

SHOFAR KAVANAH
Rosh Hashanah Second Day
September 20, 2020 ✧ 2 Tishri 5781
Rabbi Jennifer R. Greenspan

I want to share one of my favorite passages from the mishnah, the first attempt at laying out the laws and ritual of Judaism following the destruction of the 2nd Temple:

“A shofar which has split and then one glued it together is not valid. If one stuck together fragments of shofars, it is not valid. If there was a hole in a shofar and one closed it up, if it interferes with the blowing it is not valid, but if it does not it is valid.”

A few centuries later, the Talmud adds:

The Sages taught: If anything was added to a shofar, whether of the same substance, i.e., horn, or of a foreign substance, the shofar is unfit. If the shofar was punctured and sealed, whether with the same substance or with a foreign substance, it is unfit. Rabbi Natan says: If it was sealed with the same substance, it is fit; with a foreign substance, it is unfit...If the shofar was plated with gold on the inside, it is unfit. If, however, it was plated on the outside, and if its sound changed from what it was before the plating, it is unfit, but if not, it is fit...

For several pages of the Talmud, the sages explore what makes a broken and repaired shofar fit to declare the coming year, and though it could be mundane and boring – we’re just talking about the knitty-gritty of the physical shofar here – it has become a selection of Talmud that I find myself returning to many years. If you think I’m a little bit nuts for calling this one of my favorites, I would understand. It seems very detailed and esoteric to worry about the details of a kosher Shofar. But it really is a favorite. Because while it’s “just” about the shofar, to me the rulings seem to boil down to one thing: Authenticity.

And every time I’ve reviewed this section, I can’t help but think of myself as the shofar.

If a shofar is broken, the Talmud says, you should repair it with like-materials; if it is a shofar from a ram, it should be patched with material from a ram. If it is one from an ibex, patch with ibex. A kudu shofar with kudu. So too, when you find yourself broken, use pieces of yourself to mend the cracks in your soul. We’ve all felt broken, this year especially. Sometimes we’ve even as shattered as the nine-beat Teruah call. It will take internal self-work and self-care to mend those cracks.

If a shofar itself is to be adorned, it can only be done in a way that leaves the sound as it is; adornments must be on the outside, and may not be on the mouthpiece. The inside should not be plated with gold or silver, as it would change its sound. So too, we may adorn and adjust our bodies, but should use the adornments to express who we are, not to try to pass ourselves off as someone else. More deeply, we can and should learn and grow from others – and we must not attempt to plate our insides with their words. We must take inspiration from what we’ve learned from others, think about it, integrate it with our own systems of belief--and speak from our hearts, purely, and with our own words.

Because the word for the sound of the shofar and the voice of a human being are the same word in Hebrew: Kol. And every shofar's Kol is kosher – YOUR Kol is kosher – whether it be high, low, raspy, clear, melodious, or a little off-key. For every crack that is repaired and every adornment that is added, the only thing that may not change and grow is the shofar's sound, its voice. We must continue to find our own voice.

Mending ourselves while staying true to ourselves is easier said than done, but I think the sounds of the Shofar – and now I do mean the actual shofar – can help us do it as they reverberate within us.

Rabbi Yosef Chaiim, also called the Ben Ish Chai, wrote in Baghdad in the late 1800's that the different blasts of the shofar are meant to guide us emotionally.

The tekiah, the long, singular blast, is meant to hint at joy.

The Shevarim, the broken, three part blast and the Truah, the shattered 9-part blast, hint at pain and suffering.

And then we end with a Tekiah Gedolah.

Life has ups and downs, but the blasts that pierce and break – and make us feel that we pierce and break – end with a Tekiah Gedolah, a longer, drawn out blast, to remind us that we can come back to joy more fully. It is as though we go from whole to broken to shattered – and we have to learn how to rebuild ourselves whole and stronger than before. The blasts acknowledge that things may not always be good and joyful – but they, and the very shofar itself, also remind us that we can get back there after we go through the brokenness. It reminds us that we can also do Teshuva, repair and return, to ourselves.

Notice that the final blast is the Tekiah Gedolah. It is a long, lasting single blast that, at minimum, is the length of the other three combined. The Ben Ish Chai had said that the Tekiah is joy – so this longest blast suggests that we mend ourselves by finding ways back to joy.

We have been broken this year, and we are working on becoming repaired. We have laughed and we have cried. And the authenticity of the shofar and its calls remind us that repair is possible if we put in the time of the Tekiah Gedolah.

This year, it is not safe for us to be together physically, and we have been told that the aerosols from shofar itself may risk an even greater spread of the virus that has kept us home. Because of this, we will not be blowing the shofar during this service, even with so few in the room.

Instead, we have made a video of the full set of Shofar sounds available on our YouTube page. We are grateful for our ever-present Ba'al Tokea, Shofar Blaster, Fred Schwab for helping us make this video. After the Livestream of the service ends, we invite you to please navigate to Beth-El Zedek's YouTube channel and watch the video, and to listen.

Listen to the sharp sounds, the sounds that can reverberate in our very souls. Let them pierce you, break you, possibly even bring you to tears – and then fix yourselves from within your own soul. Put yourself back together with your truest pieces, whatever they might be. Remember your joys and pains of the year, and know that they actually fix you into a stronger, truer you.

I wish us all a year of sweetness, health, and growth.