

**Darchei Noam: D'var for ROSH HASHANAH second day; 9-6-13**

**The Shofar and the Sounds of Change (naomi oxman)**

When ROSH HASHANAH comes rolling around every year, I cannot help but think of change. Starting one month earlier, in Elul, we begin our daily shofar blowings, an attempt to wake us up, individually and communally; a time to begin the process of self-reflection, personal scrutiny, revisit the past year and plan for the upcoming New Year.

When I think of change I'm reminded of those changing light bulb jokes...which soon could be obsolete with our long-lasting bulbs...you know,

"How many J mothers does it take to change a light bulb?" ...

"none, not to worry...so I'll sit in the dark."

Or "how many therapists does it take?"

"just one....but that's only if the light bulb truly wants to change."

In preparing for Today's d'var, I ran across more of these quips, which are seasonally and religiously appropriate... or inappropriate.

**Q: How many Jews does it take to change a light bulb**

**A: 30. One to change the bulb & 29 to give contradictory advice to the person changing it.**

**Q: How many Orthodox Jews?**

**A: This light bulb has never been changed and never should be!**

**Q: How many Reform Rabbis?**

**A: Don't worry, anyone can change it whenever and however they want to.**

**Q: And how many congregants does it take to change a light bulb in the synagogue?**

**A: Don't you dare touch it-my family donated that light bulb!!!**

**This question of change inevitably plagues me at this time every year; a time when we turn inward and are called upon to look at our “selves” and into our “selves”, participate in a cheshbon Hanefesh, an accounting of one's soul; when self-examination and introspection supposedly lead us to selicha; forgiveness, mechila; renouncing, and kaparah; atonement; all presumably front and center in our hearts and mind at this time.**

**My question: How much and what really changes when all is “davened and done” after the Yamim Noraim, these “awesome days” that we find ourselves in every fall?**

**What will really be different in the coming year?**

**Will business partners settle misunderstandings?**

**Will feuding family members make peace?**

**Will friends find their way back into each other's lives?**

**Will spouses forgive one another for infidelities?**

**Will children accept the inequities caused by a parent years earlier ?**

**Similarly, will parents let go of the unmet expectations of children who have disappointed them? ...**

**And we haven't even left our own backyard and neighborhood, so to speak, to begin grappling with the “other”? to begin to tackle the bigger issue of creating a more peaceful and harmonious world ,one less focused on the differences that divide us, but rather the similarities, hopes and dreams that unite us.**

**A world in which we readily experience the humanity of humans, the “tzelem elokim”, the image of gd that was invariably imbued in each and every being whom we encounter as we journey through our lives.**

We begin the month of Elul with daily shofar blowings, we recite selichot, we engage in rituals, gather with family and community, eat particular foods, and end these Aseret Yemay Teshuva; these 10 days of Repentence, with Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar; the day of atonement. We stay in shul, we daven, and we fast.

All done for the sake of making certain that indeed we will start the new year in a different place, hopefully with a different perspective; having a clean and clear conscience; we will have made amends, committed to something, someone or some ideal that will contribute to creating a better start this time around.

Does this really ever happen for you???

How is this done? It isn't easy and usually, we are waiting for the other guy to take the first step...often waiting eternally, as we are quite a prideful bunch.

As I thought about this, I thought of what my elementary school teacher, Rabbi Borenstein, back in the day at Torah Academy; he used to tell us:

Pay more attention to what you are doing than what your classmate is/isn't doing. If we all did this, how much better the world would be.

How right he was!

ROSH HASHANAH is an opportunity to scrutinize and judge one's own behavior rather than to sit in judgement of another...let's leave that to G-d.

Perhaps change would more readily occur were we to pay closer attention to the blasts of the shofar. The sounds of the shofar are meant to be the sounds of change. Listening intentionally offers us an opportunity to begin this difficult process.

I found many reasons explaining the meaning of the shofar, (found in our own machzor ) most based on Rav Sadiah Gaon. one of the last and most famous 10<sup>th</sup> century Gaonim, great Talmudic scholars. Included are the following:

Rosh Hashanah is the day that commemorates the creation of the world and it is described as the "coronation" of Hashem (G-d). As it is customary

to sound a trumpet at a king's coronation so we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

When the Jews accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai, the shofar was blown serving to remind us of the revelation at Mt. Sinai and therefore to renew our commitment to Hashem and to accept that Torah morality is absolute and G-d given

The shofar reminds us of the admonitions of the prophets and their calls to repentance.

Shofar blasts were sounded preceding a war - to rally the troops for action calling the people together for prayer and repentance. It is like an air raid siren that alerts us to danger, and summons us to action

We all know that the SHOFAR is the quintessential symbol of the holiday. We herald in the New Year, utilizing the ram's horn reminiscent of the story of Akedat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac that we read today. I know that when I hear a good shofar –blowing, I do tremble a bit. The shofar is meant to be a wake –up call, stopping us in our tracks as we listen to the various sounds and turn inward to listen to our inner voices, thoughts and feelings.

The question we must ask ourselves is will these shofar sounds awaken us sufficiently to begin to make changes in our lives?

As I thought about the shofar, I thought of the word itself. Shofar, comes from the root shin phey resh as in L'hishtaper, to improve, to better. The shofar is our yearly call to action to improve our “selves”; but its 3 sounds; those of T'KIAH, TRUAH, and SHEVARIM are what matter the most.

On a recent run, I pondered those words and it occurred to me that if I think of nothing else this ROSH HASHANAH but those 3 words; and really Listen to the sounds as they exit the shofar, which is what the mitzvah demands of us to do when we recite: “Lish-moah kol shofar”, to hear the sound of the shofar, perhaps the shofar blowing will inspire greater change

As the shofar will be blown shortly, I encourage you to try and meditate on these sounds.

And what is it that those particular blasts remind us of?

Embedded in each one is a clue as to what I thought about...and hopefully, what you will begin to contemplate when you hear the shofar.

**Teruah**; “ta, ta ta ta ta”....embedded is the letters resh and ayin; signifying the word for evil or bad; ask yourself when you hear the teruah; what have I done this past year that is bad? What am I ashamed of? Was I dishonest in my business deal? Did I cheat on an exam? Did I lie to save face? Was I behaving like a bully? What gossip have I spread? Have I been faithful in my relationships? Was I as good as I know I can be?

When, where & how have I allowed my yetzer Ha rah, my evil inclination to win over my Yetzer Ha tov? My good inclination? Can I do differently and be better next time around?

**Ra...Teruah!**

**Shevarim**: embedded in the word are the letters shin, vet, resh, signifying shever, a break or a crack. When you hear the sounds of shevarim;...think about the small cracks, the splits, the fracture or ultimately the complete breakdown that occurs in relationships. The slip of the tongue, the unintended hurtful words said in jest, the outright insult, the silent treatment and perhaps the complete break, the complete shever of a relationship that creates a heavy, often unacknowledged burden, due to the inevitable void caused by the loss of relationship.

How do I begin to repair the cracks that I've created? What if I just ignore the small ones, ? Will the fissures grow deeper and stronger dividing us more? Where do I begin to patch the breaks, the shever(s) in my life? Are they even

reparable? Do I believe that I can make tomorrow better than yesterday. If so, begin now today on Rosh Hashana, the birthday of the world, the start of your new world

## Shever...Shevarim!

**Tekiah**: Finally, the tekiah and for most of us there is a tekiah gedolah.

Not necessarily, a particular misdeed, but rather embedded in the word are the letters taf, kuf, and ayin; as the root of the word "nitkah" , to become stuck.

Ask yourself when you listen to the tekiah and the tekiah gedolah; where have I been stuck this past year? What is it that invariably gets in my way? Is it procrastination? Is it fear? Is it anxiety? Do I lack self-control? Am I too focused on money? Am I self-centered? Arrogant? Dismissive? Is it pessimism? Lack of faith? Do I pass the buck and not own up to my responsibilities? Do I apologize when I've done wrong?

What are those traits that keep me down? Is it stubbornness, that once served me well that now, perhaps works against me? Is it anger? Memories of wrongs committed against me that I cleave to like a lost lover; continuing to feed and fuel it, such that it paralyzes me from further growth; ultimately embittering and destroying me.

Where am I nitkah, stuck? Tekiah.

## What is my greatest Tekiah gedolah?

Let us turn in and hear our personal teruah, shevarim and tekiah and let them metaphorically exit from our selves through the shofar and when we recite "yehi rason" p. 438 (read & translate from the machzor)

We too pray and wish that the angels who are listening will pay attention to us and to our confessions and "yamlitzu tov Baadenu", that they will invoke for good on our behalf.

Will we make a shinui tov, a good change?... in order to insure a shana tovah, a good year; or will it be yet be another opportunity for a shayna tovah?, a good slumber; when we find ourselves just going through the motions as we habitually do; finding ourselves next year in the same place we were the previous year.

This question of change is a core concern of every individual who walks into my office. "Naomi, do things really change?", "Can people truly turn their lives around? Can things be different and better? Can relationships improve?

...and besides, why would I want to change?, when she, doesn't believe me anyway? I've tried apologizing...and I can be good for a while, not have a blow-up and yet, as soon as I mess up; I am told:

"see, you aren't really sorry, you aren't really trying to be different, to be better, you're the same guy. I couldn't trust you then, and I can't trust you now!"

I've been privileged to work with people who invite and allow me into the chambers of their soul. Individuals place their trust in me believing that I genuinely want to help them create a better self, a more welcoming and hospitable inner world.

One in which they can learn to accept who they have been, what they have done and forge ahead with the hope that things can change, relationships can evolve, mistakes, though not forgotten, may be forgiven and indeed the future can be better than the past.

Yet, how is this done?

I too sometimes wonder if it is truly possible, though having seen heartfelt remorse, and authentic forgiveness, dreams realized and goals attained, thankfully, more often than not, my faith and hope in people is restored and sustains me daily.

I think of the young man one hit away from an accidental overdose who after nearly a dozen treatments, hard work and commitment has kicked his heroin

habit, or the woman who has been fighting depression 24/7 nearly her entire life joyfully proclaim that she now knows what it feels like to “feel happy” for the first time in decades, or the anxiety ridden, pill-popping, young man who finished his degree after attending 4 different undergrad programs, as well as treatment programs, who is now married, feeling quite self confident and self assured; owns a home and working a “real job” with benefits and much opportunity for advancement in his career. How about the divorced woman, struggling with PTSD from being a victim of sexual abuse as a child and physical abuse within her marriage, who subsequently went on to pursue and complete graduate education and is now practicing as a therapist.

There are countless examples of individuals who through hard work and resiliency, persistence and commitment never gave up hope and have managed to make significant life changes.

Making changes, even small ones, are challenging yet possible, and each year, we are gifted with yet another opportunity to ask ourselves, what will be different this year? Will I sit on the side-lines and wait for change to occur, or will I actively participate in this sport called life, my life?

We know that just like in sports (here’s the sports plug Joe) it gets harder for us we get older, making changes is more challenging. We become habituated to how we hold the racket, swing the club or stand at the plate in batting position. We are reticent to attempt a change for fear that it won’t work or complain that it feels weird and uncomfortable. We assume that others won’t change either and expect them to react in their usual and expected ways. We revel in the predictability we come to believe about ourselves and others.

Yet, we know that if with consistent, intentional, and ongoing concerted efforts, little by little, we can effect a change and eventually, the newness of the change, will wear off and will be replaced by a new and better normal. It will feel natural and comfortable, perhaps subtle.

We must trust ourselves and each other more, be less judgmental and be open to allowing ourselves to see more than we have permitted ourselves to in the past. We must be willing to take risks.

I've been reading a book by Meg Jay on twenty-somethings, called: the Defining Decade; I recommend all of you read it, especially, the 20-30 somethings here today...if no time, then listen to her Ted Talk, it's only 15 minutes. She talks and refutes the notion that 30 is the new 20, and emphasizes the importance of taking a good hard look at your life and what you are doing with it...not falling prey to believing I'm only in my 20's and putting off the hard work and the steps that we need to take to become who we are meant to be.

She's right! Be responsible, be intentional and take charge of your life to the extent that you are able to. Step out of your comfort zone...you might be surprised!

Let us all commit, at 20, or 30, 60 or 70 ... starting today, to taking greater responsibility for our lives and for this Rosh Hashana; make this a shana tova, by making a shinui tov , a good change and not have it be a shayna tova , a sleeper year.

Recently, Rabbi Lamm , Chancellor of Yeshiva University, retired after 60 years of affiliation with and service to YU. He used his retirement speech as an opportunity to publicly express his own vidui: listen up:

“And it is to this I turn as I contemplate my response to allegations of abuse in the Yeshiva community. At the time that inappropriate actions by individuals at Yeshiva were brought to my attention, I acted in a way that I thought was correct, but which now seems ill conceived. I understand better today than I did then that sometimes, when you think you are doing good, your actions do not measure up. You think you are helping, but you are not.! ...And when that happens-one must do teshuvah. So, I too must do teshuvah.

True character requires of me the courage to admit that, despite my best intentions then, I now recognize that I was wrong. I am not perfect; none of us

is perfect. Each of us has failed, in one way or another, in greater or lesser measure, to live by the highest standards and ideals of our tradition -- ethically, morally, halakhically.

We must never be so committed to justifying our past that we thereby threaten to destroy our future.. it is one of the greatest trials of all, for it means sacrificing our very egos, our reputations, even our identities. But we can and must do it. I must do it, and having done so, contribute to the creation of a future that is safer for innocents, and more ethically and halakhically correct.

So this year on ROSH HASHANAH, when you hear the shofar, ask yourself ; which sounds resonate with you? the teruah, the shevarim and/or the tekiah?

Which bad deeds will you take responsibility for?

What cracks and breaks in your life will you own up to?

And how will you begin to get unstuck from what is holding you back.?

Where will you begin L'hishtaper, to improve your life as your personal shofar, your inner alarm clock awakens you?

When you hear that internal alarm, the sounds of your personal shofar, will you continue to hit the snooze button and remain asleep for another shayna tova; and have a sleeper year?, or will this year's shofar blowing be a true wake up call from your slumber so as to inspire a shinui tov a good change in order to insure a shana tovah..a good year, or minimally, a shana yoter tovah, a better year!

My hope and prayer is that all of us will pay attention to the sounds of our individual personal shofars. May our burdens be lightened in the coming year as we expel the teruot, shevarim and tekiot that we struggle with in our daily lives.

Let us listen with intent as we remind ourselves of the sounds we put out in the world; our teruot, our shevarim and our tekiot;

And may the angels above hear the genuine remorse we feel as we expel the sounds of sin and create sounds of change!

May they “yamlitzu badenu” invoke goodness on our behalf, as they ascend the heights to Hakadosh Barcuch Hu.

May Gd help us to create a shana yoter tovah, an even better year, for all of us in 5774!

Shana Tovah! Shinui Tov ! and Ketivah V’chatimah Tovah!