos
 Rosh Hashanah Morning 5785
Bernie Kalb (and the Shofar) Can Change Your Life
 See source sheet appendix for Hebrew texts

On Rosh Hashanah 5746, Bernie Kalb had an epiphany here in this sanctuary. The world knew Bernie as a journalist, broadcaster, spokesman, and author. We knew him as a dedicated member of our congregation for fifty years who always sat right there [point to Bernie's spot] with his brother Marvin, Ted Koppel, and their families. Bernie was 64 at the time and had been the chief spokesman for the State Department for two years when he faced one of the most critical decisions of his professional life. Earlier that year, the US military had attacked Libyan targets after intelligence linked Libya's leader Moammar Qaddafi to recent terror attacks with more to come imminently. During those attacks, one US plane was shot down killing its two crewmen and among the casualties on the ground there was at least one child reported dead from US bombings. As Autumn arrived, tensions were high and more violence loomed. Then the Washington Post revealed that the Reagan administration had – a few months earlier - approved a disinformation campaign “to keep Qaddafi nervous about his personal and political stability.”

On October 8, 1986, to the applause of the reporters at his press conference, Bernie Kalb announced his resignation saying, “I am dissenting from the reported ‘disinformation’ program.” He said his choice was to remain in his role and “vanish into acquiescence” or to quit in protest. “I do not want my own credibility to be caught up, to be subsumed, by this controversy, so I’ve taken the step of stepping down,” he said.¹

When Bernie died almost two years ago, his family shared the story from behind the scenes. The Post had broken the story about the disinformation campaign two days before Rosh Hashanah. Bernie was still absorbing its impact when he came to services on October 4th. His family recalls how he returned home that day agitated and excited, having heard the shofar and citing a passage from the liturgy,

אֱלֹהֵי נְצוּר לְשׁוֹנֵי מִרְעָה וְשִׁפְתֵי מְדַבֵּר מִרְמָה

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-10-08-mn-4904-story.html> Story accessed on Sept. 29, 2024.

“My God, Keep my tongue from doing harm, and my lips from lies and deceit.”

Those words turned Bernie Kalb back towards the inner compass that had been signaling to him for days and soon enough he acted on it. He announced his resignation four days after Rosh Hashanah. We just read those same words on page 218 at the end of the *amidah*.

I share that story for a few reasons. One reason is that Bernie lived in a time of great global danger and discord. And he was personally, deeply in the center of that work. In fact, he resigned a day before he was slated to leave with the President and Secretary of State as one of a handful of advisors attending a face-to-face summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, between Reagan and Gorbachev to discuss, among other things, reducing nuclear weapons and the threat of global annihilation and the status of Soviet Jews and their possible release. It was a time of fear as terrorism spawned in the Middle East exploded across Europe. The Soviets were an even bigger threat. If anyone had good reason to ignore the pangs of his conscience to stay involved with the imperative “*L’taken Olam B’malchut Shaddai*” – to make the world a better place for all of us - it was Bernie Kalb in 1986.

We live in a similar time. This is a time in which our attention has been turned outward to the struggles, horrors, and failures of the world and its leaders. One year since October 7th, with Israel at war now across the Middle East, half our community cannot look away from the intolerable depravity of antisemitic violence and they will not tolerate any critiques of Israel. The other half of our community cannot look away from the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed since October 7th and they won’t tolerate any hint of supporting Israel. On top of that, we face a dangerous threat to democracy here at home, continual destruction and loss of life from climate events like Hurricane Helene, and genocide unfolding again in Sudan. All this feels, at times, very personal and unsettles your sense of identity and the touchstones of your beliefs – as Americans, as Jews, and as people of conscience. I know those topics are on your mind and they demand our attention. I will speak about Israel and the year since October 7th more directly on Yom Kippur. Today, however, *davka* amidst that intolerable pull towards the world’s problems, I

urge us to lean in to the purpose of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: to turn back to ourselves and to embrace the imperative for *teshuva*.

There is Jewish guidance for cultivating hope in times like this and for clarifying for you, the individual, what you stand upon as the bedrock for how you live your life. What Bernie showed, and I hope to reinforce, is that being part of this congregation and heeding the words of our ancient tradition should and can change a person's life for the better. Each of us, from all ages, and every walk of life, should hear the message from the blasts of the shofar. Maimonides taught that the shofar calls to us: "Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber. Search your ways and return in *teshuva* and remember your Creator." (*Mishneh Torah, Repentance 3:4*). There are three paths for return that you should explore over this High Holy Day season: returning to yourself, to your loved ones, and to God.

The wisdom of loving and relying on yourself is a pretty common piece of advice. In Hamlet, Polonius adjures his son who's going off to university, "To thine own self be true," and that same quote is inscribed on sobriety anniversary tokens that many people carry for honor and strength. That wise message is also a core Jewish teaching that we should hear in today's shofar blasts. One of my recent teachers, Rabbi Miriam Margles, shared a verse from The Song of Songs (5:2) as a mantra for this *teshuva* path:

אָני יְשָׁנָה וְלִבִּי עוֹר

"I am asleep, but my heart is awake"

She taught that, "there is an aspect of ourselves that never falls asleep; our hearts are ever awake. [So] our spiritual practice is for the purpose of learning to remove the barriers encasing our hearts and stir our attention to them."² Inside our hearts we carry the seeds of important characteristics that remain unspoiled despite the detritus accumulating elsewhere in our minds and our bodies. We just cited some of those inner characteristics in the poem on page 213: courage, imagination, determination, and inspiration.

² IJS, The Shofar Project 5784, Rabbi Miriam Margles, Week 1.

When Israeli author Etgar Keret was here at Temple Sinai recently, he told us story about how one of those inner elements – imagination - sustained his father through the Holocaust. Etgar’s father was a small child who survived the Nazis by hiding in a shallow hole in the forest for almost two years. He once told Etgar that he got through the experience by making up stories for himself. Every day he would change one detail of the world and imagine the whole day through the newly created lens he made for himself. One day, for example, the one detail he changed was that the Nazis were after the Jews but if they caught them they would make them eat candy and so if they found him (in that world) he’d pretend he was scared and try to run away but actually he would like it and eat all the candy they forced on him.

The writer of the Song of Songs knew something about life that we should also know: we spend a lot of time unconscious while awake. Mindlessly moving from task to task, we are washed over by bad news and horror stories and sometimes maybe also giddiness and joy. The shofar is tuned to a frequency matching receptors in your deepest self. There is always something inside you that is not asleep and into which you can reconnect on Rosh Hashanah. You have everything you need. Today is just about bringing that wakeful state to the surface of your consciousness.

Another core path of return is turning toward your friends and your loved ones. The Beatles carried this message when they sang, “I’m gonna try with a little help from my friends... I get by with a little help from my friends.” That’s also a Jewish message embedded in the Shofar blasts. Rashi, the French medieval sage, teaches that the shofar’s call is a love signal. He notes that *teru’ah*, the name of the staccato nine short shofar blasts, derives from the word re’eh/רעה, which means friend or loved one. My teacher, Rabbi Margles taught, that “when we take this teaching into our experience, we practice letting each note resonate in our bodies and whole selves, receiving it as a coded message of intimacy and companionship.”³

We see this dynamic emphasized in the most significant prayers for teshuva over the holidays. They are offered in the first plural – we say “we” in all our confessions and high

³ Margles, *ibid.*

holy days prayers in part because our tradition wants us to understand that the resolution of our wrongs and the turning to a new path is best – or perhaps only – done with the company and love of other people supporting us.

The sound of the shofar also calls us to turn our attention to God, however we understand that concept. Much of the High Holy Day imagery presents a God on high who judges us and controls fate. But there is also a powerfully important theology within Judaism that flips the script and says we have the capacity to change God. In fact, we believe that God needs us in order to be God's fullest self. One of the ways we can influence God and change the nature of existence is with the shofar.

In Psalm 47:6 it says:

עֲלֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּתִרְעָה ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר

That literally means: “God ascends with a truah blast, The Lord in the call of the shofar.”

Our sages notice that this verse uses two common names for God, *Elohim* and *Adonai*, and that is no coincidence or mere aesthetic choice. From the talmudic times, the name “*Elohim*” was associated with God's harsh side – judgement and punishment – while the name *Adonai* – represents God's gentler side – *rachamim*, compassion. So they translate this verse to mean, “*aleh elohim* – God (*Elohim*), the harsh source of judgment comes up at the outset; but with TRUAH blasts and the call of the shofar, *Adonai*, the source of mercy and compassion comes out.”

I suggest we put aside, for now, the question of what powers, if any, you might ascribe to God. Let's not get stuck, yet, on the myriad problems of any theological conception. The one thing about God that I want you to take from this Rosh Hashanah is that the idea of God and the belief in it is to believe in the reality of something that transcends any particular moment and all eternity and any particular place and all places. Whatever else it means to believe in God, the Higher Power, the Great spirit, is to believe in tomorrow. To say you believe in God is to say you believe that there are things happening in our world that are beyond our visibility and yet so profoundly significant and life changing. Open a newspaper beyond the bad news that your app's algorithms are feeding you and look at the wedding announcements, the baby announcements, and news of people

winning the lottery. It turns out that there are good things happening even when and where we can't see them. That does not diminish the horror, corruption and terrible leadership decisions that bring about such bad times. It just means you can still turn to something higher, I will call it God for now, to bring you back to hope this New Year's Day.

Bernie Kalb had every reason to fly above the fray of inner doubts and the ambivalences of a human conscience. And for whatever convergence of reasons and rituals, he sat right there (on left side of the room) and the shofar woke him up and called him to the words he'd been reading for over 50 years from that old prayerbook. Bernie always had everything he needed inside him and around him but that day, in this place, with these rituals, and a connection God, changed his life.

You too are called to wake from your sleep. To come back to yourself. To hear and answer the call of those who love you and guide you back to your best. And to come back to the first source, the *ruach elohim* who hovered over the depths of the water before there was anything else. Your tradition teaches that you, on this day, have the power to move God to *rachamim*, compassion and love. You are called to know that there is something transcending this time and place.

Awake you sleepers from your sleep, arise you slumberers. The world is on fire and all the frustrating causes you see for it all can feel like a weight on you that is constricting the capacity of your soul. Under the deep and heavy covers of this time, your heart is still awake. The shofar's calling you and your soul is ready to answer.

L'shanah Tovah. May it be a good year for you, for your family and friends and for your return to way of the First Source.

Appendix: Source Sheet for Rabbi Jon Roos, Rosh Hashanah AM sermon

Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday AM Amidah

My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. May my soul be unresponsive to those who curse me; and let my soul be like dust to all. Open my heart to Your Torah and let my soul pursue Your commandments. And all who plan evil against me, quickly annul their counsel and frustrate their intention. Act for the sake of Your Name. Act for the sake of Your right hand. Act for the sake of Your holiness. Act for the sake of Your Torah. In order that Your loved ones be released, deliver [with] Your right hand and answer me. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable before You Adonoy, my Rock and my Redeemer.

סידור אשכנז, אלוהי נצור אלהי נצור לשוני
 מרע ושפתי מדבר מרמה. ולמקללי נפשי
 תדום ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה. פתח לבי
 בתורתך ובמצותיך תרדף נפשי. וכל
 החושבים עלי רעה מהרה הפך עצתם וקלקל
 מחשבתם: עשה למען שמך עשה למען
 ימינך עשה למען קדשך עשה למען
 תורתך. למען יחלצון ידידי הושיעה ימינך
 וענני: יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך
 יהוה צורי וגואלי:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 3:4

(4) Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying: "Wake up you sleepers from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ג'ד'
 (ד) אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה
 גזרת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עורו ישנים
 משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו
 במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בראקם. אלו
 השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל
 שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל, הביטו
 לנפשותיכם והיטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ועזבו כל
 אחד מקם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא
 טובה.

every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts.

Song of Songs 5:2

(2) I was asleep,
But my heart was awake.
The voice of my beloved knocks!
“Open to me, my sister, my
Friend, my faultless dove!
For my head is drenched with
dew,
My locks with the damp of
night.”

שיר השירים ה':ב'

(ב) אָנִי יָשְׁנָה וְלִבִּי עָרָר קוֹל אֲדוֹנָי דּוֹפֵק פֶּתַח־לִי אַחֲתִי רַעֲיָתִי
יוֹנְתִי תַמְתִּי שְׂרָאשִׁי נִמְלֵא־טֶל קְנֻצוֹתַי רְסִיסֵי לַיְלָה:

Numbers 23:21

(21) No harm is in sight for Jacob, no woe in view for Israel. Their God יהוה is with them, And the king's *t'ruah* is within them.

במדבר כ"ג:כ"א

(כא) לֹא־הֵבִיט אֵינֶן בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא־רָאָה
עִמָּל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיו עִמּוֹ
וּתְרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ:

Rashi on Numbers 23:21

BUT THE TRUAH OF A KING IS WITH THEM — תרועה BUT THE TRUAH OF A KING IS WITH THEM — *truah* is an expression for love and fellowship, as (II Samuel 15:37) “the *רעה* of David’ — the friend of David; (Judges 15:6) “And he gave her to his friend (מרעהו).” In this sense, too, does Onkelos translate it: and the Shechinah of their King is among them.

רש"י על במדבר כ"ג:כ"א

וּתְרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ. לְשׁוֹן חֲבֵה וְרַעוּת, כְּמוֹ (שְׂמוּאֵל ב ט"ו) "רַעַה דָּוִד" — אוֹהֵב דָּוִד, (שׁוֹפְטִים ט"ו) "וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְמַרְעָהּ", וְכֵן תַּרְגָּם אֲנֶקְלוֹס "וַיִּשְׁכֵּינַת מַלְכָּהּוֹן בִּיְהוֹנוֹן":

Vayikra Rabbah 29:3

ויקרא רבה כ"ט:ג'

(ג) רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בְּרַבִּי נַחֲמָן פֶּתַח (תהלים מז,
ו): עֵלָה אֱלֹהִים בְּתְרוּעָה ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר,

(3) Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Nahman began: “God ascends with a blast, the Lord with the sound of a shofar” (Psalms 47:6). When the Holy One blessed be God sits and ascends on the throne of justice, God ascends in justice. (i.e., God begins the proceedings with the divine attribute of justice). What is the source? “God [*Elohim*] ascends with a blast. (*Elohim is the name of God that represents the attribute of justice*).” When Israel take their shofars and sound them before the Holy Blessed One, God rises from the throne of justice and sits on the throne of mercy, as it is written: “The Lord (*The Tetragrammaton - YHVH, translated as Lord, is the name of God that represents the attribute of mercy.*) with the sound of a shofar.” When? In the seventh month (Tishrei).

בְּשִׁעָה שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹלָה עַל
 כֶּסֶף דִּין, בְּדִין הוּא עוֹלָה, מֵאֵי טַעַם, עָלָה
 אֱלֹהִים בְּתְרוּעָה, וּבְשִׁעָה שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל נוֹטְלִין אֶת
 שׁוֹפְרֵיהֶן וְתוֹקְעִין לִפְנֵי הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא,
 עוֹמֵד מִכֶּסֶף הַדִּין וְיוֹשֵׁב בְּכֶסֶף רַחֲמִים,
 דְּכָתִיב: ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר, וּמִתְמַלֵּא עֲלֵיהֶם
 רַחֲמִים וּמְרַחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם וְהוֹפֵךְ עֲלֵיהֶם מִדַּת
 הַדִּין לְרַחֲמִים, אֵימַתִּי בַחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי.