

Rosh Hashanah 5778- Resilience
2 Tishrei 5778 September 22, 2017
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The shofar's blast is not only a jolt within our service, it is meant to be a wake up call for our lives. To what have we become numb? To what do we need to pay attention?

There are four kinds of shofar blasts.

Tekiah---one loud blast -- gets our attention.
Shevarim is 3 short blasts. It's broken which is how some of us feel.
Teruah is nine quick blasts. It is urgent, a demand that we heed the call.
A tekiah gedola is a long tekiah. How long can our attention be sustained?

The shofar is the alarm that can't be turned off. There is no snooze to hit. We need to stay awake. We can not let things slide. We can not act as if business is as usual when innocent children are targeted for deportation, anti-semitism, White Supremacists and the KKK are not condemned, fear of strangers is amplified, climate change is ignored despite severe weather, and skin color determines one's rights.

We cannot let things slide when every day -- multiple times a day -- we are called to respond. But when the world is filled with the Teruah blasts, we may be left dazed and worn out.

Abraham also faced such an onslaught of urgent needs. The rabbis state that Abraham was tested ten times. He was told to leave his home; he faced a famine; the Egyptians seized his wife Sarah and brought her to Pharaoh; he battled many kings; he married Hagar because Sarah was barren; he had to circumcise himself in his old age: his wife Sarah was captured by the king of Gerar, he was forced to banish Hagar and their son, Ishmael; he became estranged from Ishmael; and number 10, God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar at Mount Moriah.

This morning we read about the tenth test in the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. God called Abraham and told him to take his precious son, Isaac, to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah.

The 19th century Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendle of Kotzk once asked his students: What was the hardest part of the Akedah for Abraham? Was it the initial call, the long walk to Moriah, or the binding? Answering his own question: The rabbi taught: the hardest part was coming down the mountain.

Abraham went to Mt. Moriah with his son. Before and after. Before the Akedah the bond between father and son was solid. After the Akedah, his relationship was forever changed and they were estranged. Abraham and Isaac never spoke again. The experience on Mount Moriah was traumatic- for father, for son, for their relationship.

The long road after trauma can be lonely and confusing as we navigate the path home, knowing that home is not the same as when we left.

This past year we have faced many challenges as individuals and as a community

Many have faced the deaths of loved ones, some tragic, all mourned

We have experienced anti-semitism locally with graffiti at the South Mountain Reservation, and bomb scares at the JCC.

We have also experienced anti-semitism nationally with Charlottesville as Americans,

we are experiencing rampant hate speech, racism, xenophobia, anti-LGBTQ policies, natural disasters of flooding, fire and drought as global citizens ---

we are horrified by tragic attacks all over the world

Like Abraham, many of us are going down that silent, lonely and confusing mountain path.

We are Abraham. We navigate a world that challenges us from all corners -- even as, for all of us at one time or another, our hearts are broken in our own lives.

The incessant calls for help make us want to turn off the alarm and climb back under our covers. And sometimes that is okay. But we cannot permanently hide from reality. It is important that we find ways to care for ourselves to better enable us to move forward in wholeness of body and soul.

For some, this may include physical exercise such as spinning, running, pilates, swimming and zumba to name a few. For others, yoga, prayer and meditation can be helpful tools for strengthening our physical and mental state. Bingewatching TV, Netflix or a pint of Ben & Jerry's is another way to pause and recharge.

Incorporating a daily gratitude practice may help us face life's challenges. Judaism teaches us to recite 100 blessings each day. There are blessings for so many things, seeing a rainbow, seeing a friend you haven't seen for a long time, opening your eyes in the morning. Reflecting on something positive each day builds resilience.

It's often the little things adding up that help with self-care. Taking time to notice our blessings does not mean we can't be upset about the challenges we face. But noticing our blessings can help us remember the good things in our lives as we try to move forward on our mountain path.

We recall the challenges Moses faced after God gave him the Ten Commandments the first time. He learned from God that the Israelites had made a Golden Calf and smashed the tablets. The Talmud teaches that the broken tablets were placed inside the holy Ark with the intact second set. [Talmud Bava Batra 14B] We carry our broken pieces with us even as we move forward.

We strive for wholeness after trauma and move on, honoring our past as we respond to new calls.

It is comforting to note that we are not alone in our struggles. We are a community. We share in each other's triumphs and struggles. We engage in community because we are all in this great big world together. When we look around, when we share our true essence and when we listen, we realize that we are not the only ones experiencing a death of a loved one; an ill parent; infertility; a loved one struggling with mental illness; a loss of income; a stressful work environment; physical challenges; personal illness; disappointment of friends and family members; fear about the future; We are all in this together, each struggling to move forward and respond to whatever is his or her test.

We are not in control of what the future holds. But we can embrace the present, and choose how to respond. When God called to Abraham whose hand was raised with the knife, about to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham looked up and saw the ram which he sacrificed instead. It's unclear how long the ram was there. The ram's appearance was not the only amazing thing to occur. Perhaps it is that Abraham was able to notice it and find a different option. In unbearable situations, if we can find the strength to look up we may see a possibility emerge that was not clear before.

The prayer Unetaneh tokef recited on the Holy Days is haunting. It asks who shall live and who shall die. The final line of the prayer states: U'teshuva, u'tefila, U'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roa hagezera. Teshuva-Repentance or Returning to God, tefila-prayer and tzedakah-righteousness can transform God's severe decree.

During these 10 days of awe, Yamim Noraim, we focus on these. Teshuva, the root of the word is shuv, to turn. We turn towards God and turn away from errant paths. We turn towards ourselves to look within and be authentic. The work of teshuva is intense.

Tefila---prayer. We pray in community and we pray as individuals. What are our prayers? We pray the keva, or fixed liturgy. And we pray with kavanah, the prayers of our hearts offered with deep intention. We ask God to help us on our journey in this new year.

Tzedakah---we engage in acts of charity for the new year and throughout the year. We donate to causes of concern to us personally, as a Jewish community, as Americans and global citizens. And we also focus on the root of tzedakah, tzedek, justice. We move forward in the world by our own involvement in bringing justice, which may include praying with our feet, making phone calls, and standing up for those in need.

U'teshuva, u'tefila, u'tzedakah ma'virin et roa hagezera.

Engaging in these three categories transform a severe decree.

Ma'avirin, transform's Hebrew root is avar which means to process or get over. During these Yamim Noraim, we are encouraged to repent and return to God, pray as if our life depends on it and engage in acts of tzedakah. By doing so, we can change our outlook on life. Abraham could not erase what happened during his greatest trial, nor can we. But we can work hard to process, adapt and seek resilience.

Rabbi Joseph Meszler offers a new way to understand Unetaneh Tokef:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:

That this year people will live and die,
some more gently than others
and nothing lives forever.
But amidst overwhelming forces
of nature and humankind,
we still write our own Book of Life,
and our actions are the words in it,
and the stages of our lives are the chapters,
and nothing goes unrecorded, ever.
Every deed counts.
Everything you do matters.
And we never know what act or word

will leave an impression or tip the scale.
So if not now, then when?
For the things that we can change, there is teshuva, realignment,
For the things we cannot change, there is tefilah, prayer,
For the help we can give, there is tzedakah, justice.
Together, let us write a beautiful Book of Life
for the Holy One to read.

The Shofar is calling. We may be overwhelmed at times but we can find positive ways to respond: through repentance and turning to God; through prayer; or taking action with acts of Tzedakah.
Teshuva, tefila and tzedakah are the Jewish models of building resilience; they help us stand up and step forward, so that even when life seems overwhelming, we can respond and take action.

Tekiah---we hear the blast.
Shevarim--we who are broken will respond
Teruah--there are numerous challenges
Tekiah gedola--a long sustained blast. We will continue on our path down the mountain.

In this new year 5778, I pray that God gives us the strength to stand up through challenging times
to respond to the calls, even when we prefer to turn off the alarm
to modulate when a key change is required
to care for ourselves so that we can care for others
To stand together with family and friends.
to spread love and kindness
to share our joys and our sorrow and
support each other on our paths.