

Any gathering of people, including we who are gathered in this sanctuary, can be described as a collection of broken souls. Not a single one of us is perfect and there is no one here who has not been touched with pain, sadness, discord, or tragedy of one sort or another. Somehow, we've managed to put ourselves together for another day. We have wheelchairs, walkers, and canes, we have therapists, psychiatrists, and medication, we have spouses, children and friends, we have a whole collection of supports to get us through each day. Some days we are strong enough to support others, other days we can barely lift ourselves, and some days we don't have the strength to do much more than breathe. Yet we are here, together. Some in this room, and some who are peering into the room through a virtual window of sorts.

Two of the three shofar calls allude to this brokenness. Two of the three names for the Shofar calls allude to pain, loss, mourning, and brokenness. Shevarim literally means broken, and Teruah literally means a cry. Both are described as the moaning or wailing of a woman who has just learned that her son died. These sounds of the shofar are an unspoken call of welcome to all whose souls are in pain.

The broken shofar calls are sandwiched between two Teki'ot, the primary call that alludes to wholeness. When we gather together as a collection of broken parts, together we achieve a beautiful wholeness. That's the blessing of community, which happens when we set aside our ego and our fears and our resentments and jealousies and angry memories and offer the best of our imperfections to the collective whole. That's what happens when the community sets aside its collective gripes and welcomes and embraces all who come in the door with good intentions, seeking to add their voice and talents and resources to elevate the whole. We may have seen the worst of each other, but we understand that part of what it means to be a sacred religious community is to be Ahavas Israel, loving each person who seeks higher meaning and purpose by lending their time and talents and presence to our congregation.

The holidays should be a time for healing and connection. It is a time to ask ourselves as individuals and as a broad community, what are we missing? Where have we missed the mark? How can we be better? How can we make each other better? Where have we failed to be our best selves, where have we allowed our ego to demand more than its share of attention and energy? Where have we failed to make space for others? Where have we listened carefully to the message of Torah, and where have we fallen short?

So let's acknowledge that we might disagree about what is broken around us and what needs fixing, but I think we can be in general agreement that the state of our world, the Middle East, Europe, North America, the United States of America, is in need of tikkun. As individuals, the task of repair feels hopeless. Even as a collective, since we can't agree on where the problem lies, repair seems impossible. Even if we could agree on where the problem lies, the problems are so large, so systemic, that brokenness feels like a permanent state.

Shir Hama'alot, Psalm 125 that we sing before Birkat Hamazon, reminds us that "those who sow with tears will harvest with joy." It is unreasonable to expect that we'll have no sorrow in our life. The natural order of life is that we will experience loss and heartbreak. Our body becomes stronger physically by breaking down and rebuilding muscle tissue. We become emotionally and spiritually resilient by learning to overcome pain and disappointment. Face to face engagement for the purpose of intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development is an investment in our future. Those who have deeply invested themselves in a community like Ahavas Israel have built a human support system to stave off the plague of loneliness.

Join a book group, join a Havurah of people who talk about Jewish themed movies, create a Havurah of people who have Shabbat dinner together weekly or monthly, and become a part of a community of people who are not perfect, they may occasionally disagree about politics, but who are committed to supporting each other in their differences and through their brokenness.

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach founded a synagogue in Berkeley during the 1960s in order to reach out to the many young Jews who had drifted away from Jewish tradition. He named it the House of Love and Prayer. In the summer of 1967, he was asked to explain his vision for this synagogue.

He answered: “Here’s the whole thing, simple as it is. The House of Love and Prayer is a place where, when you walk in, someone loves you, and when you walk out, someone misses you.”

What a beautiful vision of a house of prayer! When you are at Ahavas Israel, we love you. We welcome you for who you are. We are happy to see you. When you are not here, we miss you. We want you to come back. We know that we are a better place with you. When you are here, when you give Torah, Prayer, and God the chance to round off your sharp corners and smooth over your broken parts, you will become a better human being. We believe in the power of mitzvot, we believe in the power of Judaism to elevate your soul.

My friend Arie ben David wrote, “It would be nice if we could build without breaking. It would be nice if my life, our lives, didn’t break apart. It would be nice if growth were a smooth, straight line. But it’s not. There is a soulful spark of hope in every broken moment. It is the foundation of our building.

“There is an inner power to the Jewish People. We are good friends with adversity. We have slept with unfairness, cruelty, and disappointment for way too long. We are done with kvetching about how life is unfair.... We have tasted enough life to assert that brokenness will not defeat us.... We have brokenness – but we also have the will, wisdom, and power to build.

“We hear the voice of the shofar. Tekiah – Shvarim/Truah – Tekiah. Again and again, we will hear the mournful broken voices of Shvarim and Truah. The broken voice of the shofar – Shvarim/Truah – is always preceded and succeeded by the unity of the Tekiah. Listen carefully to the shofar’s brokenness. It is a prayer, an invitation, for us to unify, heal, and build. Brokenness is never the final word.”

Here’s how I want you to listen to the shofar today:

Visualize a moment of brokenness and see it wrapped within moments of wholeness. See the tekiah as a protective bandage around the pain. The tekiah is the path towards healing. A tekiah is a call for the community to unite, rise up, travel, and move forward. The tekiah is the path that you can take to acknowledge the pain and move forward, whatever that means to you, whatever that looks like in your life, with your uniquely broken self. There is no growth without pain, and there are no two people broken along precisely the same lines. Honor your brokenness, honor your loss, it is real and tangible, but the shofar is here to tell you that you can take the broken pieces and put them into the ark of your heart, and seal them alongside the wholeness of the new pieces that you build as you continue moving forward.

Tekiah Shevarim Tekiah

Tekiah Teruah Tekiah

Tekiah Shevarim Teruah Tekiah.

The Ba'al Shem Tov would say the following before blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah: "You, and I, and God; and God, and you, and me; and me, and you, and God."¹

He would remind his congregation that we are in relationship with God and with each other; each person here is in relationship with each of the others and with God; and God is in relationship with each of us. You, who have chosen to walk into this room, are enmeshed in this web of connections. You can choose to sever the connections and walk away; or you can embrace the messiness of the connections, and grow together with this community.

A parable. Once there was a member of the King's court who rebelled against the king. When he was brought before the king he pleaded for mercy in judgment. The king commanded him to set his own sentence according to the law. When he heard the king's ruling the courtier cried out with great despair and pleaded with the king not to make him judge himself, for he knew in the depth of his soul that by legal standards he was guilty. He begged the king to judge him for he knew that the king was loving and merciful and could set aside the punishment required by law.

So, too, we pray 'Do not come to us in judgment,' meaning do not come to us for judgment of ourselves, "for no living being can make themselves righteous." We know that strictly speaking we have sinned and we are unable to forgive, so we beg You to judge us, for You are loving and merciful and yearning to forgive and to act with us compassionately...

Only Your eyes see us correctly, for You are loving and merciful and it is within Your power to forgive us, and to abundantly gift us with life, blessing, goodness, redemption and comfort.²

We, who come to you with broken and bruised parts, ask to be comforted, blessed, and healed. Amen, so may it be Your will.

1. cited in Ariel Mayse's "Laws of the Spirit", page 183, citing Ketem Paz, a Tiberian Hasidic text, late 18th c.

2. Kedushat Levi, toward the end of the end of the section on Rosh HaShannah