

When I was a child, being in the sanctuary to hear the shofar was, without question, the highlight of the service. There are other pieces of music and liturgy that have stuck with me, a powerful bass voice singing U'vashofar Gadol from the prayer known as Unetaneh Tokef; and "falling kor'im, the prostrations of aleinu and the service of the kohen gadol; ... but the raw, primitive sound coming out of a ram's horn or a kudu antelope, high and piercing or low and resonant, was, and remains for me, the most important part of the service.

Why do we love the shofar so much?

The shofar is music without words, a universal language.

The shofar is not complicated.

The shofar is raw.

The shofar is a primal prayer.

There are three different shofar calls. Tomorrow, I'm going to talk about the meaning of two of them. Today, I want to focus our attention on a lesson suggested by an observation by the composer Claude Debussy, "The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between them," how this idea applies to the shofar, and the lessons we learn from it.

The shofar calls do not depend on series of musical tones. While a good horn player can coax musical notes out of a shofar, that's not what we do on Rosh Hashanah. It's just one note, maybe two, but the notes are not what's important. It's the rhythm or the pattern of the sound that forms the shofar calls. The first sound is called Tekiah. A Tekiah begins with silence, an indrawn breath. It's the silence of anticipation. It is the sound of our collective hearts emptying themselves of all thought and waiting to be filled with the raw power of tekiah. The tekiah is one unbroken sound. After the tekiah there is another silence, to allow the initial sound to echo in our ears, and then we combine a shevarim, a tekiah broken in two places, and a teruah, a tekiah broken at least eight times by almost imperceptible bits of silence, into a rhythm of sound and rest that calls to mind Morse code -- dash dash dash dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot -- sandwiched between teki'ot.

After two more sets of this series, we combine the Teki'ot with the shevarim alone. The momentary silence of the breaks in the Shevarim gives us the slight rise and fall of the note. As this echoes in our heart and soul for half a breath, the pattern is completed by another tekiah and its echoes, slowly ushering in a perfect silence. We do this again, two more times. And then we repeat the series with a teruah alone in between the tekiot. A tekiah is a stuttering bullets of sound shaped by the momentary rests in between the briefest of staccato blasts.

Always, we listen for the echo of the shofar, the resonant, beautiful sound bouncing and fading away. The shofar is sound, shaped by the length and frequency of the silence that breaks up the call.

It's the silence between the sounds that distinguishes one call from another. It's the silence between the sounds that changes the emotion of the call from a cry of excitement or alarm to the sound of wailing. It's the silence between the sounds that tells us that one call has ended and another is beginning. It's the silence between the sounds that allows us to hear the echo. It's the silence between the sounds that allows the music to penetrate our hearts. Just as when painting in watercolor, it takes a moment for the paper to absorb the color, it takes a beat of silence for our ears, hearts, and souls to absorb the sound of the shofar. Without the silence, it would be one long unending tekiah. It is in the silences, in the pauses, that we can find a key lesson of the shofar. We need to pay attention to the pauses.

There is power in silence. Silence prompts reflection. Consider the response to a question. The first answer is usually a top-of-mind response. It's the most shallow and least creative. Allowing silence after powerful questions stirs up deeper reflection.

When we hear words, especially something that makes us uncomfortable, something we disagree with, something we don't want to hear, there is power in taking a moment of silence before we respond.

Quiet reflection reveals truth. Proverbs 10:19 says, "Where there is much talking, there is no lack of transgressing, but one who curbs one's tongue shows sense."

Silence reveals the heart. Silence exposes our inner values, struggles, and desires. Silence has a habit of revealing meaning.¹

The shofar teaches us to pause and think before responding. When you read something that causes you to react, stop and breathe and think before firing off a response. Ask yourself: Is it worth my time responding? Will my response change anyone's mind? Will it make a difference? Am I responding to elevate the conversation or just to make myself feel better?

The problem - one of the problems - with "conversations" via social media is that there is no use of effective silence. In person, you can force reflection by face to face silence. On social media, if a response doesn't appear lightning fast, the person has gone on to scrolling other content.²

The shofar doesn't need to be loud to be effective. It's the tone, the pure honesty of the sound, that simple rawness of the instrument, that captures our attention. We need to recover the ability to respond with clarity and with an honest attempt to understand the other. If you feel the need to raise your voice, if you are tempted to express the loudness of your response by overcapitalizing your sentences, if you attack the other instead of responding to an idea, retreat back into silence. Respond later, rationally and with compassion. Respond quietly but with passion. You will be heard better and your message will be more effective than the one you didn't share. The intent of the shofar is not to blast us out of our seats, but rather to move us to change our behavior, or perhaps to open the gates of heaven. The powerful response is the one that changes the tenor of the exchange, or perhaps opens the conversation to new depths.

The story is told that the great Hasidic sage the Ba'al Shem Tov would hold auditions each year before Rosh HaShanah to select the Ba'al Tekiah, the one to sound the 100 blasts of the Shofar. More than being able to make the ram's horn sound the proper notes, the Ba'al Tekiah had to master the 100 special prayers or Kavanot, so that the Ba'al Tekiah could fill each sound with complete spiritual power to lift our prayers to the Holy One on high. There was one who dreamed of serving as the Ba'al Shem Tov's Ba'al Tekiah, and studied for two years to master the Kavanot and to perfect their technique. The day arrived for his audition, and he stood before the Holy Ba'al Shem Tov. And froze. So overwhelmed with the need to be perfect, he could not remember a single one of the holy prayers and could hardly sound a single note. He was devastated. He stood before the Ba'al Shem Tov, crestfallen and heart-broken, and lost himself in tears of grief.

"I select you," the Ba'al Shem Tov said. "But I completely failed," the man said. "I could remember none of the kavanot, and I could hardly make a sound."

1. [<https://keithwebb.com/powerful-thing-can-say-nothing/>]

2. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/power-strategic-restraint-silence-ok-chris-ortiz-2dddc/>

The Ba'al Shem Tov explained with a parable: In the palace of the King, there are 100 secret chambers, and there are secret keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all, and that key is the ax. The secret chambers are those essences of God that lead us closer and closer to who we ultimately should strive to be, and the secret keys are the kavanot and mitzvot and holy acts we perform that open those spiritual portals. But the ax, the key that opens every chamber and brings us directly into the Divine Presence is the broken heart. It is your broken heart, the Ba'al Shem Tov explained, that will carry all our petitions into the presence of the Most High. For as Psalm 34 reminds us: "God is close to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

This is how we use the Shofar -- to be the key, the ax, the pure breath of passion, breaking open the gates of heaven. And if we learn from the Shofar how to conduct ourselves in dialogue, how to be silent, how to listen and respond with quiet strength, then our conversations, too, will break open the gates of peace and the gates of heaven.

Ken y'hi ratzon, thus may be God's will.