

Shanah Tovah.

The blowing of the shofar is one of the best-known parts of the High Holiday liturgy. It's very hard to miss. You don't need to know Hebrew to connect to what's going on. It's not something we do all the time. And it's weird. It's really, really weird. Case in point- I saw multiple facebook posts by apartment-dwelling friends recently, asking where to practice blowing shofar, so as not to disturb the neighbors. Now I'm sure that some of that is about basic decency; not wanting to do something incredibly loud in a shared space. But those same apartment dwellers have dogs, babies, vacuum cleaners, blenders... The difference is that those are socially-acceptable and understood noisemakers. There's no risk of someone knocking at the door to ask you to keep it down, and needing to explain what you're doing with an animal's horn, neatly polished and turned into a rudimentary instrument.

So what exactly are we doing with this horn? Instead of launching into some of the most classical explanations, I actually want to explore the blessing that Dov recited before blowing the shofar. It begins like any other blessing for performing a mitzvah:

ברוך אתה ה' א-להינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וציונו...

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us...

Now the shofar blower is literally about *to blow the shofar*. So that's how we would expect the blessing to conclude. לתקוע בשופר. But instead we say: "and commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar," "לשמוע קול שופר."

Now this distinction, between "to blow the shofar" and "to hear the sound of the shofar" might seem trivial. But Rambam exhorts us that it is actually of the utmost significance: the mitzvah is actually to hear the shofar, not to blow it. Indeed, if the mitzvah were to blow the shofar, we would each need to do so ourselves - talk about loud!

Rambam goes so far as to say: אלא כדי לשמוע, אין אנו תוקעין, - we **only** blow the shofar in order to hear it. The act of blowing the shofar, according to the Rambam, is itself totally insignificant; it is only a means to the end of listening to the sound that it produces.

This might all seem a little bit silly. Who cares whether the mitzvah is to blow the shofar or to hear it? They're basically inseparable from each other!

But the mishnah figures out a way to separate them out, so that we can explore each independently. It teaches that if someone blows the shofar into a cistern, or a cellar, or a barrel- and therefore only hears the ECHO of the sound of the shofar, and not the unmediated sound of the shofar itself- that doesn't count. We actually need to hear the ACTUAL sound of the ACTUAL shofar.

The same mishnah teaches another seemingly unrelated lesson about the shofar as well:

If you happen to be walking along 35th Ave, and hear the sound of the shofar from inside Beth Shalom יצא לבו, אם כוון לבו. If you were focused and had the intention of fulfilling the mitzvah of hearing the shofar, then you fulfilled it. But if not, if you weren't really paying attention, weren't in the headspace that you are now actively listening to the shofar, then you still need to hear it again. It doesn't count.

These two disparate teachings, about blowing the shofar into a pit and about walking by a shul, are actually trying to emphasize the importance of the same thing: complete presence. If you're only hearing the echo of the shofar, or you're only hearing the shofar without really paying attention to it, you're not actually fully engaged in the act of "לשמוע קול שופר," "hearing the sound of the shofar."

But why are we so particular about presence for this particular mitzvah? Why does it demand this kind of attention? Rambam asserts that the underlying reason for blowing the shofar is to say to all of us: “Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! Arise, slumberers, from your slumber! Examine your ways, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator!”

Suffice it to say, that’s hard work, and it’s not something we can do if we’re still half asleep. We must be fully present to the sound of the shofar, because otherwise we cannot be fully present to the work of examining our behavior, engaging in the process of teshuvah, and reconnecting with the Divine.

The shofar demands our full attention because our lives need our full attention, and without the call of the shofar, we might not be inclined to give it. It’s so easy to just go through the motions- wake up, get ready, go to work- without actually being engaged in what we’re doing. And in 2018, it’s easier than ever to be disengaged. I text my mom to send me her quinoa recipe, without needing to pick up the phone, hear her voice, and ask, “hi, how are you?” I can order more dog food from my phone with one click, not fully processing how much I ordered or when it will show up, and also not fully processing what Jeremy was trying to tell me while I half-listened and half-ordered dog food; but effectively not doing either well.

I have always been a careful driver, yet sometimes being careful is not enough, and this summer, I was in my first car accident. Thank God, both I and the other driver were not hurt, there were no passengers, and this is why car insurance exists, which we both had. But that moment operated like the blast of the shofar for me, though we were both driving slowly enough that the impact was much quieter than a tekiah.

While I used to drive carefully and with full attention, since the accident, when I drive, I am alert in a way that I had never been before, a way that I hadn’t even realized

was possible. And even though I don't love driving- and the accident certainly didn't help with that- I've actually begun to enjoy it more, because it is the one time of the day when I simply could not be doing or thinking about anything else. I was driving, just driving- and that was enough.

Now, the school year has begun, and Jeremy is taking the car again. And so as I return to walking, bussing, and taking lyfts from place to place, I am working on how to transfer the focus that I had while driving to other areas of my life.

Because, indeed, this is what the shofar asks of us. Not simply to focus, awaken, and pay attention in **this** moment; but to do so globally, so that we can live our best lives- most in touch with who we are striving to be and most connected with our Creator.

That's hard work. Our minds wander, our to-do lists are long. It seems so efficient to do lots of things at once. And that's not all bad. I enjoy learning or laughing from a podcast as I go on a walk, though I'm sure that it means I don't notice everything around me. And sometimes being fully engaged with reality is deeply painful, or frightening. We absentmindedly scroll through the news, because if we really listened with our full selves; with all of our empathy and compassion and humanity; it would be absolutely crushing. We're exhausted, and it's hard to be fully present to our friends and loved ones when we're working really hard at just keeping our eyes open.

But the blessing for the shofar gives us a good start: "לשמע," "hear." Really hearing the sound of the shofar is the first step towards heeding its call to change, to improve, to strive. Listening to your thoughts is the first step towards refocusing them. Really hearing the complaint of your child is the first step towards empathizing with their frustration. Noticing the pain of a friend is the first step towards helping to alleviate it. Actually paying attention while I place an Amazon order is the first step towards getting

the right amount of dog food and having it arrive on time. Hearing the pride of a loved one is the first step towards sharing celebration in their accomplishment. Noticing the beauty of the world around us is the first step towards deeply appreciating it.

While the Mishnah and Rambam help us understand what all of this loud, neighbor-scaring, noise is all about, the Talmud offers additional insight by noting that not only is this horn blowing strange, but the fact that we do it both during the Torah service AND during musaf is even stranger. Shouldn't once be enough? After all, if the shofar is fully awakening us, we shouldn't need a snooze button. By the time the shofar blasts in musaf come around, we should already be wide awake- so what's the point?!

Rabbi Yitzchak answers this question by saying that we blow the shofar both times “כדי לעררב את השטן,” “in order to confuse the שטן, our adversary in the divine court.” Rabbi Yitzchak seems to suggest that the שטן will make the case against us when the first shofar blasts are blown, and then by the time we get to musaf, and present our case, advocating for ourselves before God, the confused שטן has already gone home for lunch or something, leaving us with only our defense and no prosecution.

But I'd like to offer an alternative reading. Perhaps what is really confusing to the שטן is the fact that we're awake, paying attention, engaged in the fullness of our lives and in shaping our future instead of letting it happen to us. The satan is used to us going through the motions. Yet once the shofar has been blown, and certainly by the time it is blown again, we are fundamentally changed. We are awake, and ready to fully experience whatever comes our way.

And when we are engaged in that way, the שטן is stunned into silence. There is no case to be brought against us. Not because we are perfect, but because we are really and truly trying our best.

And so as we head into the repetition of the musaf amidah, as we seek love and mercy from the Divine, and as we blow Rosh HaShanah's final shofar blasts, may we pay attention, bringing our full selves to this and every moment. May that wakefulness, that real presence, continue long after we walk out of this building today. Indeed, may we all be inscribed not just in the Book of Life, but in the Book of Really Living. Shanah Tovah.