

ROSH HASHANAH DAY SERMON, 2015, 5775

THE CRY OF THE SHOFAR: A CALL FOR LOVE OF ISRAEL

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Last week, I e-mailed the following question to the congregation: “What does the cry of the shofar mean to you?”

I received so many thoughtful responses I thought I would share a few of them with you today:

- The cry is a primordial call for self-examination.
- The sound of the shofar evokes the feeling of a desperate cry of the earth asking: "When will peace and harmony replace a world of acrimony?"
- The sound of the Shofar congers up a primitive, pre-historic feeling, like a link from the beginning of time that connects me, almost personally, to that ancient time.
- Hearing the shofar never fails to send a chill down my spine. It makes me think of my father, and my grandparents, and all the generations that went before them hearing the same thing. It makes me feel connected to them, their lives, their thoughts, and where I come from in a very real way.
- To me, and many other Beth Am people, the shofar will always recall Marshall Glickman and that incredibly last note that seemed to go on forever. It was a call, a reminder and a pledge that it was possible to hold onto our faith, to put that extra something into what we believed in.
- And from our Baal Tikiah himself, Steven Glickman: When thinking about the cry (or as I have always consider it, the blast) of the shofar, the most important point is to remember that the commandment is to hear shofar not to blow shofar. The way I explain the experience of blowing shofar is as follows: As I stand in front of the congregation I always look forward to the moment when a 1000 eyeballs shift from the end of the shofar, where the sound is coming from to my face which I imagine is turning a lovely hue of pink, red, and purple and then shift again to their watches as they time the tkiah gedolah.

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- My personal favorite though was from Vicky Rubin, who texted me a video of her dog Addy barking to the exact pitch of a shofar blast.

Amazingly, we do not know what the shofar blast originally meant or even how it sounded. Tikiah, Shevarim, Teruah, are just educated guesses by the rabbis. We vary the call the hoping that by doing so, over and over again, we will achieve the same cry our ancestors used thousands of years ago. But, the shofar blasts are more than just a series of random sounds. They are a sermon without words, beckoning the New Year.

Like many of you, the shofar also conjures up memories for me - going to services with my father on Rosh Hashanah, watching my own kids trying to make sound from a difficult instrument – but it also serves as a hopeful cry for peace and wholeness, of a world where everyone, everywhere is accepted and loved.

Several Hebrew words come to mind –

Shema, “listen” -Like an ancient bat signal or Morris Code, we are reminded to put away our petty differences and stand, at least today, as one community, *Klal Yisrael*.

Bamidbar – wilderness. It is a reminder of the ancient wilderness where our people was formed. The smell, the touch, the look of the shofar is something unlike anything else in the modern world.

Lastly, Yisrael - Israel. The cry of our sacred homeland, the only place in the world where Jews are truly safe, loved and protected.

As we read in the psalms – “If I forget the O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate.” For, two thousand years we were like a people with a phantom limb. Israel is more than a country for us, it is our very heartbeat, the landscape of our skin.

Israel is the place Abraham and Sarah were drawn to, Moses and Miriam gave their lives to try to enter, and Deborah and David fought to conquer: Canaan, Israel, Palestine, the highway between Mesopotamia and Egypt, Asia and Africa,

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East and West. The place where shofar blasts resounded from every hill, “lifting our eyes to the mountains” reminding us from where we have come.

For fourteen years, I avoided the cry. It was too expensive, I was too busy, it was too hard. But, improbably, this summer, I was finally able to go. As many of you know, it almost did not happen. Our synagogue trip, of brave travelers, waited to the last minute, but in the end, had to postpone. In the middle of the Gaza war, the danger was just too great.

Little did I know that two weeks later I would receive a call from our Jewish Federation director, Michael Wise, inviting me and other area rabbis on a solidarity mission. And, still I wavered, deciding only a few days before. A cease fire had been established; my family and I felt it was safe enough to go.

Today, I want to share with you some of the sounds from that trip. Not about the specifics of this current conflict, but, the modern day equivalent of the shofar blasts, as the Hatikvah states “the song buried within my heart where the Jewish soul sings.”

HEVEINU SHALOM ALEICHEM

There is no sound more beautiful in the Jewish world. Not the shofar, the grogger, or even the breaking of the glass at a wedding. It is the sound of pure and utter joy, not rehearsed or expected, there is no synagogue to host it, or rabbi to bless it, it simply occurs, like a firework, without pomp or circumstance, just the sound of wheels hitting pavement after a long flight – and there it is.

In all the details of getting ready for the trip itself, I had forgotten about how different a trip to Israel was from a trip to any other destination in the world. I took US Airways (or now American) through Philadelphia, and before boarding the flight we were cordoned off in a different room. There in a small alcove with no bathrooms and dingy metal seats, a celebration was occurring – Orthodox Jews instructing their children, Birthright students meeting with their advisors, a troop of Israeli teens returning from American summer camp, and just regular Israelis and Americans preparing for the flight.

And, then, after eleven hours in the air with this new community, it happened; first the Israeli teens, then the birthrighters, and then seemingly the whole plane, singing with joy.

As our mission leader pointed out later that first night, Israel is the only airport in the world that has a sign “WELCOME HOME.” While sixty-six years have passed since its founding, the celebration of being “a free people, in our land,” never loses its potency.

And, for me, it was amazing to see the incredible growth of the country – a brand new airport, decorated with Jerusalem stone, competitive with any airport in the entire world. In a country of just a shade under 8 million citizens, there are on average three million visitors each year, bringing in eleven billion dollars a year. Amazingly, Jews account for less than half of Israel’s tourist market.

The Israeli economy is humming – with industries such as the High Tech, pharmaceuticals, and, even, now, a gas field off of Ashkelon. What a difference a decade makes. When I last visited Israel, its economy was in a downward spiral, now it is one of the leading economies in the world.

I could see it everywhere from the brand new high speed trains from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the crowded beaches in Tel Aviv, and the construction vehicles everywhere you looked. As the joke goes: “What is Israel’s national bird? – the answer: the crane.

A Siren

The primary use of the shofar was to sound the alarm. How ironic that is the only Biblical instrument still in use today.

Sirens have been part of the Israeli security infrastructure since before 1948. A people accustomed to unannounced pogroms, knew that there was nothing more vital to its survival than a system of alerts that could let its people know when danger was near. While television and radio alerts are barely noticeable in the US, the Israeli alarm system is built into the fabric of Israeli society.

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Every “Yom Hazikaron,” Israeli Memorial Day, there is even a fire drill unparalleled in any country in the world. On that day, a siren is sounded at exactly eleven a.m. For two minutes everything in Israel stops: the cars park in the streets, everyone stands in their place, the entire country comes to a halt. And, for two minutes there is just silence, until a second siren is heard and life resumes as normal.

These past fourteen years, sirens have been going off in Israel on a regular basis, for most of that time just in southern Israel, but the past few months, as far north as Haifa and Jerusalem. If you happen to live in the south, you have to fifteen seconds to find safety. Inside, this means finding an area away from external windows to wait. But, if you are outside or in a car, it means lying on the ground, with your hands protecting your head for several minutes.

I know very well how onerous this is, because I experienced it myself during my time in Israel. The trip organizers told us to make sure to wear pants, so as not to scrape our knees on the way down. Before boarding a van to head down to Sderot to meet with residents in Southern Israel, we were instructed to carefully exit the bus and find a place to lie down. Many of the sixty-five members of our group were elderly, and still they had to take part in the drill. With my face planted on the hard concrete, I could not imagine going through this drill for real.

Luckily, while we experienced the rockets and the iron dome, we were always inside when the explosions occurred. One of those occasions was at an absorption center, where nine and ten year old Ethiopians were participating in a class. There we witnessed their anxious behavior whenever a rocket whistled by outside. It is, after all, the youth, the infirmed, and the aged, who have been hardest hit in this latest round of violence.

Normal Life

Busy thoroughfares, crowded beaches, honking cars, and excited teenagers - the Israel that I saw was unified and resilient. We met with soldiers injured in Gaza who hoped to return to duty, grieving family members who welcomed us into their homes less than a month after their 18-year old son was killed in Gaza , and new olim, immigrants, from the United States, who had just arrived despite the

situation. All of them eager to talk, share their stories, proud of their country and their faith.

Even in the midst of such calamity life went on, almost as a statement: Hamas has not, will not, and will never win.

Lastly, is the one sound I did not hear, the Tikiah Gedolah we have always been waiting for – the sound of peace.

Israel is a normal country, living under extraordinary circumstances. Since 1948, there have been wars on average twice a decade. It is easy, to get immersed in the politics, which side is right, which side is wrong. Ultimately, everyone suffers.

I felt the absence of peace most profoundly in a conversation our group had with an 11th grader from Sderot. We met in her high school, where every classroom served as a bomb shelter. There, she described a recent meeting she had with the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, or Bibi, as she called him. The meeting was about her participation in scouts, one of her few highlights of this past summer, a summer she lived mostly confined to her house. As Netanyahu fielded questions about the scouts, her burning desire was to ask him something different. What she really wanted to ask him, the only thing she cared about, but could not get the words out of her mouth, was, “when will we have peace with our neighbors?”

In the words of Yehudah Amichai, Israel’s most famous poet: “A peace without the big noise of beating swords into plowshares, without words, without the heavy thud of the rubber stamp; I want it gentle over us, like lazy white foam... I want it come like wildflowers, suddenly because the field needs it: wild peace.”

As you hear the shofar this morning, I can’t tell you what you will hear. I only ask you to remember Israel. Pray for her, as Jews have been doing for thousands of years. And, if you have a chance, go and visit. Forget about the stories on the news and simply go. I promise you will not be disappointed.

This coming June 28th, the Buffalo Jewish community is planning the biggest trip to Israel in our history. Temple Beth Zion and Temple Beth Tzedek, with the

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support of Federation, are joining with our group to go together. How amazing 60-70 and maybe even 100 Buffalonians making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land!!!

NBC reporter Martin Fletcher, wrote the following about Israelis in his wonderful book "Walking Israel": "They're a noisy bunch, gregarious and excitable, spontaneous and combustible, a vivid mix of the orient and the occident – hummus meets Kartoffelsalat. They're also a bundle of contradictions: selfish and generous, bigoted and tolerant, arrogant and – well – maybe not so humble. Their national character is that there is no national character. They are too varied. The only accurate generalization is that they are, in my opinion, the worst drivers in the world."

And, most importantly, they are us.

NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM

HEIVEINU SHALOM ALEICHEM