

הרם כשופר קולך

**LIFT UP YOUR VOICE LIKE A SHOFAR**

**ROSH HASHANAH SERMON 5779/2018**

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**The Alarm Clock**

A few years ago, a friend told me about the great benefits of Senior Strength, a class he was taking on the Vineyard to help maintain his physical wellbeing as he aged. For several years I avoided the class mostly because of my aversion to the very idea that I was a candidate for a class for seniors! Seniors are older people, I am not yet a senior! It took me a few years to accept that I was a senior and this past year I started going to the class and love it.

The problem is that the class is offered at 7 am. Which means that I have to wake up at 6:00 and I hate getting up that early in the morning. Sometimes I go to bed late and want to sleep more; sometimes I am just lazy. I hear my alarm ringing. Should I get up? Should I press pause? And then when it rings again, should I press pause again or just turn it off. Sometimes I ignore the alarm, go back to sleep and miss my class. What is the big deal? So, I will be not such a strong or flexible senior! Why do I need to be strong? Most times when I ignore the alarm I regret it but waking up is sometimes so hard.

**Rosh Hashanah is a day devoted to waking up.** It is about waking up to everything, to love, and to truth. Last night I talked about love and today I want to focus on truth.

The Shofar calls us to wake up to the truth, to what is true for us on every level, physically, emotionally, ethically, politically and spiritually. It is about teshuva, not only waking up to

the truth, but where necessary, realigning our lives with our highest selves, with God, with whatever is of ultimate importance.

Maimonides writes that the shofar calls out to us: “Awake you sleepers, awake from your sleep! O you slumberers awake from your slumber! Search your deeds and turn in Teshuvah.”

### **Shofar - Yom T’ruah**

And the primary tool for waking up is hearing the sound of the shofar blast, that we blow for 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul/the first day of the last month of the Jewish year till the end of Yom Kippur in 10 days time. On Rosh Hashanah we blow 100 blasts on the shofar. Right after this sermon we will sound forty blasts of the shofar.

The entire holiday of Rosh Hashanah is defined by the Torah as **Yom T’ruah**, “The first day of the seventh month will be sacred day, you shall do no work, It will be a **Yom T’ruah for you**, a day on which truah is sounded on the shofar.”

It is striking that Rosh Hashanah is called, a day of Truah. Truah, one of the three notes that we blow on the shofar, is the most broken, maybe the most urgent of the three notes. Of the three notes it is the one that is most like an emergency alarm; t’ruah startles us like the siren of an ambulance or fire engine. Tekia is a whole note, Shvarim is broken into three, T’ruah into 9 or more. We start with a whole note, then move to a more urgent note and then to the most urgent. T’ruah is urgent, relentless, calling us to pay attention quickly, urgently.

Collectively this year we are living in a moment of great crisis, in our own country, in Israel,

and globally. **Every day feels like a Yom T'ruah.** And this year it seems particularly important that we hear the sounds of the t'ruah not only personally, but also collectively. And that is what I want to talk about today.

### **A State of Moral Emergency**

In 1963, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, outraged by over 200 years of American racism and by the fierce and often violent backlash to the Civil Rights Movement in his own time, sent a telegram to President Kennedy proposing that he declare the United States to be in **“a state of moral emergency.”** He wrote that “the hour calls for high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.”<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by Rabbi Heschel, and outraged by the shocking immigration policy of “zero tolerance” separating children from their parents, in July of this year, the leaders of four national Jewish organizations: Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, issued a statement declaring that America was in a state of moral emergency. In their statement, that has generated about 20,000 signatures, they wrote:

*“To this country, in whose promise we still believe, to the millions of people who are outraged and horrified, and especially to the thousands of children who have been separated from their families, **we declare our nation to be in a state of moral emergency.**”*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/115575.?lang=bi>

*When crying children are taken from their parents' arms, the American Jewish community must not remain silent.*

*To those who are targeted by these cruel policies, know that the Jewish community hears your cries. We will take risks to support you, and we will demand that our nation's leaders take action. We will not abide the claim that people didn't know or understand the extent of your suffering; we will not allow your torment to be in vain.*

*Our government can persist in this inhumane behavior only if good people remain silent.<sup>2</sup>*

All of us share the outrage at the cruel and inhumane policy that left children separated from their parents with total disregard for the welfare or even the whereabouts of the separated families.

As American Jews, many or most of us are the children of immigrants. As Marge Piercy writes in her magnificent interpretive version of the Shma, "We should love the stranger, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt and have been strangers in all the lands of the world since."<sup>3</sup>

As a people we have experienced oppression in different countries and we often relied on other countries to welcome us. I came to the United States in 1970 as a student and then paid a lawyer who helped me get a green card and then become a citizen. Subsequently I helped my mother to immigrate in a process that is now derided as "chain migration." My brother and sisters also immigrated. It is true that we left South Africa because we felt

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bendthearc.us/moral\\_emergency](https://www.bendthearc.us/moral_emergency)

<sup>3</sup> <https://poetrypill.blogspot.com/2009/11/shemavahavta.html>

insecure but we were privileged and we didn't suffer the desperate conditions that drives many immigrants, from Mexico and Central and South America to seek safety and security in our country. These immigrants, now vilified in disgusting rhetoric by our nation's leaders, are fleeing desperate conditions that were created to a great extent by United States military intervention in their countries, the goal of which was to protect the interests of American corporations and the geopolitical and military interests of the American Empire.

Those advocating this harsh policy to immigrants, like the President and other national leaders are themselves from families who immigrated to the United States, often illegally, and who then secured immigrant status for their families. And, shamefully, among the advocates of this cruel policy are some Jews. I was so moved by the bold public statement by David Glosser, the uncle of Stephen Miller, a senior West House adviser who is one of the architects of the the zero tolerance policies of the Administration. Glosser points out that Miller's family benefited from the policies that the Administration is trying to undo.

He wrote, "I have watched with dismay and increasing horror as my nephew, who is an educated man and well aware of his (Jewish) heritage, has become the architect of immigration policies that repudiate the very foundation of our family's life in this country," Glosser wrote. "I shudder at the thought of what would have become of the Glossers had the same policies Stephen so coolly espouses — the travel ban, the radical decrease in refugees, the separation of children from their parents, and even talk of limiting citizenship for legal immigrants — been in effect when Wolf-Leib [Glosser] made his desperate bid for freedom."

The Glosser family arrived in the U.S. “just a few years before the fear and prejudice of the ‘America First’ nativists of the day closed the borders to Jewish refugees.” If the family had not been allowed to immigrate, they “would likely have been murdered by the Nazis along with all but seven of the 2,000 Jews who remained in Antopol the town from which they came.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Un-American?**

Many say that the current policies are un-American. It is true that these policies violate principles and ideals that are central to an ideal vision of America but unfortunately it is not the first time that America has cruelly separated children from their parents. Native American children were separated from their families and sent to schools where they were forced to assimilate and not allowed to speak their native language. During slavery, slave owners often sold the children of slaves to other slave owners. And during the Second World war the children of Japanese American citizens were often separated from their children. These actions were as cruel and barbaric as the policies of the current Administration and it is important that we acknowledge our history of brutality.

Unfortunately, the harsh policy on immigrants and the separation of children from their parents is a reality in Israel as well. For Example: Thousands of Palestinian children have been taken from their homes, arrested in the middle of the night, detained for months, and separated from their families. Tens of thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/08/13/stephen-miller-is-an-immigration-hypocrite-i-know-because-im-his-uncle-219351>

have faced racism, detention, deportation and state violence simply for seeking refuge. Shortly after the founding of the State, hundreds of Yemenite-Jewish children were kidnapped and disappeared. Israel has still not fully accounted for what happened to these children, some of whom died and some of whom seem to have been given to Ashkenazi families for adoption.

However the four Jewish organizations that led the inspiring effort to challenge these policies in the United States rarely say anything critical about Israel policies very similar to policies they may criticize in America.

Using the words of the original statement as their framework, Jewish Voice for Peace created a public statement that tackled the same issues in Israel.

Here is an excerpt from their statement:

*To the state of Israel, in whose promise many of us were taught to believe and where we continue to fight for a just future for all; we declare the state of Israel to be in a state of moral emergency.*

*When crying children are taken from their parents, whether Yemeni-Jewish or Palestinian, the American Jewish community must not remain silent.*

*To those who are targeted by these cruel policies, know that some of us in the American Jewish community hear your cries. We will take risks to support you, and we will demand that our Jewish communities take action. We will not abide the claim that people didn't know or understand the extent of your suffering; we will not allow your torment to be in vain.*

*The Israeli government can persist in this inhumane behavior only if good people remain silent.*<sup>5</sup>

Copies of the complete text of both statements are available in the lobby.

## **The Planet**

In addition to the moral crises in the United States and Israel we dare not ignore probably the most urgent of all issues: the threat to our planet. In an amazing special edition of the New York Times magazine entitled *Losing Earth*, Nathaniel Rich documents how in the decade from 1979 to 1989 we could have taken action to solve the climate crisis but we failed to do so. And now, we are already experiencing the devastating consequences of climate change that will only dramatically increase in coming years and decades, potentially leaving this planet uninhabitable.

These are the terrifying scenarios described by various scientists:

“The Paris climate agreement hoped to restrict warming to two degrees. The odds of succeeding, according to a recent study based on current emissions trends, are one in 20. If by some miracle we are able to limit warming to two degrees, we will only have to negotiate the extinction of the world’s tropical reefs, sea-level rise of several meters and the abandonment of the Persian Gulf. The climate scientist James Hansen has called two-degree warming “a prescription for long-term disaster.” Long-term disaster is now the best-case scenario. Three-degree warming is a prescription for short-term disaster: forests in the Arctic and the loss of most coastal cities. Robert Watson, a former director of the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mondoweiss.net/2018/07/progressive-jewish-justice/>



United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has argued that three-degree warming is the realistic minimum. Four degrees: Europe in permanent drought; vast areas of China, India and Bangladesh claimed by desert; Polynesia swallowed by the sea; the Colorado River thinned to a trickle; the American Southwest largely uninhabitable. The prospect of a five-degree warming has prompted some of the world's leading climate scientists to warn of the end of human civilization.”<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to even imagine this catastrophe. And the threat in our own country is also dire.

### **Threat to Democracy**

In our own country it is not only immigrants who are threatened but American democracy itself. The blatant racism that is at the core of and policies of the current Administration; the vile attacks on the press as enemies of the people; the demonization of women, immigrants and people of color and the attack on the judiciary, are all actions have occurred in other societies and led to the establishment of autocratic, undemocratic and sometimes fascist governments.

Holocaust survivors and scholars point to similarities between Germany in the 1930's and the United States today. South Africans have pointed to similarities to South Africa in the 1950's leading to a police state. The current administration in the United States has many similarities to the ascent of an authoritarian even fascist government. Yet there many among us who hesitate to make these connections out loud for fear of being labeled as alarmists.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth.html>

One of my moral heroes, Henry Siegman, wrote about this powerfully in an article published in the Nation entitled, *What my Escape from Hitler's Journey taught me about Trump's America and what Trump's America teaches us about Netanyahu's Israel.*<sup>7</sup>

Siegman, who was the executive director of the Synagogue Council of America escaped to America with his family in 1942. He was 7 years old.

Siegman argues that the past eighteen months of Trump's presidency resonate with Germany in the 1930's. He writes, What is frightening about today's America is how much "the pass that Germans were willing to give Hitler mirrors the pass the Republican Party and too many Americans have been willing to give Trump"

He points to Trump's admiration for autocrats, dictators and strongmen. About Kim Jun Yung, Trump said, "He speaks up and his people sit up in attention. I want my people to do the same." Trump's lying is not idiosyncratic but his way "like Hitler's of numbing the public to the usurpation of power that belongs to Congress and the courts."

The long term damage of Trump's presidency is unclear and the rise in activism especially among activists, younger, more female and far more liberal is a cause for some optimism but says Siegman, "of this I am certain, if Trump wins in 2020, the United States will no longer be a democracy. The only uncertainty is whether America's democracy will survive if Americans will allow him to serve out his current term."

Siegman also talks about the alienation between American Jewry and and Israel. He writes, "American Jewry - other than its its Orthodox components - will not accept a version of Judaism that sacrifices democracy to religious doctrine, keeps millions of Palestinians

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/escape-hitlers-germany-taught-trumps-america/>

under permanent military occupation and whose religious authorities treat Conservative and Reform Jews .... as members of a non- Jewish faith.”

This year Yom T’ruah is a palpable reality. We need to hear the t’ruah, the call to urgent and bold action, individually and collectively.

What can we do?

Like any urgent, important social change it only happens by mass collective action. Over the past year so many of us have participated in demonstrations starting with the demonstrations for women’s rights after the 2016 election and since many of us have gone to more demonstrations. Participation in public demonstration is not the only way. So many of our congregants are working hard on the critically urgent task of supporting political candidates in the upcoming midterm election who will uphold a just, multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy.

Now is the time not only for us to wake up but to speak up collectively. As individuals, and more importantly as a synagogue, we cannot give a pass to those responsible for these policies in the United States, in Israel and our globe. We must raise our voice!

In the haftarah/prophetic portion that we read on Yom Kippur, Isaiah suggests that the fast should be about feeding the hungry, providing homes for the homeless, ensuring justice for the marginalized, the poor and the vulnerable. Then Isaiah says Hareym kashofar kolecha Lift up your voice as a shofar.

Isaiah suggests that the spiritual challenge is not only to listen/lishmoa to the truah of the shofar but also to **be** a shofar, to lift up your voice like a shofar.

**Hareym kashofar Kolecha** In this time of moral emergency in the United States, in Israel and globally. Let us lift up our voices as a shofar!

Let us start with our own personal lives. Let us wake up to the truth of our lives to our deep commitment to love ourselves and one another deeply, to live an ethical and spiritual life.

Living a spiritual life is by itself an act of resistance to the greed, racism and disregard for the welfare of all. By the way we live spiritually and ethically, let us be a shofar.

**Hareym kashofar kolecha** Let us lift up our voices as a shofar!

Let us, here at TVO, boldly proclaim our Core Statement of Values. Let us proudly proclaim our belief that Judaism is a religion dedicated to justice equality, freedom and liberation for all. That Judaism is a tradition that connects the spiritual and the political. Let us weave work for justice into the life our community. Let us loudly proclaim that we are dedicated to justice and equality not only in the United States but in Israel Palestine as well.

**Hareym kashofar Kolecha**/Let us lift up our voices like a shofar!

Let us remind Jews like Stephen Miller, Jared Kushner, Sheldon Adelson, Benjamin Netanyahu, Naftali Bennett and many others that it is a shande for Jews to engage in racism and oppression. Let us remind them that as Jews we thrive in open, multiracial, multiethnic societies

**Hareym kashofar Kolecha**/Let us lift up our voices like a shofar!

Let us face the challenge of changing our behavior as individuals and as a community to reduce our collective carbon footprint. Let us challenge those corporations and politicians who promote policies that spread lies about the science of climate change and who promote policies that will increase our collective damage to the earth.

**Hareym kashofar Kolecha/Let us lift up our voices like a shofar!**

**Hareym kashofar kolecha: it is time for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.**

Let us loudly proclaim that in our society that has institutionalized racism for centuries that Black Lives Matter!

Let us loudly proclaim in our society that has institutionalized sexism for centuries that Women's lives matter!

**Hareym kashofar Kolecha/Let us lift up our voices like a shofar!**

Remember my alarm clock. It is so easy to ignore, to put on pause again and again. Let us not ignore the shofar's alarm calling out to us on this Rosh Hashanah. Let our voices be so loud and persistent that it cannot be ignored.

**Let us join with others to raise our voice like a shofar.**

**And let us be a source of hope.**

The shofar is not only an urgent call to wake up and act it is also a sound of hope. The shofar is sounded in the Jubilee year when resources are redistributed to create equality and justice. And the shofar will be sounded to announce the messianic age.

The rabbis teach that the t'ruah sound is a reminder of the sobbing of Sisera's mother when her son was killed. Sisera was the commander of the Canaanite army that attacked the Israelites. So let us remember that every child has a mama and be loving and compassionate to all, even our enemies!

So as we read in the Torah when it addresses the jubilee year, "Let us proclaim liberty throughout the land and throughout the earth to all!

And as Amos inspires us:

Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

May we all be blessed to be agents for teshuva/return, change and transformation in our own lives, in the life of our country, in the life of Israel and in the life of mother earth.

May we all be blessed with a sweet and joyful year!

Shana Tova.