

Awakening Lovingkindness

HaMakom Rosh HaShanah sermon for 2017/5778
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Ashrei ha-am yoday t'ruah Adonai, b'or panecha yehalaychun, yehalaychun

I learned this chant from R. Shefa Gold, the words are from Psalm 89.

Happy are those who know the sound of the shofar,
they walk in the light of Your Presence

For the past month of Elul Jewish people around the world have been listening for the sound of the shofar, many of them every day. In the services for this day of Rosh Hashana and again on Yom Kippur we will hear those sounds maybe 100 times. What is it about, this sounding of the shofar during these chaggim, these holy days?

We surmise that in ancient days, the shofar was used for many purposes of communicating from hillside to hillside, perhaps as warnings, alerting the people to dangers or sending other kinds of signals.

In these times as part of our prayer service the shofar sounds a spiritual alert—a wake-up call, a call to remember. This is after all, Yom haZicharon in the Torah—Day of the Remembering.

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“Happy are those who know the sound of the shofar, they walk in the light of Your Presence.” What is the meaning of this line in the psalm? I want to unpack it a little with you here tonight.

The psalm says happy are those who know the sound of t'ruah— not hear *the sound*. I think that this is key: "yoday" the word used, refers to the kind of knowing that is not intellectual but rather a deeper knowing. It is *visceral* as in "I know it in my gut" as if we must hear it in such a way that it awakens our consciousness and affects who we are and how we engage with life. Then, says the psalm, we will be happy because we will be walking, ie, living in the Presence of the One.

Reb Zalman of blessed memory used to tell the story of his daughter Shalvi asking: Abba, when we wake up in the morning can we wake up more? The invitation tonight is to think about the shofar as a call to wake up more and to continue to seek to awaken ever further.

Waking up to the realization of the true nature of our minds, to the reality that is not conditioned by the material world. Re-membering and re-turning to our true home, our true self.

R. Alan Lew of blessed memory, wrote that the shofar reminds us to turn inward, shift our focus from the outside world and examine the lens through which we view the world. He tells us to examine the screen of our own consciousness, our conditioning that colors and dictates how and what we see and how we relate to the world and others in it. He offers this instruction as the first step in the process of t'shuvah, this time of self-

reflection in which we are engaged and continuing through these days of awe—these days of miracle and wonder.

T'shuvah is inter-personal and it is also intra-personal. From Norman Fischer, the Zen master who is a Jewish meditation teacher, I heard "God remembers us so we can remember ourselves and our inner condition, tuning in to our own hearts to remember the One and to take courage to do the things to repair the heart." All of us have hearts that have been armored and this is the time to dis-arm, to create spaciousness in our hearts.

The path to awakening to which the shofar is calling us, is the path of t'shuvah—going into ourselves so that we can see where our thoughts, assumptions, and perceptions are patterned responses, conditioned by our upbringing, our circumstances, our culture. We examine ourselves and learn when and how to push the refresh button or the reset or where the software is no longer serving us or perhaps it is our hard-drive itself that needs an upgrade. It is not an intellectual process per se. It is perhaps awakening as much as we can to that vast spaciousness that is right here in our lives, something we cannot grasp or know with our intellect. A spaciousness that we can only find by concerted practice—like learning to play a musical instrument. It requires cultivating faith in the unseen realms. Buckminster Fuller was once asked by a student who he thought was the most important figure of the 20th C. Without hesitation he named Sigmund Freud. Why, the surprised student asked. What about Einstein? Because, said Fuller, Freud introduced his single great idea upon which all

significant developments of the 20th C are based: “the invisible is more important than the visible”.

The high holiday liturgy contains us a possible roadmap for our inner journey in the form of the chant we repeat frequently during these holy days — the 13 attributes of the Divine. These are the qualities that are called out when Moshe asks to see how Divine glory is manifest in the world : *YHWH, YHWH, El Rahum v'chanun, erech, apayim, v'rav chesed v'emet, notzeir chesed lalafim, noseiy avon vafesha, v'chatah, v'nakay*

R. Rami Shapiro in his book *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness*, offers a practice built upon exploration of these midot/attributes. He devotes a chapter to each quality. I find his interpretations and the practice intriguing and I want to share a taste with you tonight as a guide that might be of assistance in navigating this territory and so that you might find a way for yourself to respond to the call of the shofar this year.

1. YHVH: Realizing the divinity of self: Opening to what is beyond ourselves by opening to a larger awareness
2. YHVH: Realizing the divinity of other.
3. El: Creative Power: Cultivating creativity: realizing that we humans are a creative act
4. rahum: Engendering compassion: capacity to open to life. R. David Wolfe-Blank, z"l, wrote, *the merciful womb*, containing the duality of criticism and acceptance.

5. v'chanun: Finding grace: The ability to engage life as it is without wanting it to be something else
6. erech apayim: slow to anger; acting with equanimity: long face=expansiveness—how much room can you make in your body, heart, mind and life for reality as it is in this very moment. Engage the world from perspective of spacious mind. Extending one's tolerance.
7. rav chesed: Creating kindness: doing right by the powerless, facing the suffering in the world; continuing self-reflection, using right speech, offering tzedakah and experiencing generosity of spirit.
8. v'emet: Bringing forth truth: Truth is we don't know what truth is and understanding this is the beginning of wisdom
9. notzeir chesed l'alafim: Preserving kindness for 1000's of generations: R. Shapiro says "remembering and retelling tales of kindness". This seems especially important these days where there seems to be a societal addiction to tales of negativity, cruelty and violence. R. David Wolfe-Blank: experience of kindness recurring in such a way as to build confidence.
10. nosay avon: Forgiving iniquity: Forgiveness means letting go, not clinging to memories and feelings: this is not the same as forgetting, excusing, accepting, denying or numbing but rather is a letting go. Looking to know and understand rather than judging.
11. vafesha: Forgiving willfulness, intentional error—finding ways to regulate addictive compulsions
12. v'chatah: Forgiving errors and omissions

13. v'nakeh: Cleansing, cleaning yourself of delusion in order to see clearly.

Rabbi Shapiro says “thinking you have to change [in order to practice lovingkindness] is the delusion that makes change impossible. When you find yourself engaging in behavior that is harmful to yourself or others—just turn away. Turn away.

R. Sue Levi Ellwell writes: When we forgive ourselves, we may be able to see that others are just as vulnerable as we are. When we have compassion for ourselves, we gain perspective on our own strengths. None of us is all good or all bad. None of us messes up all the time, and none of us is consistently perfect. We are humans, with human failings and foibles. And when we begin to forgive ourselves, we discover that the act of heart-opening is a source of enormous strength. When we forgive ourselves, and put an end to the blame game, we can move on. We begin the essential work of repair. Compassion is contagious—when we treat ourselves with gentleness and care, we discover we can treat others with a generosity of spirit and patience that may surprise us. And then true repair, tikkun, begins.

There is a custom in many congregations for someone to stand up and ask for pledges—tonight I am that person but it's not the kind of pledge you dread. After hearing these 13 middot I invite you to take a moment, go inside yourself—as Gd said to Avraham avinu: lech lecha—walk to yourself.

Now as I chant the 13 attributes, reflect on which of these you might choose to work on in the coming year. It could be one for the year or, as R. Rami's book suggests, 1 midah each week for 13 weeks.

I am not going to ask you to stand up and pledge but to make it to yourself and perhaps later to share with a trusted friend or relative.

I'd like to conclude with a poem by William Stafford

You reading this, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world
than the breathing respect that you carry
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life—

What can anyone give you greater than now,
Starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

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Sources:

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness

Rabbi Alan Lew, This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared

Norman Fisher, Everyday Zen podcasts

Rabbi Sue Levi Ellwell, High Holiday sermon