

בְּשׁוֹפָר הַרְרִים קוֹלְךָ
Raise your voice like a shofar!

Rosh HaShana 5768
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שָׁנָה טוֹבָה again to everyone.

Think about those words for a moment -- “*Shana tova*,” a good year. Rabbi Dov Elkins has pointed out that the Hebrew word “*Shana*” has more than one meaning. It certainly means “year,” but the Hebrew root *shin-nun-heh* has another meaning as well. It also means “change,” from the verb לְשַׁנֵּן¹. When we wish one another שָׁנָה טוֹבָה, a good year, we are also wishing one another a year of changes for the better.

It’s easier said than done. After all, the great sage and Talmudist -- George Carlin -- once said, “The other day I put money in one of those change machines. You know what? Nothing changed.”²

He knew a subtle truth about this season. Many people come into the Days of Awe with the attitude that perhaps the changes we want will be as easy as putting money in the slot. But we know better: that change and growth always take work, and a bit of pain.

Some of us approach Rosh HaShana with joy and excitement, in anticipation of an amazing New Year. Some of us expect new babies or a new job or a wedding in the coming months, and we can look at one another and say: What an unbelievable year this will be!

But some of us come into the sanctuary differently, with trepidation. Will it be a year of good health? Will it be a year of success at work? Will it be a year of family harmony? There are too many unknowns, and a lot of fear about what might come to be.

Some of us come into the sanctuary with heavy hearts. We look around at the seats of in this room, and note too many absences. There are vacancies where loved ones were supposed to be. For some of us, this sanctuary carries an echo of and “used to be’s” and “might have beens”. And it hurts.

We hear different things in the sound of the shofar: some focus on the Tekiah, the clarion call awakening us to the joy and wonder of the New Year. Some hear in the *Shevarim*, the broken sound of trepidation and anxiety and worry when facing the unknown. Some hear the Teruah, the stuttering cries of a lonely and broken heart. They’re all there, in that primal and mystic sound.

¹Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, in *Rosh Hashanah Readings* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006), p.3

²George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*, 1997.

Tekiah... shevarim... teruah... tekiah again. The series, you probably noticed, always begins and ends with a Tekiah. One of the great kabbalists of our people, the 16th-Century Rabbi Yeshayah HaLevi Hurwitz (known as the SHELaH), said that this is the secret message of the voice of the shofar:

Each group of sounds begins with a *tekiah*, whole note, proceeds to *shevarim*, a “broken” note divided into three parts, or even to a *teruah*, an entirely fragmented sound. But each broken note is followed by a whole note, another *tekiah*. This is the message of Rosh HaShana: “I started off whole, I became broken, even splintered into fragments, but I shall become whole again! I shall become whole again!”³

So, too, not just for ourselves as individuals, but for our world. As a community, as a nation, we have known moments of great elation in the past year. We have also known moments that make the heart stop for fear. In the voice of the shofar, we hear joyful noise, trepidation, and devastation. What will the New Year bring? Shared bonds of community? Or growing isolation and loneliness?

This summer, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam released a study about declining civic engagement in America. He found that as our American communities grow more diverse and more multicultural, a surprising trend seems to happen: people tend to vote less and volunteer less, we give less and share less in community projects. The social networks that connect us to one another get weaker. Based on interviews with nearly 30,000 people across America, Dr. Putnam’s study is the largest ever on civic engagement in America. And his conclusions are distressing: Living in a multicultural society, writes Dr. Putnam, “Seems to bring out the turtle in all of us.”⁴ Namely – we end up withdrawn, stuck in our own shell, and alone.

“Alone” is a sad word. Not always; the legendary actress Greta Garbo once pointed out that there is a big difference between “being alone” and “being *left alone*.” But in the context of a society where neighbors are more and more isolated from one another, it is sad, and dangerous, too. Dr. Putnam himself has written about the side effects of isolation from our neighbors:

Kids fail to thrive. Crime rises. Politics coarsens. Generosity shrivels. Death comes sooner (social isolation is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking). Well-connected people live longer, happier lives, even if they have to forgo a new Lexus to spend time with friends.⁵

Furthermore, when we are isolated from one another, others are free to things in our names. Did you watch General David Petraeus give his report on the War in Iraq to Congress this week? I believe there is a connection between the war and the dwindling social connections of our society.

³. Paraphrased in Rabbi Arthur Green, *These are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999), p.204.

⁴. Michael Jonas, “The Downside of Diversity,” *The Boston Globe*, August 5, 2007.

⁵. Robert Putnam, “You Gotta Have Friends,” *Time*, June 25, 2006;
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1207822,00.html>

I don't know how you feel about the War in Iraq, although I will assume that the majority of us reflect the opinion of the majority of Americans, that the war is a debacle.⁶ I am no military expert, and I'm uncertain about what we as a country should do next, especially as I listen to the Presidential candidates. I don't know if we would do less damage if we called our troops home, or if we have a moral responsibility not to abandon what we have become enmeshed in. The Union for Reform Judaism has passed a detailed resolution⁷ calling on Washington among other things to: (1) Set a clear timetable for withdrawal from Iraq; (2) Oppose an escalation in troop strength; (3) Encourage the Iraqis to resume reconciliation talks with the full range of Iraq's political leaders. So that's where our religious movement stands.

I don't know. Yet I do know this: This war is now four and a half years old. And it has affected my life, personally... very little. And I resent that.

There are people in the room today who have served in Iraq or who have family members who have served there. They are heroes; it is heroic to serve your country. But we also know that our community, writ large, has not had many responsibilities there. It is neither us nor our children who are doing the fighting, and the dying. Nor is it the children of the politicians who waged this war. It is overwhelmingly our neighbors a few towns and cities over: the soldiers, as ever, are disproportionately poor and minorities.

That, too, is not the end of the matter. For that is the way that wars have been fought since Vietnam and the end of the draft. No, the bigger problem is the message from our leaders: This war needs fighting, but *it need not adversely affect you and me*. In fact, you'll recall that the war was launched simultaneously with an enormous tax cut. Now tell me, please, when in American history were a war and tax cut offered at the same time?

The American way has always been that, come wartime, our leaders would say, "Here is what we have to do. It is our moral duty. It will not be easy and some of our soldiers will not make it home. But the national interest, the moral interest, depends on these men and women. And therefore, all the rest of us will be asked to make certain sacrifices – to tighten our belts, to conserve resources, to make sacrifices in the name of the common good." We think of the stories of World War II, and the ways in which communities came together – including the iconic "Rosie the Riveter," symbolizing the six million women around America who filled factory jobs while men went off to war. The immortal words of President Kennedy from 1961 speak across the years:

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you –

⁶ <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>

⁷ "Resolution on the War in Iraq 2007," Executive Committee of the Union for Reform Judaism, March 12, 2007; <http://urj.org/Documents/index.cfm?id=14211>

ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.⁸

We all know that that is not the way in which this war was delivered. No one demanded sacrifice of us. And today we are reaping our harvest.

President Kennedy's legacy includes the Peace Corps and a reenergizing of civic engagement, especially among young people. It includes a generation of students and adults who would take months or years off of their careers to spend time doing national or military service. Today there are signs that a new movement of civic engagement and service could be starting – and, given the state of the world, it couldn't come at a better time.



Last spring, a special initiative at Shir Tikva was launched as we addressed these questions. We began gathering in each other's homes, sharing our stories with one another, telling where we come from, what brought us to this place at this time in our lives.

We were asked to share some very personal stories with one another. We asked, "What are your hopes and your dreams for yourself and your family? What are your deepest fears about life in America – you know, the things that bother you so much that they keep you awake at night?"

Over the course of a few months, we hosted thirty of these house meetings, usually in groups of twelve to twenty. Some of the gatherings were groups of old friends. Some of the gatherings were members of this large, vibrant community who barely knew each other beforehand.

We heard remarkable things. And as we listened to each other, certain themes kept reemerging.

Many of us spoke about that new stage in the American life-cycle: The time when we become caregivers for aging parents. We shared the pressures that arise when our children's needs pull us in one direction, and our parents' in the other.

Others spoke about the children. It is no secret that our young people are pulled today in more directions than any generation of teens ever have before; and the pressures of success, peer pressure, sex, and continually having to achieve, achieve, and achieve are exacting a toll. What are we doing to our children?

Some spoke about the devastation of the environment, and reality of global warming.

And another recurring theme was being able to afford a decent place to live. This message is twofold. Some discussed the disgrace that in America – the wealthiest nation the world has ever known – the right to decent housing remains unrecognized. But this message, too, reverberates back on our own community. Some spoke about how their children grew up in

⁸ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961; <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03Inaugural01201961.htm>

Wayland, Weston, Sudbury... and, in adulthood, starting their own families, have discovered that they cannot afford to live in their hometowns. How could we have come to such a state?

There was so much more, of course. Many worried about the well-being of the State of Israel, in the shadow of Islamist fanaticism and terror. And of course, there are those who can't sleep at night for fear of not having Jewish grandchildren.

As I listened, I sensed themes that were unspoken, but lingering behind the words. Remember the research of Robert Putnam, about the loosening of the bonds of community and its repercussions. We live in a beautiful part of the world here in MetroWest – I remember one of my first visits to Shire Tikva, before I began to work here. It was an autumn day, just after the Days of Awe, and I drove up Rice Road. The trees were all changing colors, and it really was awesomely beautiful. We've built large houses here, on large properties, in beautiful woods, so that we can't see our neighbors. And then came the realization: "My G-d, we can't see our neighbors."

We've dubbed our project *Tekiah*, taken from the prophet Isaiah's command: כְּשׁוֹפָר הַרְרָם / קוּלְךָ / *Raise your voice like a shofar!*⁹ The model is community organizing from the grassroots: gathering and meeting people where they are at, finding common ground with our neighbors, and identifying problems that, with our combined strength, are **solvable**.

What's next for *Tekiah*? Our core team has been working diligently for months to make sense of all we learned. We are currently in the midst of the researching the themes and the potential, given the resources of MetroWest, to organize. The ultimate goal is to find the theme that our efforts will coalesce around in the months and years to come. In December, we are preparing a community-wide launch to celebrate this new direction. I hope you'll be there – and if you want to take a leadership role in this work, I hope you'll contact me this fall.

Tekiah is the cutting edge of what is happening in congregational life throughout America. All over the country, synagogues are overhauling traditional models of "social action" – namely, models where all the work of justice and caring in a congregation is taken on by just a few people, rather than the entire community. Or where the work of volunteering in a soup kitchen is *de rigueur*, but no one asks the deeper question: Why, in our land of unfathomable plenty, are there people within one mile of here do not have enough to feed their children every day?

Which is the Jewish ideal? Obviously – both. Our goal is to create a many-spoked wheel where all these things happen. Jewish living demands the sensitivity and compassion to be able to reach across the line at the soup kitchen and offer human contact and love. And the tradition of the prophets demands that we ask the hard questions, the political questions – and that we turn them into religious questions.

For instance, there's a story about the great 19th Century Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. He once gathered together a group of his students a few days before Pesach. He was about to send them out to inspect a local matzah-baking factory to certify its matzah Kosher for Passover. One of his disciples, recalling all the halakhic details that are involved in preparing matzah, asked,

⁹ Isaiah 58:1

“Rabbi, is there anything in particular we should be looking for when we are at the factory?” Rabbi Salanter answered, “Yes, most certainly. When you visit the factory, you’ll see an old woman working there, baking the matzah. She is poor and has a large family to support. Make sure she receives a living wage!” That’s how you know the matzah is kosher.

No matter what the themes are that we pursue, I have every expectation that *Tekiah* will transform the work of social justice in this community. Judging from the response to our house meetings alone, there is a thirst in this community for sharing our strength and applying it towards justice. And there is the added benefit of joining together with our interfaith partners in this community – the myriad of churches here, the Islamic Society across the street, the many agencies that do the work of social justice every day – and finding our shared voice and common ground.

Still, there will be those who say – is this really what we’re supposed to be doing? Perhaps we should focus all of our energies on traditionally Jewish issues, like Israel, and fighting anti-Semitism? This community-organizing business doesn’t sound like regular congregational life. And it sounds like it could be controversial...

We will never relinquish our responsibilities to Jewish causes. In fact, other congregations involved in similar work report that their activism on Israel and anti-Semitism is much healthier. Because of their organizing work, the neighbors understand where we are coming from so much more clearly. They become willing partners in these just causes that we once thought were all our own.

And as for wading into controversial issues, I recall the words of the American prophet Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “**Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of people and is not concerned with the slums that damn them and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.**” And surely, my friends, that is not us.



Tekiah! Today is the day we sound that shofar.

Twenty-six hundred years ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke to the exiles of Babylonia with a vision of renewed hope in what their community could mean. He called to that congregation of Israel: *רָם קוֹלְךָ / Raise your voice like a shofar!*

So, too, does the prophet’s voice call to us today. It calls to us, as a community of individuals that reaches out for one another when we consider how frightening life can be.

רָם קוֹלְךָ / Raise your voice like a shofar! Every place where the momentum of society would make the world colder or crueler or harsher, we are to be the voice of an alternative sound;

Raise your voice like a shofar! Wherever the world would have us sacrifice our children (like Abraham almost did) on the altar of competition or superficial success (or getting into that good school);

Raise your voice like a shofar! Wherever the powers-that-be would destroy something precious in the common weal for the sake of the corporate “bottom line”;

Raise your voice like a shofar! Wherever the society around us would prefer that we dilute our identities as Jews for the sake of “fitting in.”

We have much work to do. But imagine the chorus that we will create, not just the voice of one shofar crying in the wilderness, but another, and another, and another, and another, as each adds his voice into one great symphony of change.

Then we will know that the New Year, 5768, will be one where we will truly be written down in the Book of Life, for we will have inscribed our names there, together.

Amen.