

Potentially the Best Year Ever

Rosh Hashana 2010

The Jewish Center

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There was a small child who lived in Moscow – a boy of 7 or 8 years old. As the story goes, he loved to play the piano and he particularly loved listening to classical music. For months, he had been begging his mother to take him to the symphony. And finally his mother agreed. The boy was just ecstatic.

They find their seats in the concert hall, the orchestra begins to play and the boy couldn't be happier.

During a short break between pieces, the boy's mother turns to the seat next to her and notices that her son is gone. She starts looking around frantically to see where he is. And then she notices that he's gone up to the stage and he's seated himself at the piano right next to the virtuoso. And the next thing she knows, the boy starts playing the piano: Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

She's mortified. She jumps out of her seat and is about to race up on the stage to bring him down; but before she can move, the virtuoso pianist starts to play the accompanying chords. And suddenly he's turned Twinkle Twinkle Little Star into Mozart's famous variations on the theme.

To the untrained ear, the notes of the shofar sound so simple and uncomplicated. But packed within each deceptively simple sound are generations upon generations of symbolism and meaning.

In fact, Rav Saadya Gaon writes that there are no fewer than ten reasons why we blow the shofar. And over the years we've surely heard dozens more:

- It's about teshuva;
- It's a call to arms;
- It's the sound of מתן תורה.

There are so many symbolisms – and each of them is meaningful. So this morning I pose to you this ambitious question: Is it possible, among all these meanings, to identify the underlying essence of the shofar? When we hear the sound of this special instrument, what are we supposed to be thinking? What are we supposed to be feeling?

There's an anomaly in the davening that provides us with a clue toward solving this mystery. There's a paragraph that we say right after we blow the shofar. We'll actually sing it together three times today. היום הרת עולם we'll say. Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of man's creation. But the question is: why is this relevant? We keep repeating this line each time we blow the shofar, but what has it got to do with anything? Start with the next line. היום יעמיד במשפט – today we're standing in judgment. That's a line I understand. But היום הרת עולם? Why?

Notice that we don't say היום נולד עולם or היום נברא עולם: we don't talk about the world being born or formed – but rather הרת עולם. הרה means to conceive or become pregnant. It has a totally different connotation.

In fact, there's a great debate in the gemara between R. Yehoshua and R. Elazar as to whether or not the world was created in Tishrei or in Nissan. Rabbeinu Tam writes אלו חייים דברי אלוקים חיים – they're both right! In fact the world was created in the physical sense in Nissan. It was in Tishrei, however, in which the world was conceived.

What we're celebrating today is not creation, but the potential for creation.

This I would argue is the common denominator that unites the disparate themes invoked by the shofar. In each instance, the shofar is blown to signal the potential and the potency of the moment. That's why היום הרת עולם is the perfect formula to accompany our תקיעות. Because that is in fact the theme of the day and the message of the shofar.

Fundamentally, there are three kinds of occasions on which the shofar is sounded and it's in these three areas that the shofar calls upon those who hear its sound to notice the potency of the moment.

- First, as the prophet Amos said: לא יחרדו עם – is it possible to blow the shofar and for the people not to tremble? It's an alarm that is meant to evoke an emotional response. That's why the sounds of the shofar itself mimic the sound of crying: the long sobs interspersed with broken whimpers or staccato weeping. It's about the capacity for human beings to be emotionally alive and to give voice to that emotional personality.
- Second, it's used as a religious implement. The קול שופר takes us back to Har Sinai when the Shofar accompanied revelation. It's our religious wake-up call. As the Rambam writes: עוררו עוררו משינתכם. Religiously, it asks to examine our relationship with Hashem and with His Torah. The whole notion of teshuvah is a call, not just to straighten what's crooked – but to set ourselves down the path of achieving that of which we're so capable.
- And finally, the shofar is a political instrument. We use it to coronate the king, to sound the alarm of war or to gather together those who are dispersed. The shofar reminds us that these moments call not only for action, but for a recognition that they are so pregnant with possibility. When the shofar sounds, it's because there's a real possibility – a real potentiality – for something big to happen.

So this morning I'd like to suggest that we heed the call and examine our own untapped potential in the realms of emotion, religion and politics.

Emotional Potential

One of the deepest lessons that I've learned in my young rabbinate is just how much people want someone to hold their hands. Sometimes the gestures are conscious;

sometimes they happen without our even knowing. But it's these gestures of emotional support that make all the difference.

It's been a difficult year for The Jewish Center. We lost too many of our cherished members, among them a matriarch and two patriarchs of the Center. Sometimes knowingly – sometimes just by their presence – they were the pillars that held us up and gave us support. If you were sitting in this room, they loved you just because they loved The Jewish Center. Their absence is palpable. Now the burden falls on our shoulders.

It's up to us to stand up and care. When you do that, you lift everyone up. On a human level, the shofar is imploring us to remember the reservoirs of emotional energy that we too infrequently harness.

Each of us has so much emotional capacity. How much of it is in active use? How much of it could we devote to reaching out and concerning ourselves with the welfare of the members of our community?

Though we probably don't give ourselves enough credit, each of us has a core of inner goodness: an untold capacity for empathy and sympathy. You say to yourself: I know she's sick, but I can't call or visit – we're not that close; I don't want to invade her privacy. And I really wouldn't know what to say.

Take a cue from the sounds of the shofar. You don't have to say anything. Just be present. Just open up your heart and the rest will flow from there.

Religious Potential

When it comes to our ability to uphold the Torah, our potential is equally unlimited.

Haim Sabato is a Rosh Yeshiva and well-known author in Israel. In his newest book, *From the Four Winds*, he tells the story of his personal relationship with a Hungarian man named Farkash – a kind and generous man who had survived the Holocaust and made his way to Palestine. On his deathbed many years after the war, Farkash entrusts his precious siddur to Sabato and instructs him to give the small volume to Farkash's son when the time is right.

"This siddur has been through a lot," he tells the author. "It is saturated with my tears which have mingled with the tears of my father on its pages. I cried in it day and night. In this siddur I poured out my soul, in the loneliness of the old man's bakery, and when my mother died. With this siddur I passed through the horrors of the Holocaust. Father passed through the First World War with this siddur – and look – I passed through another world war with it.

"This siddur was not taken by the Nazis װ". I always knew that my father's merit would ensure it remained in my hands. Many yeshiva students who found out I had a siddur in my possession came to me at every opportunity. An old rabbi from Debrecen used it to recite the prayers on Rosh Hashanah in a little alcove as I hid him from view, after he

begged me in tears to lend it to him for a few minutes, telling me it would revive his soul.”¹

Religiously, I’m not aware of an era in Jewish history where opportunities for Jewish development were more readily accessible than ours.

- On the website Hebrewbooks.org there are more than 43,000 classical Jewish texts available for free download.
- You could hold more Torah in the palm of your hand on the subway than was ever amassed in any beis medrash in Europe.
- Every day in Manhattan there are 150 Mincha minyanim.
- There are dozens upon dozens of Jewish organizations performing the most wonderful acts of chesed right here on the West Side every day.

When you hear the shofar – when you sing היום הרת עולם – just imagine your own personal capacity for Torah and mitzvos: Think of the davening, the learning and the chessed that’s so much within your reach. There are so many ways you could be filling your days with meaning. What’s stopping you?

Political Potential:

Finally, with the ground zero mosque controversy swirling and the anniversary of 9/11 upcoming, I don’t need to remind you that we’re living in an age that is not only fraught, but frightening, too. But what you may not have fully realized is the gravity of the issues that lay ahead – not in six or nine months from now – but in six or nine days from now:

- Peace talks brokered by the administration between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are set to resume for the first time in two years;
- The freeze on new construction in Yehuda and Shomron is about to end;
- The UN General Assembly is just ahead and is sure to feature the kind of Anti-Israel vitriol that has now become routine; and the U.N. Human Rights Council is expected to issue a follow-up to the now infamous Goldstone Report.
- Activists in Lebanon have said they’re trying to launch another flotilla to challenge the Gaza sea embargo in the coming weeks;
- The list goes on.

In 5771, you can’t be a bystander. There are so few of us – so few of us who care enough to really matter. The Jewish people – both here in America and in Israel – need every one of us right now.

It’s harder today to be politically active than it was a generation or two ago. I can’t just stand up here and tell you the date of the next rally for Soviet Jewry. The world has gotten much more entangled and much more complicated. The good news is that our community has strategically positioned itself such that it can affect change at the highest strata of the political world. But just because we have well-trained officers doesn’t mean we don’t need the support of every member of our community. We do. Each of you can find a role uniquely suited to your strengths.

¹ From the Four Winds pg. 139-140.

You don't have to be a star musician to make a contribution. If you're heart is in it, and you place yourself in the company of those with wisdom and experience, you can be a difference-maker, too.

This year flex your political muscle. Put politics on your map and on your calendar. Carve out time to be an activist. It will surely be time well-spent.

Concluding Thoughts

In truth, we remind ourselves twice every day of our mission and our ability to excel in each of these three arenas:

ואהבת את ה' אלוךך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך.

It's our duty to express our love for Hashem and His Torah:

- בכל לבבך – with all your heart – with your fullest emotional self.
- ובכל נפשך – with all your soul; as the gemara says הוא נוטל נפשך – a person even needs to be prepared to give up his life על קידוש ה' – which is to say, he needs to harness all of his religious capacity.
- ובכל מאודך – and with all of your resources; if we're not picking up a weapon to fight for our people and our land, we at least have to pick up the phone. It's on us to use every political means at our disposal to rally for the causes we hold so dear.

This Rosh Hashana we have a lot do daven for. But when the davening is over, we also have a lot to do.

Had the world been conceived, but not created, there would be nothing to celebrate. היום היום – Today we celebrate both our individual and collective capacity for greatness – but the real celebration will come only if we transform capacity into results.

In the end, the sounds of the shofar are anything but simple. They ask us to hold and think about a number of themes. But fundamentally, they ask us to realize our potential.

We conclude the שופרות section of our עמידה by saying,

ברוך אתה ה' שומע קול תרועת עמו ישראל ברחמים.

Blessed are You, Hashem, who hears the shofar-sound of his people Israel with mercy.

We affirm in no uncertain terms that Hashem hears the call of the shofar. The only question is: Do we?