

“Tekiah Gedolah: The Future Calls Us”

How fortunate for us that we can begin a New Year in September! Since last Rosh Hashanah, we had little time to enjoy our sweet New Year, before the novel coronavirus arrived in January. Within another month, the news was confirmed; COVID-19 entered our vocabulary and our world. By the end of March, we shut down businesses, schools, houses of worship, and personal routines. Now, we drive through for dinner, we tune-in for worship services, we Zoom for family gatherings, and our life-cycle events are private moments waiting to be re-scheduled in the future. We still say, “L’Shanah Tovah u’Metukah” May it be a Sweet New Year; but, will it be? It depends.

The answer begins with a parable. On Rosh Hashanah a story-teller called the Maggid of Dubno (17th century; cf. Mishnah Avot 2:13) used to tell about a villager who traveled to a large city where he stayed the night. In the middle of the night, he was awakened by the sound of drums beating. He asked about the disturbance and was told that the drums are a fire alarm. Once he understood, he went back to sleep. When he returned home to his village, he told others that in the big city, when a fire breaks out, they all beat drums and before too long the fire burns out. So, the villagers bought a supply of drums for everyone. Just as you imagined, a fire broke out and everyone beat their drums. And, while they waited for the fires to subside, a number of homes and other buildings burned to the ground. A wiser person in the village observed their idiotic behavior and rebuked them, “Do you think the fire can be put out by beating drums? The drums are an alarm to awaken you to take measures to put out the fire!” So, the story-teller urged his people not to beat their chests with “Al Cheit” and “I’m sorry,” but rather to be awakened to the deeds that must be done to extinguish the fires.

What’s burning around us? It’s a long list that includes pandemic, racism, anti-Semitism, and economic insecurity. Like the drums, the Shofar awakens us. But, it’s much more. It’s the age-old announcing tool that awakens, arouses, and urges us as Jews. When I heard the Shofar, today, it awakened me like nothing else could; and, it alerted me to listen for the sounds that followed. Each sound made me aware of my Jewish obligations. Did it awaken you, this morning? Did it alert you, today? On Rosh Hashanah, the mitzvah is to hear the Shofar, and be moved by its call. What did we really hear?

First, Tekiah! The shofar stirs us from our sleep. It awakens us to the power of this day. It assembles us as a people, and orients us to the work that lies ahead of us. It asks us if our labor is rewarding. Are we accomplishing the tasks that need to be done? Tekiah! Are we the persons we were meant to be? Can the Shofar awaken us to be more?

We listen again. Shevarim-Teruah! Three blasts and staccato notes command us. Once considered to be the central note of the day, Teruah roused the troops in ancient times to strike the tent pegs and prepare for battle. Teruah still warns us to be on-call and ready to address tragedy and brokenness. It doesn’t permit us to recoil in fear. Instead, Teruah draws us out to persist and to take action.

Even on our sacred days, we’re not permitted to sit idly by; we’re not allowed to rest on our proverbial laurels. Ironically, on the Sabbath, our day of rest, we find this prayer:

*“Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency;
 Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance,
 the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat,
 the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual, of humans.
 Shock us, Adonai...Wake us, O God, and shake us from the sweet and sad poignancies
 rendered by half-forgotten melodies and rubric prayers of yesteryears;
 Disturb us, O God...let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber;
 Let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.”*

Shock us, it says. Wake us, it urges. Disturb us, it repeats, and spur us to action. Even on the Sabbath, there are priorities that cannot wait. Tekiah wakes us out of our slumber and idleness. Shevarim-Teruah commands us to tend to the least of us, to restore justice, to bind up wounds, and to give hope. Where do we begin?

Our first responsibility is to ourselves and our families. In the face of rising anti-Semitism, we should be awakened to act decisively. Our generation can't be passive. Our generation must honor the memory of those who couldn't fight back. It's our generation's turn to use every means to combat anti-Semitism. But, squabbling between two Jews or two Jewish organizations about who's right and who's wrong, even in the fight against anti-Semitism, serves vain purposes. We've been taught that if a disagreement between us is for the sake of God and our highest ideals, then the matter has merit. There's nothing wrong with two opposing views if they sharpen our understanding and improve the outcome.

Our enemy is still every anti-Semite, until their hearts are turned or they lay down their arms and their hatred. Our weapons, however, have changed. Whether or not we can march in the streets, it doesn't change the difference we can still make from home during a pandemic. On the Internet, by email and phones, we can secure the future of our families and communities. Many of us join meetings and organizations that meet on Zoom, to do the work that defeating anti-Semitism requires. Interfaith relationships make a difference. I'm grateful for interfaith relationships we enjoy with Christians, Muslims, Jains, and Hindus, to name only a few faith traditions. Their friendships and support build communities of respect; but, we cannot rely on others to do what we must do for ourselves, first. No one will love the Jewish people more than us.

Our responsibility goes beyond ourselves. We have to champion the values we cherish. To “love our neighbor,” to “welcome the stranger,” and to “make peace where there's strife,” are examples of Jewish values we have to model through action where we can.

Last May, I was invited to attend the funeral of George Floyd. I accepted the invitation in order to express my sympathy for the pain and trauma of Mr. Floyd's family, and the obvious pain that roiled our city and nation. I was moved by the power of that moment. It called for empathy and hope. Whether or not Mr. Floyd was a model citizen wasn't the point. The focus of the cameras on the knee that was on Mr. Floyd's neck was the point. The measure of who we are as Jews, depends largely on how we respond, and how we treat the most vulnerable among us. It's true at home where we rear our children; it's true in our city where our civic duty lies outside the gates of our neighborhoods; and, it's true in our nation where we can be, at best, a model for other nations.

That's when the Shofar should echo in our ears: Shevarim-Teruah! Get up, it urges us, to address the world that suffers under the scourge of racism and anti-Semitism. Shevarim-Teruah is an alarm to rouse the troops, to assemble for orders, and to accomplish the commands. A people assembled on Rosh Hashanah, comes to hear and to be oriented to its sacred tasks.

One more challenge awaits us. It might be the most important we need to overcome. The pandemic has magnified overwhelming feelings of personal helplessness. I know it's true, because I have sometimes felt overwhelmed, too. That's why, during a peak in the pandemic last April, I was moved to write to you in my weekly blog about a special moment. It was a cool spring day. I was working from home. I took advantage of the weather and took my lunch outside to eat it on the grass. Sitting on a blanket, alone, I notice how quiet the neighborhood was. When I looked into the sky, there was a Blue Jay perched up high on a telephone line. It sat there for a long time with a twig in its beak. I thought it would fly off to finish its nest building, but it didn't. I remember I thought to myself; there's so much to do and you're sitting for so long on the telephone line.

Then I felt oddly embarrassed. I began to learn something about myself as I continued to stare at the bird. The quiet of the day, without back-to-back meetings and urgent matters, enabled me to perch outside for an extended time, too. I truly wanted the bird to fly away so I could get back to thoughts about my work, but it didn't leave. The longer it stayed, the longer I had to think about eating more slowly than before, soaking up more sun than I would have, and digesting more than my lunch, but also some new expectations.

I thought to myself: we're all creatures in nature, but surely there's a difference. What is it? We learn from Rabbi Akiva (Mishnah Pirkei Avot 3:14) who used to teach, "Beloved of God is humanity for we were created in the image of God; but greater still was the love, in that it was made known to us that we were created in the image of God, (as it is said, *For in the image of God made He man*) (Genesis 9:6)." The difference is our awareness of our Creator, and, in that awareness, our discovery of indisputable love. Rabbi Samuel Karff z"l, taught about this verse, "It is one thing to be loved; it is another thing to know that you are loved."

Eventually, the bird on the telephone line flew off, presumably, to build its nest. I picked up my plates and finished my day with deeper appreciation of my Creator's love, and increasing awareness of all that I can still do and be.

Shortly thereafter, a member of the congregation called me. He often calls to tell me something clever. Though he was distracted by other matters and couldn't remember his clever story, he didn't hesitate to tell me what was uppermost on his mind. David, he said, since last February, when the pandemic, the economy, and the nation's troubles have surrounded me, I've begun to focus on what really matters. It woke me up. It stirred my senses. He concluded that family, love and friendship mean more to him than anything he could build or accumulate.

These moments of clarity are important. All the more reason that the Shofar is an important announcing tool. It's critical that in the order of the shofar blasts we hear Tekiah, again and again. It's to awaken the last of us who sit idly by; it's to enlist the last of us who take too long to be stirred. And, then, Shevarim-Teruah! We hear the blast that makes no mistake that it is you and I who are summoned. It's we who stand before God to be commanded and to respond. No one should take our place if we're able and ready.

And, then, Tekiah Gedolah! It's the big blast that endures as long as we have breath; or as long as David Scott has breath. The honor is his to demonstrate what our collective breath can do when we exhale with a force to reshape the world's brokenness. We greet the last note with awe and amazement. We're all exhilarated. The world needs us to come together; to give truth, justice, and faith a chance to temper our fears, and unite us as a people.

Now, we respond. We begin from the same starting place from which our parents and grandparents began, and our ancestors before them. The Hebrew prophet Amos (3:6) asked the Israelites, "When the Shofar is sounded, do the people not tremble?" There is no more profound sound for the Jew, than the sound of the Shofar. The Hebrew prophet, Ezekiel (33:4-5) urged us, "Whoever hears the Shofar and doesn't heed its warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head; whereas, had he heeded the warning, he would have saved his soul."

In his memoir, Rabbi Karff, of blessed memory, ended his book with these words, "For persons of religious faith, our ultimate source of meaning is that we live in the presence of our Creator, who has made known to us the way we should live..." (For This You Were Created, p. 396).

My friends, the way we should live has been made clear to us. The Shofar, which faded from our hearing since last year, was made vibrant and clear to us again, today. Let it make us tremble before the possibilities that await us in the New Year. Let us, who live in a time of disruption and angst, be comforted in knowing that the Shofar's calls echoes in our ears, again; it has awakened our souls; and, it has aroused our instincts. It urges us to address the world for the sake of our shared desires: a good year, a sweet year, a year of prosperity and peace. For the sake of every generation that has heard the Shofar calls on Rosh Hashanah, we must not fail to hear its resounding echos. The Psalmist wrote (188:5-7, 29), "In distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and brought me relief. The Lord is on my side, I have no fear; what can mere mortals do to me? Praise the Lord for God is good, God's steadfast love is eternal."

L'Shanah Tovah. May it be a good and sweet New Year. Amen.