

Rosh Hashanah 5773/2012: *Kol Shofar* in Campaign Season
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When we listen to the blast of the shofar, what is it that we hear?
And why do we need a shofar to hear it?

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The shofar is one of our most ancient Jewish symbols. Its sound is triumphant, and since we always hear it on Rosh Hashanah its meaning is somehow reminiscent of the delicious joy of apples and honey. It carries in its undertone stories of liberation and freedom. But if we listen closely, we hear a trembling melody, which beneath the symbols popular meaning tells a different story.

The Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud listened carefully to the shofar, as they grappled with the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, and some of them found it haunting. In one passage they asked whether the shofar should be straight, pointing directly toward the heavens? Or should a proper shofar bend & contort downward? The question behind the question: should the calling of Rosh Hashanah be one that lifts us upward, elevating our spirits with divine inspiration? Or should this moment be one of bending our heads to ground, humbling us with the reality of our own human condition.

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I've actually heard the same debate around High Holy Day sermons, if you can believe it. Should the homilies lift us up with inspiration, or move our heads and eyes downward toward the reality on the ground.

A story is told of a woman who approached the rabbi after services and said, "I am so sorry, Rabbi, for my husband who walked out during your sermon." The Rabbi replied, "It's okay, I know I can be provocative and alarming, and who am I to judge." The woman replied, "It's not a reflection on *you*, rabbi, it's just that Ralph has been sleepwalking since he's a child."

I think we can agree that there's no sleepwalking during the blaring sound of the shofar. But physically it embodies that essential question of how we can possibly lift ourselves upward when we know that there's a reality around us, a sobering story that demands to be heard.

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For these talmudic sages, they had one story in mind. It's a story that they named only be implication, in a passage in which they discussed which animals were permitted to make a kosher shofar. Rav Hisda argues that we can make a shofar out of the horns of virtually any kosher animal, except the bovine family—that is, related to a cow. Why is that? Rav Hisda says

cryptically, “*Ein kateigor naaseh saneigor*,” literally “because an accuser may not act as a defender.” What kind of a cow is an accuser? What animal in what story continues to accuse generations to come of a crime? The answer: the crime of the Golden Calf, for it lingers on for future generations. And a shofar is, somehow, an instrument of our defense, designed to distance us, in every way, from the incident of the Golden Calf.

So as we spiral downward along the arch of the shofar, let us refresh our memories of Exodus 32. The people see that Moses is so long in coming down from the mountain that they call out to Aaron, “*kum aseï lanu elohim*” make for us god, since we don’t know what really happened to that man Moses who took us out of Egypt.” And Aaron complies: “Take off your golden rings,” he says, “from the ears of your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me.” All the people take off their gold, they give it to Aaron, and Aaron magically transforms it into a Golden Calf for them to worship.

Meanwhile, on the top of the mountain, far removed from the people, Moses receives the 10 Commandments—the symbol of the very covenant that was being broken. When Moses returns to the people and sees what happened, in public, before the whole community he shatters the tablets. This is the lowest point of our text—the grimmest moment of public corruption. The relationship between people and God is devastated, with all parties to blame, and they’re left with broken tablets, in plain sight, at the foot of Sinai.

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Returning to our central question, *why do we need a shofar?* Because it is our most public symbol. It is our civic alarm clock. And the shofar, the sign of transcendence in public space, also spirals downward, alluding inversely to the moment in our story when covenant collides with civic corruption. Within the fragmented cry of the shofar, we can hear the echo of those two broken stone tablets.

In our own public square, do we not hear this echo? In June, Gallup released their annual poll of Americans’ Confidence in Institutions. They found that overall confidence in U.S. Institutions—from organized religion to the media to the banks—is as low as its been in recorded history. This survey only confirms what we’ve all known for some time now. It’s no longer shocking to learn of widespread corruption, of bribes and Ponzi schemes, insider trades, and state-funded affairs. Even the professional sports arena, so often a haven from civic corruption, has fallen victim to fraud, as players continue using performance enhancing drugs, despite the testing and the public cry for fair play.

And now this Gallup poll adds dimension to the prevalent climate of distrust that we’ve all sensed. According to the poll, there was one institution that held the least amount of confidence—one establishment sitting rock bottom in the covenantal category of American trust: Congress. 13% of Americans have confidence in Congress. A figure that, as some pundits have quipped, amounts to less support than the King of England received from the colonists in 1776. As we blow our shofar, our symbol of the power of civic life, what about that 87% who distrust our federal legislature? How do we make sense of this reality on the ground, during this campaign season?

Harvard Professor of Law and Ethics Lawrence Lessig, in his book *Republic Lost*, explores how the campaign finance landscape is at the root of our nation's civic corruption. He writes, "Practically every important issue in American politics today is tied to this [one] because this issue is at the root, the thing that feeds the other ills."

The perception of brokenness in campaign finance is actually not so controversial. 75% of Americans believe that campaign contributions buy results in Congress. With Republicans just as convinced as Democrats. The mixing of money and politics is nothing new—a close reading of the Golden Calf tells us this much, when Aaron gathers gold from among the people to illegitimately manufacture a deity. But the problem of our campaign finance system today, the particular formula that enables our leaders to emerge as viable candidates in the first place, is corrupt for its own unprecedented reasons. In 1974, it took \$56,000 to run for Congress. In 2008, it took 1.3 million to be considered. The overall amount of spending in the last 30 years has increase by more than five times.

And the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citizen's United vs. the Federal Election Commission*, ushered heaps of corporate money into the 2010 election cycle, often anonymously. Now it's impossible to fully track the funding for our candidates, no way to count the dollars that enable them to be seen and heard by the people in the first place.

For this reason, Lessig and others call this Congress the "Fundraising Congress," because they spend somewhere between 30-70% of their time meeting with funders—predominantly corporate lobbyists and the most wealthy and privileged of our citizenry—trying to keep themselves in office. In nearly any other profession, if one spends up to 70% of his or her client's time trying to get more clients, they would be fired. But this is what our members of congress are doing to keep their jobs: they depend on the funders over the people.

This is a contaminating distraction. And records show this: the number of hours that our congressmen have spent in congressional meetings has plummeted. The hours in which they used to work out problems are now spent financing campaigns.

Lessig calls this crisis a "dependency corruption." He defines the term in this way:

"Imagine a compass, its earnest arrow pointing to the magnetic north. We all have a trusting sense of how this magical device works. When we turn with the compass in our hands, the needle turns back.... Now imagine we've rubbed a lodestone on the metal casing of the compass, near the mark for 'west.' The arrow shifts. Slightly. That shift is called 'magnetic deviation.' Magnetic north was the intended dependence. Tracking magnetic north is the purpose of the device. The lodestone creates a competing dependence.... A corruption."

When money like a loadstone pulls our civic leaders away from their magnetic north, away from the people they're supposed to lead, the purpose of the device is corrupt.

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The United States was the first nation to offer Jews full rights of citizenship, and as American Jews we have a proud history of putting the device of our freedom-loving Constitution to purpose, for those most vulnerable among us—the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. Because as quintessential victims of historical oppression, we are keenly aware of the importance of a government that functions of, by, and for the people.

When we sound our shofar, calling our attention to the public square,
When we sound our shofar, allowing our eyes to bend downward toward the covenant between our people and our leaders, what we see is... our own broken tablets.

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But our ancient story doesn't end there, with the Golden Calf and the broken tablets. Moses climbs back up the mountain. The people return to the covenant, to each other, to God. They all pull their own weight and the result is two new tablets! That is because our shofar also bends upward. Yes, it spirals down, compelling us to see the world as it is, incomplete, but it also bends upward, uplifting us, calling us to the mighty mitzvot of civic repair, of *tzedek*, of social justice.

This is not a new kind of shofar blast for our community. We've known this call for quite sometime now. We've been following the call of the uplifting shofar throughout Temple Israel's rich history, from the resonant voice of the Rev. Dr. King in the Levi auditorium in 1965, to the call for the liberation of Soviet Jewry culminating in the 80's.

And in more recent days, we through Ohel Tzedek, our congregation's Tent of Justice, have taken historic steps toward civil rights and equality. Through policy we've bent the arc of history toward justice. We've blasted our shofar for marriage equality and protection from discrimination and hate crimes. We've blasted our shofar to ensure that none of us take for granted our right to vote, to be true citizens.

For the last 16 years, with our friends across the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, We have blasted our shofar time and again:

- To expand access to quality healthcare;
- To provide shelter to those without homes; education and safety for our children;
- To champion the cause of fairness and equity, during a time wave of economic hardship;

With the shofar of our shared interests, we transcend the petty politics of divisiveness. With the shofar of our prophetic tradition, we overcome *the broken tablets*—the “dependency corruption,” and the historic level of institutional distrust in our nation.

In this space, our shofar, the symbol of civic challenge and triumph can lift us upward.

In this space, in October, in this very building, we will hear this kind of shofar blast again. We will gather with our communities across the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization for an Accountability Action. The candidates for the Senatorial seat in Massachusetts, Senator Scott Brown and Candidate Elizabeth Warren, are invited and expected to attend. (We're still

negotiating this date with the candidates and will publicize it in our Temple Israel weekly emails.)

These two candidates, against the mighty current of campaign finance corruption, have already taken important steps toward civic repair. They both have signed what they're calling "the People's Pledge," a historic pledge to prevent 3rd party advertisements, an attempt to keep super PAC money out of this election. They've both agreed to a voluntary enforcement system—if an outside group runs an advertisement on television, radio, or online, the campaign benefiting from it must pay a significant penalty to the charity of the other candidate's choosing. And while this senatorial election still is one of the most expensive campaigns to date, their pledge is a courageous step, sending a strong moral message to the rest of the nation.

Our candidates for leadership, having taken this laudable step, are invited to our Accountability Action—not for a debate, not to argue back and forth, but to practice a higher form of politics. We, the 55 community institutions that make up GBIO, will decide the agenda, based on our shared social justice concerns, and they will each address our priorities. Together, we are creating a different civic space, a higher kind of politics.

So in the days ahead, when we read our newspapers, flip on our TVs, or open our inbox, and our heads follow the downward depressing curve of the shofar, let us also remember its uplifting call: the sound and the quality and the music of our most ancient instrument.

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Perhaps you've heard the story of a retired music teacher, an elderly man who lived in a boarding house. His health was declining, and he wasn't able to get around so well. Each morning a neighbor of his, a student, would stop by his room and ask, "What's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. I can hear the tenor upstairs—he sings flat! The piano across the hall, it's out of tune, but, my friend, this tuning fork will always be middle C!"

Within the harmony and discord of our daily lives, we have a middle C. It sinks our heads downward, demanding that we hold no illusions about the world in which we live. It lifts our faith upward, reminding us of our mandate to repair. And in this season, on Rosh Hashanah, it calls us.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu lishmoah kol shofar.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Source of civic power,
Who makes our lives holy through our sacred obligations,
and commands us to hear the voice of the shofar.

(Shofar sounding)