

# The Shofar Calls

Rosh Hashanah - I Tishrei 5778 – Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul, MN – Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker

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This was a challenging year to figure out what to say on this Rosh Hashanah.

Sometimes there is a topic everyone is waiting to hear or at least willing to hear.

This year there are at least seven.

As much as I would like to simply talk about *teshuvah* and our tradition's wisdom about our souls, our minds are spinning with what is going on outside our walls.

There is rising anti-Semitism. The image of a fringe minority, but vocal minority, shedding their white hoods and spewing their hatred openly on the streets is beyond disconcerting. Is that what we need addressed?

Or perhaps what it is like to live, to parent, to cope with increasingly bellicose saber-rattling with North Korea, with the threat of nuclear weapons?

Or the fragility of security after devastating hurricanes and shattering earthquakes?

Or maybe we need to hear about what is happening to confederate statues in many communities and the question of who owns history and how to address the racism that shaped the way our country includes or excludes people?

What about our broken immigration system and how new bans and threats of deportation are scaring many who are or who consider themselves American?

Then there is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 6-day war and the relentless status quo between Israelis and Palestinians that does not help Israel's status in the minds of many Jews let alone the suffering of many Palestinians, even though by many standards, Israel is doing well.

And this summer, there was Israel's delegitimization of the Reform, Conservative, and liberal Orthodox movements raising the question of how to nurture and inspire support for Israel while cultivating effective criticism?

When I first began my rabbinic life at Mount Zion twenty-one Rosh Hashanahs ago, somehow there was less urgency about what we needed to hear.

I have been listening a lot, listening to many voices in our community about all of these issues.

I have been hearing concern, outrage and strong opinions, and the need for support.

I have been hearing voices that reflect conservative perspectives about the responsibility of individuals to follow laws and seek to improve their own lives and other voices that reflect

liberal perspectives about the responsibility of the community to support those who have been disadvantaged by other laws. These are not mutually exclusive perspectives even though they can be. We need more spaces as Americans where we can talk beyond sound bites to push against conventional wisdom on the left and on the right.

I encourage each of us to listen to each other and to expand our circle of listening and to not judge based on the first thing said, but to ask questions to learn more.

We need those spaces and we will have them but not today.

There is a time for listening and there is a time for speaking.

Our tradition can speak clearly even with divisions in society. It can share values that transcend partisan politics without relinquishing its voice from the public square.

On this Rosh Hashanah rabbis from around the country decided to do something unprecedented, to speak common words from our pulpits. I will now share a message being delivered in synagogues across the country. It is called “One Voice for the New Year” and it was written by Rabbis Elka Abrahamson and Judy Shanks with input from many.

As many here know, Rabbi Abrahamson was Mount Zion’s rabbi in the 90s and I had the honor, privilege and joy of working with her and Rabbi Zinkow for my first three years.

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The Talmud teaches, “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.” As Jews we are held accountable in ever-widening circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One chutzpadik medieval commentator teaches we must voice hard truths even to those with great power, for “the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king’s actions to him.”

Today I speak words of protest, joining hundreds of my rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent. We will, without hesitation, decry the moral abdication of the President who fuels hatred and division in our beloved country. This is not a political statement.

We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Rosh Hashanah is Yom Teruah, the Day of sounding the Shofar, whose piercing tones sound an alarm, express our fears and especially in these times compel us to respond with a resounding call for justice.

**The shofar blasts: Tekiah [single shofar blast] The Sound of Certainty:**

As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, the “immortal declaration” that all [men] people are created equal. We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country’s history and advance its noble visions of tolerance. On this first day of the New Year WE are “Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” [Lev 25:10].

**The shofar blasts: Shvarim [3 shofar blasts] The Sound of Brokenness:**

Something crumbled inside us when we watched the televised images of Charlottesville’s streets filled with hate-spewing marchers. The wound reopened when in Boston the glass wall of a Holocaust memorial was shattered and here in Bloomington when the imam’s office at Dar al Farooq community center was bombed. How much more vandalism, how many clashes, which other cities? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of “normal,” of racist and anti-Semitic acts or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles. Let us never grow numb to the brokenness, but let our pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities.

Neither silence nor complacency nor waiting anxiously and fearfully for the next wounding event are options. Not for us. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, possessed a rare understanding of unfathomable brokenness. His memorable words sound a warning to us today, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.” May we never be neutral, never silent in the face of threats or of discrimination toward any. Let us interfere as **הַרְפֵּא לְשִׁבְרֵי לֵב** healers of the broken[hearted], and **וּמְחַבְּשֵׁי לְעֵצְבוֹתָם** binders of their wounds. (Psalm 147:3).

**The shofar blasts: Truah [9 short blasts] The Sound of Urgency:**

The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Racism is wrong whether it seeps into explicit anti-Semitism or not. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first Adam so that no human being could ever say, “my lineage is greater than yours.” But just in case we thought the white supremacists were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that many – but certainly not all - Jews in America are white,

those fiery torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened.

As Martin Luther King taught us, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny," whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.

### **The Shofar blasts: Tekiah Gdolah [lengthy single blast] The Endless Pursuit of Justice:**

*Tzedek tzedek tirdof* the Torah admonishes: "Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, God, give to you." *Tzedek Tzedek* implores us twice: once to pursue justice in the way we conduct our personal lives, and the second time to pursue justice in our community through insisting that our government upholds justice and redresses injustice for all. Our sacred text reminds us that for a community truly to inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and to unity.

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Thus ends the communal statement.

A few months ago, Mount Zion's Board reflected on what it meant to be leaders and their role on behalf of our congregation. Though unrelated to the statement I just read; the Board decided it was "dedicated to equality and to unity." Our Board signed a statement called "*Brit Olam – A Covenant with our World*". Dozens of synagogues across the country in the Reform Movement have done so as well and we anticipate hundreds of others will in the months to come. The *Brit Olam* states: "Across North America and around the world, vulnerable populations face profound challenges. As the Reform Jewish Movement, we are committed to meeting the urgency of now with moral leadership through congregational and community-based action."

The Board committed to "[f]ostering a culture of sacred and civil dialogue in our congregation where all opinions are heard", to grounding any action in our texts and values, to acting in solidarity with vulnerable communities, and to building relationships across lines of difference in our local community. Finally, the Board committed to the following statement: "In keeping with eternal Jewish tradition, we commit to lead our congregation in advancing Jewish values in the public sphere."

This is nothing new for our Jewish community.

It was emulated by Rabbi Yoachim Prinz who was one of the most sought-after preachers in Berlin in the 1930s and who was exiled from Germany in 1937, thank God.

In America, Rabbi Prinz tried to warn American Jews about what was descending in Europe. After the devastation of the Holocaust, he later devoted himself to Civil Rights in America and in 1963 at the March on Washington, he was the only Jewish speaker. He spoke right before Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech. Rabbi Prinz said:

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of ... the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

Ours is a tradition that helped inspire and shape the values of America.

Ours is a tradition that demands action and involvement in the world.

Ours is a tradition that knows that justice alone will not create the world we seek.

Tzedek is justice combined with *chesed*, loving kindness. And it is that measure of loving kindness that makes all the difference. We plead with God in Avinu Malkeinu to deal with us with generosity and with kindness, *aseh imanu tzedakah v'chesed*.

We seek a measure of leniency in how we are judged by God. We plead for *chesed*/loving kindness. And this is what we must reflect in the world as well. The Psalmist tells us that the world is built with one attribute and that is *chesed*, "*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*," [Ps. 89:3]. "The world will be built from love." The world will be built on words that heal, by hands that care, by eyes that smile. The world will be built by sharing these gifts God has given us.

Every community relies on passionate and engaged citizens; it relies on you to be insistent advocates for tolerance and enduring kindness between the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and enlivens every citizen and judges with loving kindness. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our city and in our country -- in this New Year. Let us build this world from love.