

The Silent Shofar: A roaring call for action

Close your eyes, come on close your eyes just for a second. The race is about to begin. All of the contestants are lined up. A hush falls over the crowd. You know that moment is about to come.....[SOUND SHOFAR].

That was a bit of a jolt huh? That is exactly what the sound of the shofar is supposed to do. It is designed to wake you up. It is the Jewish horn that begins the race or journey a month preceding Rosh Hashanah— telling us to examine our deeds and repent. The sound of the shofar is our call to action.

In the Mishnah we learn that if a person is walking by a synagogue or is in their house near a synagogue and hears the sound of the shofar, and directs their heart towards the sound, they fulfilled the mitzvah of hearing sound of the shofar. But if the same person hears the shofar and does not direct their hearts to the sound of the shofar, they do not fulfill the requirement of hearing the shofar.

This text demonstrates the rabbis' belief about intention and action. It is not good enough to sit and listen to the sound of the shofar, even if you purposely came to the synagogue to do so. You must turn your heart towards the sound, in order to fulfill the mitzvah.

The shofar announces that a new year has arrived. Now that it has, we each need to ask ourselves what am I going to do in **My Journey** during this coming year.

“Birth is a beginning and Death a destination.
And life is a **journey**: from childhood to maturity and youth to age,
From innocence to awareness
and ignorance to knowing
from foolishness to discretion
and then perhaps to wisdom.”

This beautifully crafted poem struggles with the fluidity of life. It describes the cyclical nature of our existence. And it gives the most credence to life. Even though we all know this poem by its first line, “Birth is a beginning and Death a destination” the poem actually deals with the journey between these two stages, more than it deals with either end of the journey, birth or death.

Our Torah portion today does not do this. The story of the akedah seems to be missing significant pieces of the journey that Abraham and Isaac went on. The beginning of the story explains when Abraham received his revelation; and then at the end we learn in great detail how Isaac was saved by an angel of God. But during the span of a three day journey, we only have one conversation between the two of them. “Isaac broke the silence and said to his father Abraham: ‘Father!’ And Abraham said: ‘Here I am, my son.’ And Isaac said: ‘I see the firestone and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham replied: ‘God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ And the two walked on together in silence.

This conversation is clearly missing something, it cannot possibly tell about the entire journey. What was Isaac thinking during this time? He must have felt something. Did Abraham know something that we don't or was he simply lying through his teeth?

Since the rabbis know how important journeys are, they have carefully reconstructed different ways in which they believe that journey might have happened.

At a baby naming the rabbi usually will recite the blessing, “Our God and God of our mothers and our fathers, sustain this child through his parents loving care. Let him be known among our people Israel by this name. May his name be a source of joy to him, and inspire him to serve our people and all humankind. May his parents rejoice in his growth of body and soul. As they have brought him into the covenant, lead him to the study of torah, to a life of good deeds and to a marriage worthy of God’s blessing.”

This blessing is a prime example of the journey that we hope for our children. A life of growth, study of torah, and to one day be brought under the chuppah. More importantly only eight days after the birth we wish for the newborn a life of good deeds and to be inspired to serve our people and all of humankind. The rabbi says this prayer because it is important even during times of great excitement that we are reminded of the mitzvot in life.

As a paradox to a baby naming ceremony, it is customary at a funeral to think back through the life of our loved one to remember the important times. When we hear of someone’s passing we ask for their memory to be a blessing. These two ceremonies held like bookends at either end of a person’s life both reflect – forwards and backwards— on the journey of life.

“From weakness to strength
or strength to weakness
and often back again;
from health to sickness
and back, we pray, to health again”

What do you want your journey to look like? What do you want to be remembered for?

Maimonides lived what he taught. He really understood the balance between a life of prayer and a life of action. When a scholar wanted to visit him to seek guidance on a translation of Maimonides work, Maimonides wrote him back a letter describing his typical week. With this letter we see that Maimonides rarely had time to take a meal, let alone discuss minor technicalities in translation.

It is a moving glimpse of the life of the great philosopher and physician, spending his time **healing the sick, guiding the members of his community, studying and praying with them, concerned no less with their bodies than with their souls.** It is amazing that he was less concerned with the translation of one of his most famous books than with the health of the people in his community. He put others above himself. This is one of the many things we remember Maimonides for. His journey was full of contributions.

“From offense to forgiveness,
from loneliness to love,
from joy to gratitude,
from pain to compassion,
and grief to understanding,

from fear to faith.”

A rebbe once spent an entire day reciting psalms. Towards evening, he was still reciting when a messenger came to tell him that his mentor wanted to see him. The rebbe said he would come as soon as he was finished, but the messenger returned, saying that the mentor asked him why he had delayed. The rebbe explained that he had been reciting psalms. The mentor told him that he had summoned the rebbe to collect money for a poor person in need. He added, “Psalms can be sung by angels, but only human beings can help the poor. Charity is greater than reciting psalms because angels cannot perform acts of charity. We take a clear message away from this ancient teaching. Get up and act.

Everyone of our prophets was concerned with social justice. They all wanted the world to be a better place. In Jeremiah chapter nine it says “this is what the Lord says: let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let he who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who **exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth**, for in these I delight, declares the Lord.”

We heard the sound of the shofar this morning, summoning us to a year of action and intention. This year will be a section of our journey. What will you do this year? How will you turn your hearts towards the shofar? You could volunteer at a soup kitchen, raise awareness for the refugees in Darfur. You could volunteer on the temples caring committee. It is not enough to only attend services today and hear the sound of the shofar. If this is where it ends, it was a silent shofar. You must turn your hearts toward the shofar. The sound of the shofar is our reminder that we are being summoned for action. It is a roaring call! Actions that will be woven together to fulfill the hopes are laid out for us at our baby naming ceremonies and are talked about long after we have passed on.

“From defeat to defeat to defeat
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
A sacred pilgrimage....Birth is a beginning.”