

Isaac's Binding and Abraham's Finding
Rosh Hashanah Day II 5784 (2023)
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Rabbi Dr. Joseph Soloveitchik wrote about the experience of visiting his wife, Dr. Tonya (Lewit) Soloveitchik, while she was in the hospital battling cancer. He writes, "I could not pray in the hospital. Somehow, I could not find God in the whitewashed, long corridors among the interns and the nurses. However, the need for prayer was great... The moment I returned home, I would rush to my room, fall on my knees, and pray fervently. God, in those moments, appeared not as an exalted, majestic king, but rather as a humble, close friend... He was right there in the dark room. I felt his warm hand – *k'viyachol*, as if – on my shoulder. I hugged his knees *k'viyachol* [so to speak]." After his wife's death in 1967, the Rav would write, "After my father's death, I felt like a wall of my house had fallen down. After my wife's death, I felt like the entire house had collapsed."

In the Torah reading this morning, we find Avraham *avinu* in a moment where his whole house is collapsing, as he is asked to sacrifice his son Yitzchak. And like the Rav, I think we find Avraham vacillating between being able to pray and not being able to pray; torn between prayer and silence.

Our tradition tells us that the shofar should be made of a ram's horn to remind us of the binding of Isaac (bRH 16a). I'd like to suggest that the shofar is associated with the binding of Isaac, because the sound of the shofar can represent three different responses to crisis: tears, prayer, and silence.

First, tears:

A midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni describes the moment that Avraham puts Yitzchak on the altar. Yitzchak lies there and Avraham leans over him:

עיני אברהם בעיני יצחק ועיני יצחק בשמי שמים

Avraham's eyes are looking into Yitzchak's eyes, and Yitzchak's eyes are on the lofty heavens.

והיו דמעות מנשרות ונופלות מעיני אברהם עד שהיתה קומתו משוטטת בדמעות

And there were tears pouring out of Avraham's eyes and falling until he was swimming in tears.

Avraham looks into Yitzchak's eyes as tears stream from his face.

In the sound of the shofar, we are crying with Avraham.

The midrash continues:

פער פיו בבכיה וגעה געיה גדולה והיו עיניו מרופפות וצופות לשכינה

His mouth gaped open with sobs and he heaved a tremendous sigh and his eyes roamed, searching for the Shechina.

והרים קולו ואמר אשא עיני אל ההרים מאין יבוא עזרי

And he raised his voice and cried, "I raise my eyes towards the hills. Where will my help come from?" (Psalms 121:1-2)

While the text of the Torah does not include any indication that Avraham prayed, Chazal, our sages of blessed memory, understood that Avraham davened for a different outcome. With the sound of the shofar, we daven like Avraham.

The Mishna in Taanit 2:4 records the words of a prayer for fast days that says, "מי שענה את אברהם בהר" – The One who answered Avraham on Mount Moriah, הוא יענה אתכם וישמע בקול צעקתכם היום הזה

should answer you and hear the sound of your cries today.” Drawing on the midrashic image of Avraham praying, we can hear the ram’s horn as a sign that prayers are answered. The ram is not just a reference to the story of the *akeida*, the ram is a reference to the end of the story, the answer to Avraham’s prayer. With the sound of the shofar, we ask God to heed our cries and answer us like he answered Avraham.

But there are also times when prayers, and even tears, don’t come. Perhaps we feel abandoned; perhaps we’re overwhelmed; perhaps we can’t find the right words; or the hospital corridor is bleak and uninspiring. There are times when we, like Avraham, cannot untangle our conflicting needs and emotions. There are times when we don’t know the prayer inside of us. These are times of silence.

Rav Yehuda Amital writes about the fact that in the biblical text itself, Avraham is silent throughout the story of the *akeida*. Rav Amital writes, “Human speech... cannot express what lies in the recesses of one’s heart... The heart is a jumble of thoughts and feelings, and we struggle to convey to God what we really feel in words and speech.” Perhaps Avraham is silent because his feelings are big and chaotic. These are moments that we need the sound of the shofar. Rav Amital writes, “God gave us the mitzvah of shofar, and through it we transmit to God the emotions of our heart.”

The shofar is tears, and the shofar is prayers, and the shofar is also for the times that words and tears are not present or are insufficient. The shofar stirs and expresses something ineffable inside of us.

The Gemara records a tannaitic teaching that says that if you put one shofar inside of another shofar, so that one is inside of the other, if the sound that you hear when you blow out of both of them is the sound of the inside shofar, then you have fulfilled your obligation; but if the sound you hear is from the outer shofar, then you have not fulfilled your obligation. The Gemara expresses this by saying, “אם קול פנימי, אם קול חיצוני — אם קול פנימי” (bRH 27b). Taken metaphorically, this suggests that when you hear your inner voice, that’s when you’ve truly listened to the shofar. Even when that voice is not something that we can express with words, even then, we listen, and God listens. At the end of the *shofarot* section of the *mussaf amidah* we thank God, “כי אתה שומע קול שופר” — כי אתה שומע קול שופר, “because You, God, You listen to the sound of the shofar and heed the *truah*.”

The sound of the shofar is from God and it’s to God: It’s a plea for Him to recall His mercy and our devotion; a nonverbal plea from within; a howl like Avraham’s. At the same time, it’s an answer to our prayers, like the ram was to Avraham. It’s an encounter with something outside of ourselves, something vast and mysterious, a God that inspires reverence and fear. At the same time, it’s an encounter with a God that knows and wants our hearts. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 106b, in trying to explain why some prayers are answered and others are not, says:

הקב"ה ליבא בעי דכתיב (שמואל א טז, ז) וה' יראה ללבב

The Holy One Blessed be He wants the heart, as it is written “And God sees into the heart.” (I Samuel 16:7)

In just a few moments, the sound of the shofar will penetrate our hearts. Some of us have lost faith that our prayers will be answered; may we find the faith of Avraham in the sound of the *tekiah*. Some of us have lost our ability to cry; may we find the courage of tears in the *shevarim*. Others of us are only feeling silence; may God still heed our *truah*, even when we don’t have words or tears.

Today, I think, we’re supposed to feel a little like a tear-streaked Avraham, knowing that our lives are at the mercy of Divine command. We are meant to let the emotions crest within us, carrying our *tefillot* to *shamayim*. But if the prayers and tears don’t come, if we don’t even know what our prayers are, we should still find comfort knowing that both we and God will listen to the wordless cry of our shofar.