

Responding to the Shofar of Sinai

[Blow shofar.]

Through the ages, the shofar has been sounded to inaugurate kings and mourn the dead, to conduct wars and to celebrate peace. But before King David entered Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam. 6:15), before the walls of Jericho came tumbling down (cf. Joshua 6), before even the writing of the laws of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (cf. Lev. 25:9), one single shofar blast started it all. The very first time the sound of a shofar reaches human ears is at Mount Sinai during the declaration of the Ten Commandments. We read from the Torah:

¹⁶On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, **and a very loud blast of the shofar**; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for Adonai had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ¹⁹**The blare of the shofar grew louder and louder.** As Moses spoke, God answered him with a voice.

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God's revelation to the People of Israel at Mount Sinai is the most dramatic moment of our mythic history. Thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, dense cloud and shaking earth. And amidst it all, a sound that had never before been heard, a sound that had appeared neither in the Garden of Eden, nor on the deck of Noah's ark, that had not been heard by Abraham and Sarah nor their children after them. A sound that grew louder and louder the more God spoke until, breaking the barriers of time and space, it reaches the ears of all Jews in all lands and all ages.

This shofar blast, our sages teach us, was the greatest miracle of Mount Sinai.¹ Our ancestors had in their lives seen fire, smelled smoke, heard thunder, and felt

¹ See **Ibn Ezra** on Ex. 19:13 and 19:16:

earthquakes. But this shofar blast – emitted not from a physical ram’s horn but from the divine essence itself – was profoundly new. Unlike any other sound before or since, it utterly defied the senses.

וְכָל-הָעָם רָאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֶת-וּל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָר עָשָׂן.
And the entire people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar and the mountain of smoke (Ex. 20:14).

The people saw fire and smoke – and they also saw the sound of the shofar. Rashi explains that this would have been impossible in any other place. But when God addresses you, the impossible becomes real.

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The shofar returns us to Mount Sinai, where Israel first met God. It offers us a glimpse of Judaism’s cosmic scale. It joins us together in a holy bond, transforming us from individual persons into a unified people.

In short, the shofar reminds us that each of us is part of something much bigger than ourselves.

This is a truth we see refracted through so many facets of our lives. We see it in our relationships with our family. Like it or not, we are shaped and formed by our family; what they do matters to us, and what we do matters to them.

The bold claim of Judaism is that we share this kind of bond not only with our immediate relatives but also with all members of the Jewish community. Jews and non-Jews alike who are part of this extended family are, in the words of the Talmud, עַרְבִים

והתימה על האומרים, כי על־ול השופר הולך וחז מאד, משה ידבר במשוך היובל, כי־ול השופר הוא פלא גדול, אין במעמד הר סיני גדול ממנו, כי־ולות ובת־ים וענן כבד גם הם נראים בעולם, וול שופר לא נשמע עד יום עשרת הדברים. והנה לא היה מ־רן כבש.
It is surprising that some think this refers to “the blare of the horn” in v. 19. That “blare of the horn” is the greatest of all the miracles at Sinai. Thunder and lightning, clouds and hail had all appeared in the world before, but not this “blare”—which was *not* produced from a ram’s horn.

אבן עזרא הפירוש הקצר שמות פרק יט פסוק טז
וול השופר הוא הפלא שאיננו בדבר התולדות:

“The sound of the shofar” was a miracle unlike any occurrence throughout the generations.

See also **Abarbanel** on Ex. 19:15 (in *The Commentator’s Bible*):

“All the people who were in the camp trembled.” Not at the thunder and lightning, which they had seen before, but at the sound of a horn when there was no horn to make the sound.

See also **Gersonides** on Ex. 19:16 (in *The Commentator’s Bible*):

“A very loud blast of the horn.” God created this sound miraculously, just as He had created the thunder, the lightning, and the cloud. What I meant to say is that God created the blast of a horn without there being any horn.

יָהּ בְּיָהּ, “tied up with one another” (BT Shavuot 39a)² – what one of us does impacts all the rest.

And these connections go on and on – we’re part of a nation, a species, a world. Our world is part of the universe, and the universe, as best we can guess, is part of an infinitude far beyond our comprehension.

“No man is an island,” wrote the poet John Donne. “Every man is a piece of the continent, / A part of the main.” Our choices do not spring fully formed from our own individual minds. Rather, we are influenced always by the people and traditions that surround us. We adopt as our own the moral principles and ethical frameworks whose origins we often don’t know and usually can’t understand. We embrace the basic framework of right and wrong handed down to us by our ancestors.

It is because each of us is part of something greater than ourselves that we can continue to exist as a society, as a people, and as individuals who treasure our relationships.

And the shofar returns us to the source. Its sound reminds us that we are inheritors of and connected to something greater, and that something – be it Torah, God, peoplehood, or tradition – calls us to respond by living lives accountable to more than our own selves.

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The Zohar, the primary text of Kabbalah, teaches, “when the Torah was given to Israel in Ten Words, each Word became a voice, and every voice was divided into seventy voices, all of which shone and sparkled before the eyes of all Israel, so that [each of them] saw eye to eye the splendor of God’s Glory” (Zohar II 146a). We, too, are addressed personally by forces much greater than ourselves. Like our ancestors before us, we each will have our own unique way of hearing, of understanding, and of responding to those voices. As the new year begins, we seek to open ourselves to guidance by those voices, which may lead us to profound and lasting change in our lives.

Perhaps one voice speaks to us of *tzedek*, of justice. Maimonides, one of our greatest sages, taught in the 12th century that there are eight levels of *tzedakah*, charity. At the bottom of the ladder are those who give out of obligation but who do so begrudgingly; at the top are those who put themselves on the line through generous

² Rashi’s quote of this phrase in his comment to Deut. 29:28 is עֲרַבִּים זֶה לָזֶה and his comment to Lev. 26:37 uses עֲרַבִּין זֶה לָזֶה. Rambam uses the phrase עֲרַבִּין זֶה בְּזֶה in MT Hilchot Shevu’ot 11:16. All four variations are used in rabbinic sources with עֲרַבִּין זֶה בְּזֶה the rarest and עֲרַבִּים זֶה לָזֶה the most common.

gifts, interest-free loans, and opportunities of employment. Below the bottom rung are those who give nothing at all. And above the top rung, we may imagine, are those who seek to alleviate the effects of injustice throughout society. The voice of *tzedek* urges us wherever we stand now to take a step higher on the ladder of justice, to work yet harder to make the world a better place.

Perhaps another voice speaks to us of *limmud*, of learning. Jews have been called, first by others and then by ourselves, the People of the Book, and it is a reputation well-earned. In the annals of our tradition lie insights to poetry and health, to spirituality and mathematics, to psychology and drama. Achieved through mystical encounters and scientific inquiries alike, clarified and reformed throughout the centuries, Jewish wisdom bears endless potential to ennoble our minds and bring meaning to our lives. The voice of *limmud* urges us to increase our commitment to learning, to walk through the doors of the treasure house of Jewish wisdom and marvel at what we find.

Or perhaps a voice speaks to us of *kedushah*, of holiness. There are in our world endless varieties of spiritual practices, and we might be surprised at the spiritual diversity found within our very own Judaism. But were one single expression of holiness to eclipse all others in the Jewish tradition, it would be remembering Shabbat. One day a week, we are taught, we can be satisfied with the world as it is. We can separate from the demands and expectations of our work and make time to refresh and renew ourselves and our families. The voice of *kedushah* urges us to enter into the palace of Shabbat, to create in our lives more room for holiness.

Tzedek, limmud, kedushah—justice, learning, and holiness. These are but three of many voices calling out to us from our tradition. Each of them embodies whole worlds of *mitzvah*, of sacred obligation, and any of them could inspire us to action in the year ahead.

How do they call to you? Martin Buber, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, taught that we “must ask of each [*mitzvah*], and ask again and again: Has that been said to me, rightly to me?”³ There’s no predetermined answer about whether or how it’s right for any of us to deepen our commitments to Jewish expressions of justice, learning, ritual practices, or any number of other sacred obligations. But as John Donne reminds us, “[We] are *involved* in [hu]mankind,” and in order to be involved, we need to hear the voices of our tradition, of our people, and of our God, and to act on what we hear, committing ourselves to higher purpose.

³ Martin Buber’s letter to Franz Rosenzweig on July 5, 1924 (in *The Letters of Martin Buber*). Fuller quote:

“I may not just accept the ‘statues and judgments’ [Lev. 18:26] but must ask of each one, and ask again and again: Has that been said to me, rightly to me? So that at one time I can count myself as part of *Israel*, which is being addressed, and at another time, at many other times, not. And if there is anything in my own life I am able to call a *mitzvah* with an undivided heart, it is just this: that I act and do not act as I do.”

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Maimonides taught that when the shofar calls to us, it is as if the shofar were saying:

עורו ישנים משנתכם
ונרדמים תִּיצוּ מתרדמתכם.
וּחפְּשׂוּ בְּמעֵשֵׁיכֶם, וְחִזְרוּ בְּתשובָה,
וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵכֶם. ...
הִבִּיטוּ לְנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְהִטִּיבוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם...

Arise, you sleepers, from your sleep,
Slumberers, awoken from your slumber.
Examine your deeds, return in repentance,
And remember the One who created you. ...
Look to your souls, and make well your paths.⁴

The shofar speaks to each of us:

Zichru borachem, it says, “remember the One who created you.” Find your place in the midst of something greater than yourself, a power that transforms a series of incidents and occasions into a life story that bears meaning and purpose.

Habitu l'nafshoteichem, “look to your souls.” Open yourself to that higher power, allowing the possibility of new choices based less on science than on faith.

V'heitivu darcheichem, “make well your paths.” Then see where they lead.

Perhaps you may find yourself at Sinai.

[Blow shofar]

⁴ Rambam's Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4. Full text below:

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ג הלכה ד
אע"פ שתִּיעַת שׁוֹפָר בְּראשׁ הַשָּׁנָה גִּזְרַת הַכְּתוּב רַמַּז יֵשׁ בּוֹ כְּלוֹמַר עוֹרוּ יֹשְׁנִים מִשְׁנַתְכֶם וְנִרְדַּמִּים הִקִּיצוּ מִתְרַדְמַתְכֶם וְחִפְּשׂוּ בְּמעֵשֵׁיכֶם וְחִזְרוּ בְּתשובָה וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵכֶם, אֱלוֹ הַשּׁוֹכְחִים אֶת הָאֵמֶת בַּהֲבִלֵי הַזְּמַן וְשׁוֹגִים כָּל שְׁנָתָם בַּהֲבֵל וְרַיָּא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יוֹעִיל וְלֹא יִצִּיל הַבִּיטוֹ לְנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם וְהִטִּיבוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם וּמַעֲלֵלֵיכֶם וְיַעֲזוּב כָּל אֶחָד מִכֶּם דְּרַכּוּ הַרְעָה וּמַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא טוֹבָה, לְפִיכֶךָ צְרִיךְ כָּל אָדָם שִׁירָאָה עֲצֻמוֹ כָּל הַשָּׁנָה כּוֹלָה כְּאִילוֹ חֲצִיו זְכָאֵי וְחֲצִיו חַיִּיב, וְכֵן כָּל הָעוֹלָם חֲצִיו זְכָאֵי וְחֲצִיו חַיִּיב, חֲטָא חֲטָא אֶחָד הָרִי הַכְּרִיעַ אֶת עֲצֻמוֹ וְאֵת כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלוֹ לְכַף חוֹבָה וְגֵרָם לוֹ הַשְׁחַתָּה, עָשָׂה מִצְוָה אֶחָת הָרִי הַכְּרִיעַ אֶת עֲצֻמוֹ וְאֵת כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלוֹ לְכַף זְכוּת וְגֵרָם לוֹ וְלֵהֶם תְּשׁוּעָה וְהִצִּילָה שְׁנֵאֵמַר וְצַדִּיק יִסּוּד עוֹלָם זֶה שְׁצַדִּיק הַכְּרִיעַ אֶת כָּל הָעוֹלָם לְזְכוּת וְהִצִּילוֹ, וּמִפְּנֵי עֲנִין זֶה נִהְגוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַרְבוֹת בְּצַדִּיק וּבְמעֵשֵׁים טוֹבִים וְלַעֲסוֹק בְּמִצְוֹת מְרַאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים יֵתֵר מִכָּל הַשָּׁנָה, וְנִהְגוּ כּוֹלָם לְעוֹם בְּלִילָה בְּעֶשְׂרֵה יָמִים אֱלוֹ וְלֵהֲתַפְלֵל בְּבֵתֵי כְּנַסְיוֹת בְּדַבְרֵי תַחֲנוּנִים וּבְכִיבוּשִׁין עַד שִׁאוּר הַיּוֹם.