

Be The Shofar- The Call to Action
Rosh HaShana 5778
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What a year it's been! I was beginning to think that we had entered some sort of twilight zone where the Cleveland Indians would never lose, the Browns never win, the sun darkened by day, Nazis march on our streets, hurricanes flood our streets and earthquakes would rattle our lives. The Talmud simply advises us that today on Rosh HaShanah- "The year ends along with its curses." Can it be that simple to start over? Can we file away a year that had its share of loss and pain? The rabbis then add that a year of poverty ends with riches, perhaps that's why we merited the Tribe's record streak.

This was the year of the solar eclipse, the first time in over a century directly over America, we could view a brief moment in the path of totality. Armed with solar filters and eclipse glasses, we joined together as one from coast to coast for those two and a half minutes- marveling at the view of the darkened sky in the middle of the day- an incredible natural phenomenon.

Here in Cleveland, out of the path of totality- the skies only slightly dimmed as the sun was nearly fully covered by the moon- almost 80 percent- but it was still bright and warm here. For those of us wearing the filtered lenses or using our cereal box pinhole projectors, we were keenly aware of the eclipse, watching as the moon slowly began to cover much of the sun, we kept looking up

taking in the spectacle. We were spectators to a great show from G-d and nature.

As Jews, we are taught to not look at the sun but rather to focus on the moon. Our Jewish lives and rhythms follow the phases of the moon as it waxes and wanes. The Talmud describes how moon watching was the national pastime. Before calendars and iPhones, months and years were not set on fixed days. All of Israel would look up in the sky to see when the new moon would appear. As soon as they saw a new moon, they raced to Jerusalem. The Great Court would hold legal proceedings validating the moon watchers. And when two matching reports were made and their testimony was accepted, the new month or new year was declared for all of Israel. The rabbis could have professionalized the role naming official moon observers but they wisely declared that everyone should keep their sights aimed high- that we should be star gazers.

The famous rabbinic teaching of Rabbi Ben Zoma asks, “Eizehu Chacham? Who is a wise person, HaLomed Mikol Adam (Pirkei Avot 4:1)- He answers, One who learns from all people.” Here, wisdom is a shared enterprise- as the Talmud is traditionally studied in pairs “b’chevruta.” The rabbis remind us that often teachers learn from their students more than they can teach. The Maggid of Mezrich says we can even learn from an infant, they always smile and when they want something, they cry, reminding us that on Rosh Hashana, our true requests in prayers should be accompanied by tears.

Later, the rabbis present a second answer to the question- Eizehu Chacham, Who is a wise person? Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi answers, “HaRoeh et HaNolad (Tamid 32a), The one who sees the birth.” We are not all planning to be Obstetricians or midwives, rather the Maharsha suggests that a wise person understands the purpose for which he or she is born- identifies their mission in life. This phrase is also translated more loosely as, “Who is a wise person? One who can foresee the future.” If we have a clear understanding of the past, we can better predict the future. On this Rosh HaShana, when we think back on all the “births” that occurred for us this year- new plans, friendships, all of our discussions, actions and mistakes, we truly know how to make this next year so much better, that is what we call teshuvah.

In Hebrew, a new moon is called Nolad- a birth- though not scientifically correct, the rabbis envisioned with each month a new moon was “born.” We believe that with each new month and all the more so, today on Rosh Hashana- the new year- there is hope, new possibilities exist, as the moon grows larger and brighter over the first half of the month, so we can grow as well- if we work at it- but first , like the new moon- we need to clean our slate and start anew through teshuvah- repentance and repair, learning from our mistakes and holding steady with our good convictions. So the rabbis ask- Eizehu Chacham? Who is a wise person? A person that lifts her head, raises his vision and watches the sky for the birth of a new moon, is a star gazer filled with hope for a better tomorrow.

Are we as Jews only supposed to gather knowledge, observe and watch the moon, look inside and perfect ourselves? Judaism is not

lived purely in our head but also in our heart and our hands. Being a Jew isn't just about watching what is done to us or for us as spectators at a Tribe game.

The mitzvot and all our traditions, rituals, teachings and values are meant to inspire us to action just like Lawn Chair Larry.

One day, Larry Walters decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. So he went down to the store and bought forty-five used weather balloons filling each with helium. That afternoon, he strapped himself into a lawn chair tied with the balloons. He took along a drink, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he needed to land.

Walters, who assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, was caught off guard when the chair soared more than 15,000 feet into the sky -- smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern of LAX- Los Angeles International Airport. Too frightened to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for more than two hours until he started to descend.

Soon after, he was safely grounded, cited by the police and surrounded by reporters, who asked him three questions:

"Were you scared?" "Yes."

"Would you do it again?" "No."

"Why did you do it?" Larry said, "Because you can't just sit there."

Now, don't get me wrong. In no way should anyone put themselves or others in danger like Lawn chair Larry, but I share this story because on Rosh Hashana- when we prepare to begin the new year- the Shofar calls to each of us saying- it's time to lift yourself up and make change-- "because you can't just sit there!"

Today, we hear the call of the Shofar inspiring us to action to repair our lives and world. Reminding us that we can't just sit and observe quietly the events in our lives, our community and our world but must rise up like Lawn Chair Larry. The long tekiah calls us to attention and reminds us that we are united in purpose to improve our world. The broken three blast of the shevarim are the call to our yearning heart seeking to reach out to others and finally the Teruah alarm shakes us out of our indifference to lead us to action. In the words of Rabbi Daniel Allen, we shouldn't just hear the shofar- we should be the shofar, we should be sounding the calls that our people need to hear and standing up for what is right.

The same week as our country marveled at the total darkness of the solar eclipse, our country was darkened in Charlottesville, Virginia- when the Alt-right, White Supremacists and Nationalists, the Klu Klux Klan, the League of the South, Identity Europa, neo-Nazis and other radical hate groups gathered and darkness ensued. The Friday night torch lit march- the Unite the Right Rally- evoked for us images from a horrific past of Nazi Germany- and Pogroms- rallying cries of "Jews will not replace us" and the the Nazi slogan- Blood and Soil- passionately screamed across a charming southern college town- and then Saturday morning- with alt-right speakers

ready to spew their hatred- an Ohio man rammed his car into a crowd of counter- protesters murdering Heather Heyer- who that day proclaimed- “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” We were watching with our eyes wide open, and we as Jews and Americans must rally to action- to call out hate and bigotry- we need to be the Shofar- the clarion call for justice.

Be The Shofar- rise to action from the shofar blast of our congregant Randy Kertesz who has parked his semi-truck in the synagogue’s parking lot collecting much needed supplies for Hurricane Harvey Relief, driving it down there himself in just two weeks. And then there was the amazing story out of Panama City, this summer when a family with small children were stuck drowning in a vicious riptide off the Florida shores- calls for help to the police and lifeguards went unanswered so those on the beach sprang to action- strong swimmers hit the surf but were quickly caught up drowning in the same riptide- suddenly- those onlookers on the beach locked hands working together and formed a long human chain- total strangers joining hands and saving lives- pulling everyone safely back to shore. Be the Shofar- Rise up and lead, swim to the rescue, open your heart and fill our truck to help those devastated and drowning.

On Rosh HaShana, we have the power to be the shofar- to keep our sights set high, reminded that the birth of the new moon gives us hope for a new tomorrow- and reminded that we are the ones that must make our tomorrow better.

L'Shana Tova u'Metukah- May we all be inscribed in the book of life for a year filled with hope, happiness, laughter, inspiration and peace.