

The Silent Shofar: A roaring call for action

The Handmaid's Tale, a popular TV show based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of a dystopian society, is set in the US in the not-so-distant future. Fertility rates have plummeted, at least in part because of environmental pollution. An extremist Christian terrorist group has won a civil war and set into motion a fundamental Christian misogynistic society.

The horrors that are depicted in this show are mind-boggling. Fertile women are turned into handmaids for sterile women in the upper echelon. In order to keep the peace, authorities conduct frequent public executions, cattle prods, emotional warfare and any inhumane torture you can imagine. Yet none of these images (even the brutal rape scenes) are the scariest scenes in the show.

The most frightening scenes are the flashbacks to "normal life." We see handmaids and their families living lives that look exactly like ours: listening to music on iphones, going to work, driving cars... This is enough to send chills down my spine.

The change wasn't long and gradual; it happened in what seemed like moments, surely within in a generation. The show does an excellent job of highlighting the vanishing women's rights ... the main character in a flashback has to have her husband sign a form before she can pick up birth control. The school her daughter attends calls the authorities when her child comes to school with a fever, suggesting a working mother is an un-fit mother.

If I were watching this show four years ago, I would be struck by the violence and not at all fazed by the fragility of democratic society. Today, my perspective is completely different. I wonder: could these changes slowly creep up on us here? In my generation? Are we awake to the subtle changes challenging our society? I wonder, are we all sitting here asleep... **[SOUND SHOFAR]**. If you were asleep a minute ago, hopefully you are awake now. The *shofar* is our soul's alarm clock! There is no snoozing allowed.

The *shofar* is here to wake you up to our broken world, to make your insides quake and to make you absolutely uncomfortable with the status quo. It is the Jewish horn that begins the race or journey a month preceding Rosh Hashanah. The sound of the *shofar* is our call to action.

In the *Mishnah*, the first major collection of our oral Torah, we learn that there is only one *mitzvah*, commandment, for Rosh Hashanah: to “hear” the sound of the *Shofar*. What does this mean, to HEAR the sound?

We are taught that if people walk by a synagogue or are in their houses near a synagogue and hear the sound of the shofar and direct their hearts towards the sound, they have fulfilled the mitzvah. But if the same people hear the shofar and do not direct their hearts to the sound, they did not fulfill the requirement. So how do we direct our hearts to truly hear the *shofar*?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, explains that, “Unlike almost every other culture in ancient and modern times, Judaism is a religion of **sound**, not sight; of **hearing** rather than seeing; of the **word** above the image.” So, today, we are here to listen and reflect. We take this time of year to truly evaluate ourselves and determine where and how we can change our direction. We **cannot** be here simply for the “show”; we must complete and fulfill the true task of this holy day – by internalizing the *shofar*’s call.

This text demonstrates the rabbis’ belief about intention and action. It is not good enough to sit and listen to the sound of the *shofar*, even if you purposely came to the synagogue to do so. You must turn your heart towards the sound in order to fulfill the mitzvah. That’s right, if you came to temple today with the intention of hearing the shofar but don’t turn your heart to the sound of the shofar, you could be wasting your time sitting here.

We start to hear the shofar once a day every day for the month of *Elul* preceding *Rosh Hashanah*. These are our warning calls, cries, if you will, that the New Year is coming. High Holy Days are around the corner and you need to get spiritually ready. This practice—the anxiety of a check-up and facing the High Holy Days—can be scary. So the sound of the *Shofar* is coupled with Psalm 27, which is supposed to alleviate some of our fears: “When God is my light and my help; whom should I fear? When God is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread?” We can’t let our fear paralyze us; the *shofar* is here to propel us into action.

We call this practice *Heshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of the soul, an examination of who we are and of our words, actions and intentions in the past year. The *shofar* announces the arrival and departure of the New Year.

There are so many different *shofarot*, different causes or ways that we can be of service in the coming year. Which *shofar* will arouse you from your slumber? Which *shofar* will you turn your heart towards? How are we going to make sure that this year's *shofar* does not fall on deaf ears?

We have so many opportunities to turn towards the *shofar* in this year. We could try and increase voter participation. We could be nicer to the people we love but sometimes find agitating. We could care for those in our community we don't know but need our help through the dedicated caring committee. We could meditate or pray or participate. We could volunteer or attend or protest against... the list goes on and on.

We are all broken, and our world is so broken that we have many opportunities to truly turn towards the sound of the *shofar* and make a difference. This is what I believe "turning towards" really means. Hearing the *shofar* is supposed to excite our senses, to restart our hearts, to give us a little anxiety.

Sometimes it takes great courage to turn towards the sound of the *shofar*. Naomi Tucker, an executive for Shalom Bayit, a Jewish organization working against domestic abuse, posted a story from her travels to Disneyland. Naomi heard the sound of the *shofar* of gender equality and turned towards it. Naomi overheard a dad tell his seven year old son (as his wife and daughter listened), "Maybe, but the last time we went to the Haunted Mansion you screamed like a girl." Naomi walked over and said earnestly, "Excuse me. I know you want to be a good dad. Could you please not teach your son that being like a girl is bad?" He looked her in the eye and said OK, as if he'd genuinely taken it in without defensiveness. Wow! I know! She posted this story and encouraged others to call out behaviors like this... with the hashtag #menchup. Her behavior inspired others...

Marc Dollenger, a professor at SF State, was inspired by Naomi's story. When he witnessed discrimination, he turned his heart towards the *shofar*. While standing in line at the airport, a man who'd just received a food order from his wife turned to him and said, "Women. Can't live with them. Can't live without them." Marc turned to him and told him he always loves his wife and two daughters. This stranger grumbled, admitted he loves his wife and then changed the subject.

Confronting a stranger on the street takes a level of courage many of us don't have, but we might be able to challenge our family and friends who also often slip up and perpetuate the ills of our broken society. I am not asking you to act the way these people did (although you can if you like), since they might not be authentically you. I would, however, urge you to find your authentic voice for your beliefs and share them with the world. Which *shofar* will you turn towards this year? It's imperative you choose a *shofar* and turn towards it!

A rebbe once spent an entire day reciting psalms. Towards evening, he was still reciting when a messenger came to tell him that his mentor wanted to see him. The rebbe said he would come as soon as he was finished, but the messenger returned, saying that the mentor asked him why he had delayed. The rebbe explained that he had been reciting psalms. The mentor told him that he had summoned the rebbe to collect money for a poor person in need. The mentor explained, "Psalms can be sung by angels, but only human beings can help the poor. Charity is greater than reciting psalms, because angels cannot perform acts of charity." We can take a clear message from this ancient teaching: get up and act. Whatever you are doing to keep busy, even if it is as holy as reciting psalms... it's not as important as fixing our broken world.

Every one of our prophets was concerned with social justice. They all wanted the world to be a better place. Jeremiah chapter nine says "This is what *Adonai* says: let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let he who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the God who **exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth**, for in these I delight."

It's on earth that our deeds matter! We cannot discount how much our actions impact those around us. We are all connected; our actions, good deeds, kindness and justice work are much bigger than we can imagine.

Our souls are connected to our actions. Kabbalah teaches us, "When you pay attention to yourself and the world around you, you become a fully present and aware person. You are sensitive to each moment as a unique opportunity for recognizing the special quality of every individual, object and event you encounter. During times like these, you are especially

receptive. This willingness to receive- to be wholly open to yourself and to life- is the essence of spirituality.”¹

The sound of the *shofar* is our alarm clock. It’s up to us to not silence it and simply roll over with apathy. The *shofar* is summoning us to a year of action and intention—so wake up!!! If we stay asleep who knows what we’ll find when we finally awaken. We might wake up to find ourselves a handmaid in a nightmare of a dystopia around us.

Which *shofar* is calling to your heart this year? Do you want to focus on local politics, the election in November, environmental issues, women’s reproductive rights, feeding the poor, our housing crisis or caring for the neighbor that needs you? To help you figure out some great ways to heal our broken world, you can refer to this sheet, which can be found next to the apples and honey right after tonight’s service.

If this is where it ends, if you hit snooze, it was a silent *shofar*. You must turn your hearts toward the shofar. The sound of the shofar is our reminder that we are being summoned to do something real. **The shofar is a wake-up call; let’s turn our hearts towards action!**

¹ The Invisible Chariot: An introduction to Kabbalah and Jewish Spirituality but Deborah Kerdeman and Lawrence Kushner.