

During this season of introspection, I have had to confront an uncomfortable fact about myself. Although I have not been completely disabled by technophobia, I do exhibit numerous symptoms of the malady. I am usually the last one in my circle of family and friends to own or make use of the newest gadget on the market. I do have a laptop, a digital camera, and a cell phone, but they are far from the latest and most sophisticated models available. And I have been slow to learn how to take advantage of all the features which they offer. I'll read the manual – *some day*. I'll get around to learning how to operate the various features - *on an as needed basis*. You may attribute it to laziness, to a lack of confidence in my technical abilities, or to an innate cultural conservatism (that is very much at odds with my political and social liberalism).

Ah, but I have an excuse! Nearly fifty years ago I heard a guest lecture at my college by one of our most scholarly local rabbis, and he used a phrase that has stayed in my memory ever since. "Religion harks back to the archaic." I quote these words frequently when I speak to guests visiting our synagogue. Think about it – the handwritten, animal-skin scroll from which we conduct the public reading of Scripture is the ancient form of a book. The shawl in which we wrap ourselves during prayer services is an ancient style garment, an outer cloak that may also have served as a blanket at night. You don't find best selling novels in scroll form at Barnes and Noble, nor (allowing for the fact that shawls are in fashion for women) do you go to a men's apparel shop and pick out a fringed *tallit* from the rack to wear for semi-formal social occasions. But we highlight our belief that religion deals with a special domain transcending the humdrum and ordinary by employing such artifacts in our religious rituals. So, perhaps being a religious leader explains somewhat my hesitance regarding technology, although I must admit that there are members of the clergy who are technological whizzes.

The centerpiece of our worship this morning is yet another archaic object, the *shofar*, an ancient musical instrument, fashioned from the hollowed out horn of a ram or antelope. Musical sound is made by vibration, but the *shofar* has neither a reed nor strings. The blower provides the vibration through the movement of the lips, not unlike the way that a brass instrument is played, except that a *shofar* has neither valves nor keys nor slides. I can prolong the blasts or sound them out staccato fashion, I can make them louder or softer, but if there is a way to modulate pitch on a *shofar*, it is certainly beyond

my level of skill. In sum, the *shofar* is a simple instrument, harking back to ancient times, but as we reflect on its prominence within the observance of Rosh Hashanah and the meanings that have been assigned to it, we come to realize that it has much to teach us about the nature of our faith tradition.

The first notable thing about the *shofar* is the number of different explanations that have been offered for sounding it on the New Year and the many associations which the ram's horn evokes. Sa'adia Gaon, a tenth century rabbinic sage and philosopher, listed ten different reasons why the *shofar* is blown on Rosh Hashanah. To me this multiplicity of meanings touches on something that is fundamental to the Jewish religious tradition. Judaism is a way of life; Jews are united by the practice of common rituals, ceremonies that play a key role in marking our distinctiveness and promoting our survival. Although some explanations for a ritual may bear the cachet of antiquity and be closer to the original intent, there is no one authoritative meaning that exhausts the ritual's significance. We bring to our observance of a ritual our own personal life experience, the sensibility of our particular time and place, the state of our emotions, and the capacity of our intellect and imagination. The ritual is constant, but what it means will vary over the course of time and from one person to the next.

The *shofar* links us to the past. It recalls the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, when a ram was substituted for the young man, whom his father Abraham had been commanded to offer up on the altar as a sacrifice. It is also associated with the covenant between God and the people Israel and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, when amid thunder and lightning and the billowing of smoke from the mountain, blasts of the *shofar* were heard. I have always found the Akedah deeply troubling and will struggle with it for the rest of my life. Can the demands of religion and those of ethics come into conflict? Would God really command something so blatantly immoral or (assuming that it was intended as a testing of Abraham's faith) devise a trial so cruel and agonizing? Is the story less believable or less instructive, because a protagonist in our contemporary setting who lifted a knife over his child and claimed to be acting at God's behest would be a candidate for incarceration or confinement to a mental institution? Was Abraham's behavior truly meritorious, or was God hoping that he would object to the command? And if Abraham did earn merit, is it, as tradition holds, transferable to our credit when we

stand before the throne of judgment on the Days of Awe? Doubts and objections aside, however, the Akedah story, evoked by the blowing of the *shofar*, reminds us that we are descended from those who knew that a spiritual life demands sacrifice, devotion, surrendering comfort and convenience, and acting at times against our own inclinations and who exemplified faith in a divinely-ordained destiny, even when the fulfillment of what had been promised them seemed impossibly remote. The events of Sinai, also associated with the *shofar*, remind us that it is the Covenant, with its obligation to witness to God's presence in the world and to what Abraham Heschel called "God's stake in human history", that imparts meaning to Jewish peoplehood.

The *shofar* holds meaning for us in the present as well. Throughout the liturgy of the day, God is referred to as *melech*, king or sovereign. On this day that tradition regards as the birthday of Creation, the *shofar* is our means of acclaiming, saluting Creation's author and ruler, a royal fanfare. Talking about kings is as archaic as one can get. Ceremonial monarchs in Western Europe are mere figureheads (true power there being exercised by presidents, prime ministers and elected legislators), and absolute monarchy is hardly the system of governance that we in the 21st century would hold up as a model. So when we sound the *shofar* to acclaim God's sovereignty, we are not being literal but are using symbolic language, calling on ourselves to acknowledge that our ultimately loyalty is to *Adon ha-kol*, the God Who is sovereign of All, Who calls on us to be partners with the Divine and to act with the justice and compassion, that are regarded as Godly attributes. Figuring out what is just and what is compassionate in the complex circumstances of our day to day lives may be tricky, may sometimes elude us, but the summons is one we can not ignore. When we elevate something that is smaller than God – loyalty to tribe, to nation, to political faction; concern for our status, power or comfort – to an object of absolute allegiance, tradition has a word for it: idolatry. And yes, even religious symbols and rituals can become idols, to the extent that they are looked on as ends in themselves and obscure their true purpose of linking us to God and imparting a sense of the Divine Presence. All of the aforementioned concerns and allegiances are "goods"; they have the potential to enhance our lives and accomplish desirable ends, but our loyalty to them, the *shofar* reminds us, must remain limited and contingent.

The *shofar* is also a spiritual wake-up call. Smugness and self-satisfaction are the greatest obstacle to a life of true piety and holiness. Inevitably, we fall short of our potential. We fail to cultivate a sense of gratitude for the gift of being alive and for the many blessings in our lives; we neglect to set aside moments in our busy schedules to develop a feeling of connectedness to something that is larger than the self. The needs of our fellow persons even in this most affluent of countries are staggering, and we could most likely be doing more to help alleviate want and suffering. There are occasions when all of us cut corners ethically or fail to have proper regard for the feelings of others. The *shofar* reminds us that God is the ultimate judge and that today is *yom ha-din*, the day of judgment; but it also calls us to repentance and holds out to us the promise and the possibility of change. I don't believe the *shofar's* call is an invitation to beat up on ourselves, to indulge in excessive feelings of guilt or to strive for an unattainable perfection, but it is rather a reminder that there is always room for growth and improvement, that we can learn from our shortcomings and mistakes, that we must not remain static in our spiritual and ethical lives, and that we must seek to attain a higher level of sensitivity and spiritual awareness that will be reflected in our deeds.

The *shofar* recalls the past and speaks to us in the present, but it links us as well with our tradition's aspirations for the future, what we generally refer to as the Messianic age, a time of restoration to glory for the Jewish people and peace, security, and justice for the entire universe. Tradition holds that the advent of the Messianic age will be heralded by the blowing of the ram's horn, and Jewish preachers used to end their sermons with the hope that we might merit hearing *shofar shel Mashi'ach bimheira b'yameinu* – speedily and in our days. Elaborating on the Messianic hope – the conjoining of both universal and particularistic elements, the tension between passive reliance on God and active human effort to advance the coming of Messiah – would require a whole other sermon. Let me just say that our mission as Jews will not be done until these hopes for the future are fulfilled and that our piety, our good deeds, our efforts at *tikkun olam*, perfecting the world, are animated by our faith that our aspirations will be realized some day.

The *shofar* is meant to speak to us, to evoke the associations which I've enumerated, to motivate us to “turn back” (the actual meaning of the word *teshuva*) to

God, to our ideals, to our vision of our better selves. But there are grounds within our tradition for regarding the *shofar* as a form of prayer to God as well, a wordless prayer, perhaps along the lines of a Chasidic *niggun*. Indeed, some of the notes of the *shofar* are said to resemble sobbing. We are a religion and culture that places great stock in the written and spoken word. Judaism has created a vast literature of sacred texts and has honored those scholars who had the ability to understand and interpret the words in those volumes. Our faith has an elaborate and structured liturgy in which our praise of God and our heartfelt petitions are articulated in words. And yet there are realities that can not be put into speech, moments when words fail, when the plaintive sounds of the *shofar* are more expressive of what we are feeling and praying for than the most eloquent of words on a printed page. When we consider that the very reality of God can only be approached through metaphorical language and that speech is ultimately inadequate to convey our sense of the Divine, then it is no surprise that in worshiping and approaching God, a wordless sound or gesture may sometimes be the best prayer of all.

The *shofar* is an archaic instrument harking back to antiquity but one that, I hope, can still speak to a modern audience, reminding us that religious rituals can open us to a rich diversity of meaning, inspiring us to take pride in our people's past, summoning us to shake off complacency and strive for spiritual growth, voicing our faith in Israel's and humankind's future, expressing in a profoundly affecting way the deepest yearnings of our hearts. On this New Year's Day, may we do as we have been commanded and heed the sound of the *shofar*.