

Shulamit Ran is a professor of music at the University of Chicago and Pulitzer Prize winner who recently composed an opera. At key points in the piece she scored in the blasting of a shofar. The problem she found, however, is that the shofar is an incredibly unpredictable instrument. Hard to keep on note, it is almost impossible to keep it in tune with the rest of the orchestra. More than that, she had trouble finding a musician who could play it. To solve her problem Ran turned to the *ba'al tekiah*, the shofar blower in her synagogue. Taping his blasts, she then reproduced the sound to get exactly what she wanted. During the opera three *shofarot* were used as props, since she could guarantee neither the sound nor the player. "After all," she said, "there are no shofar musicians' unions."

The highlight of Rosh Hashanah truly is the sound of the shofar. There is something magical about seeing children held high in their parents' arms, hugged by grandparents or gathered along the aisles, as they strain to hear the ancient call. After announcing the shofar service I am always moved by the palpable buzz in the congregation. So central is the shofar to this day that in the Torah the name for this holiday is not Rosh Hashanah (which came into use much later), but *Yom T'ruah* - "the day of the blast."

That is why I was saddened last year when so many people walked out just before the shofar was blown. Oh, I know there are luncheons to attend, and the drive to Jersey or the South Shore takes awhile. I understand that sitting through a long service is hard, which is why I don't think twice about so many people who are in and out during our prayers on this day. But to miss the shofar is to miss the very point of this day - which is hear a plaintive cry.

Yes, that is the real purpose of *Yom T'ruah*. To hear cries.

The Sages of the Talmud claimed that the basis for the broken, *t'ruah* sound is in the cries of a non-Jewish woman, the mother of one of ancient Israel's enemies, the Midianite general named Sisera. Sisera took to his chariot in battle against the prophetess Deborah and Israelite general named Barak. Sisera's mother, at the beginning of a lengthy poem in the book of Judges predicts a great victory for her son. At the end of the poem, however, when the time lengthens for his return the reality of the situation begins to dawn on her as she "looked out of the window, peered through the lattice and cried (וַתִּיבֵב *vat'yabev*)."¹ The Hebrew word for her growing lament was linked by the rabbis to the Aramaic translation of *t'ruah* - *yebaba*. Her cries, then, were like a shofar's wails. Later authorities disagreed about the nature of this sound. Some taught that it should be like a long, drawn out sigh, others that it is a series of short, piercing notes. Whatever the differences, they were in agreement - this sound of the shofar is of Sisera's mother bereft, forlorn, sobbing in grief.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 33b on Judges 5:28

This rabbinic tradition is shocking. Given all who suffer in the Bible, why connect the repetition of shofar sounds to this obscure figure, the mother of a barbaric enemy no less? Such a radical teaching cannot help but force us to recognize, even though part of us rebels against it, the fundamental humanity of Sisera's mother. Yes, he sought our people's destruction, but that does not close the Talmudic sages to her pain. If we are to hear the sobs of Sisera's mother in the sound of the shofar, how much more so those who are innocent or worthy?

So often we push cries aside. Over the years congregants have complained to me that they don't like the sound of crying babies. And some parents of young children have told me that they do not come to services because they are given dirty looks by those who want them to quiet their kids. To be honest, it does not bother me when children are crying during services. In fact, I think it is essential part of prayer. How can we expect God to hear our cries for help if we are unwilling to listen to the pleas of the innocent?

And we are, too often, deaf. This summer we watched the movie *Hotel Rwanda* with our children. One of our daughters got increasingly angry as the movie went on as she saw how so many were slaughtered while the world did nothing. "How could people let this happen?," she exclaimed. What answer can one give other than the truth - that people either did not care or, perhaps even worse, they did not even hear the cries of those in need. How easy it is to do. Too wrapped up in getting our kids to soccer practice or figuring out which restaurant we want to meet our friends at or fretting over how to pay the electricity bill, we close our ears ... and our hearts follow. There is always so much pain, always another crisis. Too painful to feel it, we turn away, pretending to hear nothing lest something register in the moral recess of our souls.

Then the shofar comes. *Tekiah. Shevarim. Teruah.* A sound meant to shatter our complacency and break the heart. Hear the shofar's cry; and hear the wails of those in pain.

Lest we miss the point that Rosh Hashanah is not just about our pain it is worth considering what the traditional Torah reading is for the first day of the Jewish year. In most Reform synagogues we read the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac. Traditionally, however, that is a portion reserved for the second day of the holiday. On the first day the traditional Torah reading comes from the chapter just before, telling the story of how Abraham sends away his concubine Hagar, the woman who bears his older son, Ishmael.

Hagar is a tragic character. Indeed, her very name may be an allusion that she is the paradigmatic outsider, for punctuated differently the Hebrew of Hagar can read *ha-ger*, "the stranger." Although her mistress Sarah gives her to Abraham so that a son might be borne,

Sarah despises the servant's good fortune and, the Torah says, "dealt (so) harshly with her" that Hagar runs away. Hagar returns, but Sarah then demands that Abraham cast her out. Ousted from their home, bereft of family ...

(Hagar and Ishmael) wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the bottle was spent, she put the child under one of the shrubs and she went, and sat down away from him a good way off ... saying, "Let me not see the child die." And she ... lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the child; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is."²

The climatic moment in this story is when God hears. But what does God hear? Torah says nothing about Ishmael crying. We read only of Hagar's tears. The Hasidic rabbi Mendel of Vorki suggests that God heard the silent tears of the boy. Not a sound was uttered, but God heard the pain in one displaced, exiled and near the point of death.

On Rosh Hashanah, stirred by the shofar, we are meant to hear the tears that are shed - uttered or silent. And if it is too much to be like God, at least let us be as Pharaoh's daughter. For when she was bathing at the Nile "she looked and saw a child crying."³ Surely she must have known that this was a Hebrew baby, for who else would a mother place into the river? She knew her father's edict that every Hebrew baby boy was to be drowned, but she bestirred her heart. Here, too, the text of the Torah is strange. Normally we hear the cries of others, yet it says she "saw a child crying." In this is a hint that Moses did not cry aloud, but his situation cried out to this Egyptian princess.

As Rabbi David Wolpe teaches, "the magnitude of human suffering is not measured in decibels. A fraught silence may be all the anguish a soul can bear." The shofar's trill, then, is to awaken us to the cries of Sisera's mother, of Hagar and Ishmael, of a baby floating on the currents whose silent suffering is a reflection of the impoverishment of his people. The shofar, stranger among sounds, asks us to be attentive, to cut the foreskin from our heart and to take note.

Last night I suggested that a full Jewish life is one that embraces study, righteous deeds and a sense of faith. Just as in the Wizard of Oz, where there are the three companions of Dorothy who seek a brain, a heart and courage (which is the willingness to be true to oneself), so is our own character honed by attention to these important qualities.

Al shlosha d'varim omed ... The world stands on three things. *Al ha-Torah* - on study. *Al ha-avodah* - on spiritual service. *V'al g'milut hasadim* - on deeds of caring.

² Genesis 21:14-17

³ Exodus 2:6

The caring heart is dependent, however, on the attentive ear. It is easy to miss the sounds of pain in others, yet the suffering is there. It is there in our families, it is there amongst our people, it is out there in the world.

Our Family

Snoopy, the sensitive beagle from the comic strip *Peanuts*, is sitting on his rooftop. "I hate being left home alone," he exclaims, "Maybe they'll never come back. That round-headed kid wouldn't leave me, would he? No he wouldn't, would he? I'm never sure they're coming back until I see the headlights around the corner. I shouldn't keep looking. But I can't help it. Is that them? No, it wasn't them. Watched headlights never come," he concludes wistfully.

The source for Snoopy's anxiety was his creator, Charles Schulz, who, in a book of essays wrote about this fear:

The most terrifying loneliness is not experienced by everyone and is understood by only a few. I compare the panic in this kind of loneliness to the dog we see running frantically down the road pursuing the family car. He is not really being left behind. But for that moment, in his limited understanding, he is being left alone, and he has to run and run to survive.

I don't think Schulz is correct, however. Almost everyone I have met experiences the pain of being alone and forsaken.

Perhaps that is why the story we read Rosh Hashanah morning resonates. At one level Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son seems so unusual and so primitive as to have little connection with our lives. On another level, however, the gap between Abraham and Isaac is the challenge of every relationship. And we lay awake, or sit at the stoplight in our cars, and wonder: Does he understand me? Will she reject me? Am I loved?

Rodney Dangerfield, the comedian who died a year ago tomorrow, once said that he never made any jokes about his father. It was too difficult because it brought up bad memories of his father never being around. He never stopped making jokes about "getting no respect", but he still felt the sting of abandonment.

Most of us are not abandoned as children, but we all can relate to the feeling. For some it was when a younger brother or sister came on the scene and we were no longer the only one in the limelight. For others there is a lingering resentment that, as the youngest, all I ever got was hand-me-downs. I recall how painful it was when I was in grade school when it came time to choose baseball teams. Fat and not very athletic, I always knew I would be the last kid picked. The only thing I hoped, as I cried silently watching even else get chosen, was that my own teammates not make too much fun of me when I walked to the plate.

Many of us abandon our children even with the best of intentions. Abraham is a man focused on his job - for him, serving God. While rabbinic tradition shows Abraham as a father reluctant to offer up his son, pretending not to understand (stalling by saying, "I have two sons," "each is the only son of his mother", "I love them both") - the Torah indicates no emotional misgivings. Abraham has a job to do - and dreams to fulfill - and if his child is the price to be paid, so be it.

Does Isaac scream? Torah says nothing. But can we not hear his wordless cry, not slaughtered, but nonetheless sacrificed to his father's dreams? His sense of loss is not his alone, and is reflected in a song by Richard Leigh and Layng Martine Jr., called "The Greatest Man I Never Knew":

The greatest man I never knew
 Came home late every night.
 He never had too much to say,
 Too much was on his mind.
 I never really knew him,
 And now it seems so sad.
 Everything he gave to us
 Took all he had.

The greatest words I never heard
 I guess I'll never hear.
 The man I thought would never die
 Has been dead almost a year.
 He was good at business,
 But there was business left to do.
 He never said he loved me
 Guess he thought I knew.

There are tears, too, of young people whose own sense of what they want is offered up on the altar of their parents dreams. I get worried when I see teens whose lives are so filled with sports, Advanced Placement homework and even volunteering so that they look good on a college application, but who give themselves no time to reflect - what do I want to make of my life? Does a degree from the "best college" make one happy? And what message do our children glean when they do the best they can, but we worry aloud that it might not be "good enough"?

It reminds me of the story of a bright pre-med at Harvard whose parents rewarded him with a summer trip to the Far East. There he met a guru, who said to him, "Don't you see that you are poisoning yourself with your drive for success?" He was so moved that he decided to stay. Six months later his parents got a letter: "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you were disappointed, but for the first time in life I'm happy. There's no competition.

Everyone's equal. This way of life is so in touch with my inner soul that in just this short time I am already the number two disciple in the ashram. I think by June I'll be number one!"

When I consider the mistakes I've made, the love I have not given, the silent tears I shed - I look out at you and know that we are mirrors of one another. Instead, then, of reacting with anger when we feel rejected, let us hear the cries of those in our family, who may be seeking the very things we are. Hear our cry, O God. And let us hear each other.

Jewish People

A little over a week ago Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman joined us for a weekend of learning. He told a story that bespeaks what it means to live in Israel - a state not only of the Jews, but which seeks to be guided by Jewish values.

During the height of the intifada a few years ago, the Israeli army rejected most requests by Palestinian farmers to harvest their olive trees. Desperate to lower the number of infiltrations into Israel by terrorists, the military felt it best to restrict access. The problem was that for the farmers this meant being cut off from their main source of income. Seeking to help, members of Rabbis for Human Rights, an organization of rabbis from across the religious spectrum, went to the fields to accompany the Palestinians to help them pick their olives. With Israeli protesters and Israeli army personnel facing off, the mood began to get tense. People began to scream. Harsh words were exchanged. Suddenly, one of the protesters, Nomi Hazan, a member of Israel's Knesset who was there, looked at the commanding officer and said, suddenly in a much calmer voice: "Don't I know you?" As the two tried to figure out their connection, it suddenly dawned on her. "You were the officer leading my son's unit for two years when he was in the army. Time and again he told me how you protected him. I owe his life to you." With the anger defused, the young officer said, "*Giveret* Hazan, Mrs. Hazan, believe me, I understand why you are upset. When I'm out of uniform I am with you. I know these Palestinians. I know how hard it is for them. But I am an officer in the army."

There is a delicate balance represented by those like Rabbi Weiman-Kelman and Nomi Hazan, whose lives are connected with the Progressive movement in Israel (what they call Reform Judaism). The Israeli Progressive movement is a growing, dynamic community. The two dozen congregations and 60 pre-school programs teach a Judaism that is rich and self-confident, yet also open to the moral values embraced by our tradition that urges us to love the stranger.

How much easier it is to hate, to reject the other, to close our ears to their cries. Yet this is not what the Progressive Jews of Israel choose. Rather, they are willing to open their

hearts - to affirm a Judaism that is egalitarian, pluralistic and that embraces democratic values. The irony is that only Orthodox *yeshivot*, media outlets and institutions receive money from the Israeli government; only Orthodox rabbis serve as neighborhood rabbis. Progressive rabbis, synagogues and schools have no official status - and so receive nothing.

To truly hear their cry for support involves, first of all, your ongoing support as a member in ARZA - the Association of Reform Zionists of America. A simple, yet critical way you can help this year is to register to vote in the upcoming World Zionist Congress elections. Your vote matters. In the last election ARZA won an amazing 47% of the vote - and for the first time money from the Jewish Agency, funded largely by the United Jewish Appeal, began to be directed to helping support Reform rabbis, congregations and social justice programs in Israel. We now have the opportunity to build on that success. Please - if you have not already registered - take the form at your seat and register either on-line or by filling it out. If you voted in the past, you must register again. Every person 18 years and older can register, and registration is only the first step. When you vote - vote for those willing to support an Israel that will be open to all expressions of Jewish life and hear the cries of those who are without power.

The Jewish Responsibility to Others

God's response to Hagar (the quintessential stranger) is a reminder of Torah's overwhelming openness to the pain of all human beings, not just Jews. Thirty-six times the Torah teaches us to open our hearts to those who are not part of the people of Israel. "Do not oppress the stranger." (Exodus 22:20) "Love the stranger." (Leviticus 19:34) "There should be one Torah ... for the Israelite, and for the stranger." (Numbers 15:29) The rationale is simple - "for you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."⁴

The Jewish community's response to the cries of pain in the world - to the disasters of last year's hurricanes in Florida, to the devastation of the tsunami and to the recent evacuation of North Orleans - should make us proud. What we (and so many others) did, however, must not lull us into thinking that individual charitable giving is adequate enough a response.

The gales of Katrina blew away much more than homes. It shattered more than lives. What was blown asunder was the veneer that America is nation that treats every citizen with justice and dignity. I do not believe that those who suffered in New Orleans were abandoned because they were black, but I do think they were less cared for because they were poor. What we witnessed there opened a window on the growing disparity in our society between

⁴ Exodus 23:9

those who have and those who do not. It is a blemish on this nation that so many millions cannot receive adequate health care. It is a moral stain on us all - although clearly a responsibility of Congress and the Bush Administration - that the numbers of the poor have risen over the past five years, while the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the richest Americans has accelerated. Shame on us! Do we not hear the cries of need?

True, not everyone can be treated the same. In the Torah God "favors" Isaac, but still finds a blessing for Ishmael - and responds to his cry. *T'ruah*. Sisera's wails echo through the millennia. Even those we hardly know must stir our compassion. The prophet Jeremiah's plea to his contemporaries who failed to take note is a reminder that we not close our ears or harden our hearts: "I set watchmen over you, saying, 'הַקְשִׁיבוּ לְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר' Listen to the sound of the shofar.' But they say, 'We will not listen.'"⁵ Rather, we should listen - and not only for the sake of others, but because hearing the cries of the needy can make us whole.

Anne Brener, a California based therapist and rabbinical student, recently wrote of her volunteer work with Katrina evacuees. She speaks of people grateful and full of faith. One elderly African-American woman she met fled from her destroyed home in Mississippi. She told her, regarding Katrina [with a strong Southern dialect] "She sure did spread her wing over us." Then she said, "I think God was trying to tell us something." When Brener asked what that was, she conclude, "We are too divided. God wants us to come together."

The sounds of the shofar bring us back together. Young and old, sick and well, connected and disaffected - in the sound of the shofar we are one. One in knowing that we are in pain, one in seeking to hear more clearly the silent and uttered cries of those in need, one in hearing the brokenness in our own hearts. How, our sages pondered, could human beings hear the sound and so "walk in God's ways"? By opening their hearts and comforting mourners, clothing the naked and protecting the innocent. Others, however, claim that the truth is that when we truly listen - and show kindness to others - God walks with us.⁶ May we have the heart to make it so.

T'ruah. Listen to our God. Listen with all your heart and soul ... Close your eyes and listen.

⁵ Jeremiah 6:17

⁶ Talmud, *Sotah* 14a; *Tanna Debe Eliyahu*, 143, chapter 28 [26] end