Rosh Hashanah First Day 5781                                   Rabbi Daniel H Liben

The Shofar of Hope

L’shanah Tova!  A happy and healthy New Year to all of you!  I hope you took advantage of my suggestion this morning to walk outside during break, and to take in the beauty of God's creation on this Shabbat Rosh Hashanah.   Truly, *“M’lo Kol Ha’aretz Kvodo:* The world is filled with God’s glory”!

Because today is Shabbat, we have to defer blowing the Shofar until tomorrow, the second day of the Holiday.  Although Rosh Hashanah falling on Shabbat is a relatively common occurrence, there is nothing common about the way we are entering this New Year.  We are living through a moment in time that none of us could have imagined.  For more than six months, a pandemic has upended our lives in ways that we could not have predicted.  And, though we know that it will end, much of what we consider to be normal in our lives has been put on hold. And so there is a certain irony to the fact that even blowing the shofar has to be deferred today..

So let me invite you for a moment to at least imagine hearing its blasts.  That much, we can do today.  *Take a couple of deep, cleansing breaths... and soften  your gaze, giving them a rest from watching the screen ... Now just imagine that you are hearing the long, clear blast of Tekia..and ask yourself, what is it calling you to change in your life?  ...Now imagine listening to the Shevarim...do its three broken cries mirror something broken, something that needs healing, inside of you?  ...And finally, hear the staccato notes of the Teruah....what might they be telling you...is there a message in them that you are meant to decipher….?  Take one more deep, cleansing breath, and return your attention to the screen.*

 Like many of you, I am entering this New Year with an unusual mixture of hope, and uncertainty...and loss. The losses this year were so varied in their distribution, and yet they all feel shared:   For some families, Covid 19 brought serious illness, or even the death of a loved one.  Listening to the evening news reports of ongoing Covid-19 casualties, our hearts collectively break, again and again.

 For others, the pandemic unleashed financial troubles, necessitated painful social isolation, especially for our elders, and frustrated long awaited plans of all kinds.   For young people, there were the graduations and proms that didn’t happen the way they imagined, or the sports teams they never got to try out for in the spring.   Children, who spend their entire school year waiting for summer camp, were disappointed in a way that grown-ups can’t completely understand.

And then there were the weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and all the other simchas that were either dramatically altered, or postponed.  In my own family, the pandemic forced us to forgo a trip to Israel this summer, where we would have celebrated Sara and Adam’s Jerusalem wedding, and would have had our first chance to hold Jonah and Nofar’s first baby, now 4 months old.  We are still waiting for both.

And yet, in spite of all of that, I *am* entering this New Year with hope- more muted perhaps, than in other years, but hope, and even gratitude.   Let me tell you why: As a congregation and as a larger community, I am amazed at how resilient we have been, how ably we’ve rolled with the punches, and adapted to completely unanticipated conditions.

Let me tell you about the young couple who decided not to postpone their wedding, but instead pivoted from a huge traditional affair to an intimate, socially distanced, backyard huppah.   And you know what?  They transformed the wedding of their dreams into what became… the wedding of their dreams.  Or, the Bar Mitzvah kids who chanted Torah to the community over zoom, and discovered that truly powerful Jewish rituals, moments of transformation, can happen in your living room, with your family.  That’s a really important lesson to learn, one that those families will take with them through their lives, and something that would never have happened in an ordinary year.  And, we learned that Zoom Services, brises and even shivas could bind  us together, both to rejoice and to give comfort.

It’s the custom to blow the shofar each morning during the month of Elul, as a way to prepare ourselves for the New Year.  What I have been hearing in that daily trumpeting, and what I hope we will all hear tomorrow when we blow the shofar, is a loud, clear call to life.  A timeless call that reminds us that the world is born anew, and that renewal and hope are woven into the very fabric of creation.

 Jews everywhere will keep this most sacred tradition of the shofar tomorrow, but creatively, conforming to the requirements of limiting the size of groups, maintaining social distancing, outdoors, and wearing masks.  Following the advice of Israeli medical experts, even my shofar will be masked, to limit the potential spread of droplets.   Like many synagogues, we have organized multiple outdoor shofar services tomorrow afternoon, in locations all over Natick and Framingham.  And, I can’t wait to see some of you in person tomorrow.  

But, what of those who can’t go outside, either because of age or infirmity?  For many of us, the only option tomorrow is to hear the Shofar through a computer screen.  Will that be good enough?

Or,  as the question was recently put to me: “Is it kosher to hear the shofar- that is, does a person fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the shofar- if she hears it over zoom?”  From the perspective of Halacha (Jewish Law), this is a serious question, and not only regarding the issue of using electronic devices on Yom Tov.

 The Mishna teaches in tractate Rosh Hashanah that there are two requirements to the mitzvah of hearing the shofar.  The first is that we need to hear it with intention.  That is, if we just happen to pass by a house and hear someone blowing the shofar, that’s not good enough.  We have to have had the conscious intention to listen, to be fully present to it in that moment.

The second requirement is to be certain that what we are hearing is actually the sound of the Shofar itself, undiluted by an echo.  This is the example the Mishna gives: “If the Shofar is blown in a pit, or a cistern or a jug, if it causes an echo, then it does not fulfill our obligation to hear the shofar.”  Now, if you are wondering why a person would blow the shofar in a pit or a cistern to begin with, imagine that the Mishna is describing a time of persecution, when it would be necessary to sound the shofar furtively, in the shadows, hidden from the authorities.

Sadly, given the long, often tortured history of our people, this is not merely theoretical.  In too many times and places, we chose to observe the Sabbath, circumcise our children, or sound the shofar, at the risk of our lives.  The Mishna teaches that even under such circumstances, the sound of the shofar must be pure, and not confused with an echo.

But what can we do when the sound of the shofar itself is unavailable to us, and all that is left is its echo?   Let me tell you a story about such a time. It’s about a shofar that was blown on Rosh Hashanah in 1944, in Auschwitz.  For years, stories circulated about the appearance of shofars in the death camps, shouting their illicit and defiant cries under the very noses of the Nazis.  There are similar stories, of Jewish prisoners risking their lives to light makeshift menorahs; or to steal a brief moment to sit in a rusting oil barrel in order to say the blessing over sitting in a Sukkah; or to trade away precious bread rations in order to keep Passover.

The story of this particular shofar is told by Dr Judith Tydor Schwartz, director of Holocaust Research at Bar Ilan University, in Israel.  It’s her father’s story, Chaskel Tydor, who survived nearly six years in Buchenwald and Auschwitz.  How the shofar arrived in the camp is a mystery.  Some shofarot likely arrived in Auschwitz in mid-1944 with the 440,000 deported Hungarian Jews. Their belongings, left at the camp’s railway platform where arrivals were selected to live or die, were stockpiled at Birkenau in an immense goods warehouse, whose loot was often smuggled out.

In the fall of 1944,  Cheskel Tydor, who, as a longtime inmate was given the job of assigning work details, contrived on Rosh Hashanah  to send fellow prisoners on a distant detail where they might safely, and privately, pray.  He did not know that they carried something with them.  But when they returned, a prisoner confided to him that a shofar had been produced and blown.

Although only a few prisoners actually could have heard it, the story of it spread through the camp.  That a shofar was blown at all, in such a brutal place, was enough to give people hope, to buoy their will to survive.  It inspired prisoners to imagine that what they thought was fixed and unchallengeable about their fate, might actually be otherwise.

Hope, as Rebecca Solnit so eloquently phrases it, “... locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen, and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is the room to act…”

And so, in the darkest days of our people’s sufferings, in the very depths of the hell known as Auschwitz, the mere echo of the shofar fulfilled its purpose, and raised the cry of possibility and of hope.

 On this most unusual of New Years, we are painfully aware of how much we don't know about what will happen in the coming days, weeks and months.  And that frightens us.  Will our loved ones stay safe?  Will we continue to have jobs that put food on the table?  How long will we have to juggle zoom school for our kids while we are working from home?  Will there be a vaccine that will work, and when?

But fear is not the *only* response to these unknowns, though it may be our first response.  *Hayom Harat Olam,* the Mahzor declares: t*oday the world is born.*   Rosh Hashanah is an invitation to embrace the unknown as the source of   creativity and possibility.  And, I would suggest to you, this infinite, mysterious space is not only where we find hope, but where we find God.

Moses, standing before the burning bush, asks God, “when the people ask me who sent me, what should I tell them?”  God reveals His name as “Yod Hey Vav Hey” the four letter root for the verb “To Be”.  He says to Moses, “Tell the people that, EHIYEH sent you.”  Ehiyeh- which we understand to mean: “I will be what I will be;” not fixed, but always unfolding, known yet unknown, infinite in possibility and in hope.

In psalm 27, the special psalm for these Holy Days, the psalmist wavers between his fear of abandonment, and his desire to be held in God’s presence; acknowledging his fear, but choosing to hope. It concludes with the words, “ *Kaveh el Adonai, chazak  v’ya’ametz libecha, kaveh el Adonai: Place your hope in the Eternal! , Be strong, take courage, and place your hope in Yud Hey VavHeY.”*

If that is what we hear in the shofar, if only in its echo through a Zoom screen, then the shofar will have achieved its purpose for us, and we will have fulfilled our obligation to hear it.

A few months after that Rosh Hashanah in Auschwitz, in the final months of the war, an inmate furtively pressed something into Chezkel Tydor’s hands.  It was the shofar, and this was undoubtedly the inmate who had sounded it.  “Keep this,” he said.  “*My* strength is waning, but maybe you are stronger, and have a better chance to survive.”  Chezkel kept it close, always, until the end of the war, and through his time in the DP camp that followed.  Eventually, he arrived on a Haganah ship to the shores of pre-state Palestine.   Gazing from the ship’s deck towards the coast of Haifa, how could Cheskel Tydor ever have known that he would reach this moment?   He pressed the shofar to his lips, blew into it, and released a loud, pure sound.

*In a year of instability, may you find the eternal within you*

*In a year of trauma, may you find the strength to heal*

*In a year of injustice, may you be an instrument of change*

*In a year of so much illness and suffering, may you be inscribed in the book of life*

*In this New Year, may you be blessed*

*May you be a Blessing*

*And may you find hope.*