**The Forgotten Cry**

**Rosh Hashanah Day 2 – 5776 (2015)**

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“One time, the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory commanded Rabbi Zev Kitzes of blessed memory that he should learn the *kavanot* [the special mystical intentions] of each shofar blast, because he would be the one to blow shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Zev learned the *kavanot* and wrote them down on a piece of paper to look at when the shofar was being blown. He then put the paper in his pocket.

When it came time for shofar, he began to look for the paper, but he was not able to find it. He looked to and fro, and realized that he did not know what mystical intentions should be done. He became very upset. He cried out with a broken heart, and the shofar was blown without the *kavanot*.

After this, the Baal Shem Tov said to him, “In the King's palace there are many rooms and chambers and different keys for each door. But, an axe has the capability of all the keys. An axe can open the lock of any door. So it is true with the *kavanot*. Each heavenly gate has a different *kavanah.* But, a broken heart can open them all. When a person breaks their heart before God, it is possible for them to enter through all the gates in the palace of the King of Kings, the Holy and Blessed One.” (*Stories of the Baal Shem Tov, Or Yesharim*)

The sounding of shofar is described in the Torah in two distinct ways. One sound is called “*ha’avrat shofar*” (sounding the shofar) while the second is called a “*teruah*” (or a blast). According to our rabbis “*ha’avrat shofar*” is the simple long call of the shofar or what we know as the *tekiaah*. *“Teruah”* on the other hand caused some consternation and debate among the rabbis. In fact, according to many interpreters, the original *Teruah* and how it is supposed to sound, is lost to us.

The rabbis described *Teruah* as the heavy sighs and moans of a distressed person. In this version, the three distinct sounds of the Shofar (which we call *shevarim*) are reminiscent of a person moaning in pain or agony. *“Ke’adam ha’goneach mi’libo, ke’derech ha’cholim she’maarichin be’genichoteihem”* – “As a person whose heart moans, just as the elongated groans and grunts of people who are ill.” (Rashi, BT Rosh Hashanah 33b)

Unkelos, along with other Tanayim, offers an alternate explanation. According to them, *teruah* is *yevavah*, it is an actual cry (not simply a grunt or a moan). In this version, the nine consecutive blasts of the Shofar are reminiscent of a person sobbing and crying. *“Ke’adam ha’bocheh ve’mekonnen kolot ketzarim smuchim zeh la’zeh”* – “like a person weeping, whose cries and sobs are short and continuous.” (Rashi, BT Rosh Hashanah 33b)

The Talmudic debate concludes on a surprising note (literally). Unable to identify the sort of crying *teruah* was meant to represent, the rabbis decided to follow both opinions. We blow the shofar three consecutive times following the opinion that *teruah* is symbolic of a moan or a grunt. We then also blow nine consecutive short sounds following the opinion that *teruah* is a sob or a cry. In other words, the decision was made to accommodate both opinions because the original meaning of *teruah* was lost to us.

A few hundred years after the Talmudic debate was settled by adopting both opinions, during the Gaonic period the religious leaders of the Jewish community in Babylon were asked a fascinating question. *“Mikodem meh hayu ossim?”* – “Before the Talmudic debate was settled, what did Jews do?” *“Ve’lo ken hitachen she’henichu shanah achat be’lo tekiah?”* – “Is it possible that they didn’t blow shofar one year [that they had forgotten what a *teruah* was meant to sound like]?” (Otzar HaGeonim, Masechet Rosh Hashanah, p. 61)

How could it be that the interpretation of the most important mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah – how to blow a *teruah* – was forgotten and lost? How was this matter ever even up for debate such that we ended up needing to accommodate two different opinions?

This question is so basic that it is quite hard to find a truly satisfying answer to it. Still, this morning let’s focus on an explanation provided by Maimonides in his code of law, the Mishneh Torah.

Maimonides writes: “Over the passage of many years and throughout the many exiles, doubt has been raised concerning the *teruah* which the Torah mentions, to the extent that we do not know what it is:Does it resemble the wailing with which women cry when they moan, or the sighs which a person who is distressed about a major matter will release repeatedly? Perhaps a combination of the two - sighing and the crying which will follow it - is called *teru'ah*, because a distressed person will sigh and then cry? Therefore, we fulfill all [these possibilities].” (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shofar 3:2)

According to Maimonides *teruah* was lost to the Jewish people because of “the passage of many years and the many exiles” (*“lefi orech ha’shanim ve’rov ha’galoyot”*). Difficult historical circumstances caused us to forget how to sound the crying call of the shofar. The long years of exile, schlepping from place to place, and the many hardships encountered along the way and at each new location ultimately took their toll. We’ve paid a heavy price, materially, physically, and spiritually. This national trauma had a negative affect on the ritual side as well. Many long held traditions, even essential ones like the sounding of a *teruah*, were lost to our people.

Though Maimonides attempts to provide an historical context to help explain our question, for a moment permit me to read a psychological dimension into his explanation as well.

A number of years ago I met a woman who shared a powerful story about grief with me.

The woman, who was not Jewish, explained that when her father passed away she became emotionally numb. Loyal and loving, she took care of him during the last months of his life. After he died, she attended to all of his burial needs and settled all of his affairs. Throughout this time, she did not cry or shed a single tear. “My heart,” she said, “was in a state of paralysis.”

Months passed without an indication or any expression of internal or external grief. And yet, one day, as though out of thin air, she began to cry. In fact, she cried for a few days, almost without pause. At that time, she was forced to take a few days off of work in order to properly grieve for her father, observing something akin to a traditional Jewish *shiva*.

“What do you think happened?” I asked. She offered a simple answer, “I forgot to cry. Or even, I forgot how to cry.”

As some of you may remember, this past October I visited wounded Israeli soldiers at Tel HaShomer Hospital in Israel. At the rehabilitation center, I met Yehudah Yitzchak Hayisraeli, a young father, 21 years old, the very last soldier wounded in the Gaza War. Yehudah Yitzchak was and remains in a deep coma. Half his face is completely discarded, half is intact. Half of his skull and brain were blown to bits and pieces and half sustained by heroic medical efforts. His life was torn apart. Only weeks after his tragic injury, Yehudah Yitzchak’s wife gave birth to their second child. Yehudah Yitzchak will likely never hear his child cry.

During this past Yom HaZikaron, Israel’s Remembrance Day for fallen Israeli soldiers and victims of terror attacks, Yehuda Yitzchak’s wife posted on FB that she cannot mourn, the she cannot grieve or cry. She had not yet been blessed with Yom Hazikaron – a time to remember her husband. The time of her mourning has not yet come. Her family’s *teruah*; their profound need to let go and cry, has not yet arrived.

In her post, she begged for her husband not be forgotten.

Crying is oftentimes a sign of emotional health, or at least an early indication that a person is heading towards the path of comfort, healing or recovery.

Crying can also be a positive sign after one suffers physical injury. For example, I have frequently heard doctors say that a child crying immediately after a bad fall is a first good sign. If the child doesn’t cry, there might be greater cause for concern.

Maybe, just maybe, Maimonides had a similar idea in mind.

For Maimonides, and certainly for us, the question is not simply – How could we as a people have forgotten the crying sound of *teruah*? But on a deeper or more personal level the question is also – How could a person ever forget how to cry?

Here Maimonides’ answer becomes deeply illuminating. We forget how to cry *“Lefi orech ha’shanim ve’rov ha’galoyot”* – Due to “the passage of years as well as due to the many exiles.”

*“Lefi orech ha’shanim” –* “Due to the passage of many years.” Sometimes we don’t simply forget how to cry. Instead we forget to continue to cry because we’ve grown accustomed to a bad, unfortunate, or unhealthy ongoing situation. Some of us have become habituated to a bad work environment. Others have become comfortable in a comfortless relationship, family dynamic or social situation. Still others have become accustomed to other people’s disrespectful behaviors or to our very own bad habits. Without notice, and over the long passage of time, we seamlessly adjust and lower our expectations and adapt our lives. Things that would have made us cry long ago, no longer do. Time takes its toll. *“Lefi orech ha’shanim” –* “Due to the passage of years” we’ve stopped crying.

But we didn’t only stop crying. According to Maimonides, we may have also completely forgotten the reasons to cry.

*“Lefi rov ha’galoyot”* – “Due to the many exiles.” In spiritual or existential terms, exile is a form of self-alienation. On a personal level, exile is experienced as the loss of a sense of self. In life, a person can become lost even to the point that they no longer know that he or she is lost. Sadly, many of us might have encountered individuals who we too easily label as a “lost cause.” And yet, during this time of repentance and introspection, can we for a moment concede that maybe we too have some blind spots? Maybe, we too have areas in our lives that would cause us to cry if only, if only our eyes were not shut, if only our hearts opened up, if only we were able to not be lost? We each have places in our lives where we’ve become lost or estranged from our selves. *“Lefi rov ha’galoyot”* – “Due to the many exiles,” due to our growing alienation, we’ve forgotten that we needed to cry.

In the book of Leviticus, Rosh Hashanah is proclaimed as a day memorializing the sound of *teruah*.

*“Bachodesh hasheviie, be’echad la’chodesh, yi’iyeh lachem shabbaton, zichron teruah, mikrah kodesh”* – “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorating the sound of *teruah*.” (Leviticus 23:24)

Rosh Hashanah challenges us to pause – to take a “*shabbaton”* – a complete rest so as to reflect and then remember the sound of *teruah* – remember and recall the sound of our forgotten cries. Adversity and hardships, bad habits and the routines of life, have all made us callous and apathetic. We have forgotten our own need to cry.

To be sure, many Halakhic and rabbinic authorities argued against crying on Rosh Hashanah, insisting that the Jewish New Year be celebrated as a joyous occasion.

I for one remember the first time I cried, as I often do, from this *bimah* while delivering a Rosh Hashanah sermon. Later that day, Frayda teased me, saying, “You cried during your Rosh Hashanah *drash*, but you didn’t cry under our *chuppah* (the wedding canopy).”

In truth, some moments in life bring deep and profound joy. Certainly, this Rosh Hashanah might be like that for some of us.

In addition, tears obviously cannot be forced. All we can and must do is create a communal environment open, safe, and hospitable to both joy and pain, laughter and crying.

Still, at this time I find a recollection about the mystical luminary, the Ari z”l, as shared by his student Rav Chaim Vital, particularly meaningful:

רבינו האר"י היה נוהג לבכות הרבה בתפלות ראש השנה, אף על פי שהוא יום טוב, ומכל שכן בתפלות יום הכפורים, והיה אומר כי מי שאין בכיה נופלת עליו בימים אלה, היא הוראה שאין נשמתו שלימה והגונה. (שו"ת יחוה דעת חלק ב סימן סט)

“Our rabbi, the Ari, would cry a lot during the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, even though it is considered a holiday, and even more so during the prayers of Yom Kippur, and he would say that whenever a person is not befallen by tears and sobbing during these days, it is an indication that his or her soul is not wholesome or decent.” (Responsa Yechaveh Daat II 69)

According to the Ari z”l, crying makes our souls whole. Crying can remind us of who we truly are and what we stand to lose if we fail to mend our ways.

The Gerer Rebbe once explained that although sincere tears always gain admission above, the gates are still needed in order to help shut out false tears. Not everything is worth crying about, but some things require and necessitate our tears. Rosh Hashanah is a *Yom Zikaron Teruah* – it is our day, our sacred time, to remember the things worth crying about.

“Rabbi Aryeh Levin, a man of rare compassion and sensitivity, was once approached by a distraught, recently widowed woman who cried uncontrollably. All of his efforts to console her were of no avail. Finally the widow said that she would accept consolation if he could please answer the following question.

“Please tell me what happened to all of my tears? I prayed and prayed for my late husband, I recited chapter after chapter of *Tehilim* (psalms), and shed thousands upon thousands of tears. My very soul flowed into those tears. Were they all wasted?"

Gently, Rav Aryeh replied, "After a hundred and twenty years, when you will leave this world and ascend to the heavenly tribunal, you will see how meaningful and precious your tears were. You will discover that Hashem, that the Holy One, gathered them in and counted every single teardrop and treasured it like a priceless gem. Even one sincere tear is a source of salvation!" (<http://www.neveh.org/price/pricetrs.html>)

This year, this Rosh Hashanah, as we hear the sounds of *shevarim* and *teruah,* let us remember everything, every single thing that is truly worthy of our tears and cries. Let us truly remember our own need to moan and to grunt, to sob and to cry.

As importantly, may these different sounds of *teruah*, the sounds of our own forgotten cries, help us blast through years of negative habituation and self-alienation and give us the strength and courage to make our souls whole and our lives decent again.

May our tears open the gates of our hearts.

May our tears open the Heavenly gates.

May our tears bring us closer to ourselves, closer to each other, and closer to God and salvation.