

The Three Voices of the Shofar in a Time of Transition

Adam N. Bender

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First, I would like to thank Rabbi Stoller for bestowing upon me the great honor of being asked to speak at this very special Yom Kippur Chapel Meditation.

Temple Beth-El and I go back a long time. I first started Hebrew School at Temple Beth-El at in 1953 at age 11. Dr. Jacob Philip Rudin was the Rabbi and Louis Gordon was the Cantor. They had not yet built the Main Sanctuary and High Holiday services were conducted in an auditorium.

I have had the great honor of being the *ba'al tekiah*, shofar blower, at Temple Beth-El for now 71 years. In 1955, just after my Bar Mitzvah, a shofar blower was needed for the Junior Congregation High Holiday services. Cantor Gordon knew I was a trumpet player, so he invited me to the position. I stood right where I am standing now.

For three years I blew the shofar in the Junior Congregation service and in 1958, at age 16, the year of my confirmation, I was first given the great honor to be *ba'al tekiah* at the main service.

This is a very different and important High Holiday season at Temple Beth-El. We are at time of great transition. Demographic changes and economic circumstances have forced us to sell our beloved Temple and rent a space in the present building more suitable to our size. In this season of returning, however, we are not only returning, we are also leaving. Those of us who have belonged here for longest time probably feel the greatest sadness.

It is natural to feel sadness. For many of us, Temple Beth-El is where we celebrated bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings, confirmations, and anniversaries. It is where we mourned parents, spouses, and dear friends. We have heard countless sermons there, prayed on High Holidays, and shared moments of joy and grief. The building has become part of our own life story.

The harsh ancient sound of the shofar beckons us to deal with these emotions by moving forward into the future with strength and confidence.

On Rosh Hashanah, our liturgy teaches that the sound of the shofar speaks through three great themes: *Malchuyot* (God's Sovereignty), *Zichronot* (Remembrance), and *Shofarot* (Revelation and Hope). These are not simply ancient theological ideas. They are a guide for moments of profound change—moments very much like the one our congregation is experiencing as we will have used the Main Sanctuary for the last time.

The first theme is *Malchuyot*—God's Kingship.

Malchuyot reminds us that while buildings are precious, they are not ultimate. Judaism has survived because our covenant has always been with God, not with bricks or mortar.

When the First Temple was destroyed, Judaism did not disappear. When the Second Temple fell, our people created the synagogue, the house of study, and the home as centers of Jewish life. Throughout

history, Jews have prayed in magnificent sanctuaries but also in hidden cellars, in forests, in refugee camps, and in living rooms. God's presence has never depended upon a particular building.

The closing of our Main Sanctuary reminds us that we serve something greater than ourselves.

The second theme is *Zichronot*—Remembrance.

The Torah repeatedly tells us that remembering is sacred. We remember not simply to preserve the past but to carry it into the future.

Every family here has precious memories rooted in that sanctuary. Those memories will always be with us. Every prayer uttered there, every child blessed there, every tear shed there, every celebration shared there has become part of the spiritual fabric of this congregation.

The sanctuary has shaped us, but it is we who gave it its holiness.

Jewish tradition teaches that holiness comes from the people who gather, not from the stones themselves. The walls held our memories, but those memories now live within us. As long as we tell the stories and continue the traditions, nothing essential has been lost.

Finally comes *Shofarot*.

The shofar recalls the revelation at Sinai, where the ancient sound of the shofar grew stronger and stronger. It also points toward the future—the prophetic vision of Isaiah that one day a great shofar will be sounded to gather our people and bring redemption.

The call of the shofar is not meant to be music to the ear. This is the only place in our liturgy where specific sounds, not words, communicate a very holy message. It is a very distinct and unmistakable sound specifically meant to startle us. As a neurologist, I am aware that sounds stimulate a part of the brain where memories are located. Certain sounds invoke specific memories. Think of it, these are the exact same sounds that our ancestors heard at Mount Sinai, that called us into ancient battles, and that announced new moon and the jubilee year. The shofar is a shrill and jarring call to repentance, reminding us where we came from and promising hope for our future.

Of great significance is that the commandment is not to blow the shofar but to *listen* to it. For this reason, in the blessings before the shofar, like no other blessing, traditionally, every word is emphasized, but two words need special emphasis: “*Melech*” {King} and “*L’shmoah*” to hear. Although being a *ba’al tekiah*, a shofar blower, is a very great honor, the mitzvah is not on me, the one who sounds the shofar, but on you, the congregation, to hear it. The *tekiah* is meant to stir us up and rouse us for what is to follow. [SOUND TEKIAH]. Hopefully, if I put any of you to sleep, that will wake you up!

If you listen to the very first notes of the musical “West Side Story,” Leonard Bernstein used French horns specifically to invoke the sound of the shofar. Repeatedly, the same sounds recur in the songs “Maria,” “Something’s Coming” and “Cool” and also in the overture to Bernstein’s “Candide.”

The central part of the mitzvah, however, are the next calls after the *tekiah*: The *shevarim* and the *teruah*. These are meant not to be fanfares invoking triumph and joy but the broken wails and whimpers expressing tremulous fear combined with awesome humility. [SHEVARIM-TERUAH]. *Shevarim* is three

broken sounds meant to simulate wailing [SOUND SHEVARIM] and *teruah* mimics a whimpering with nine staccato sounds [SOUND TERUAH].

The longer *tekiah gedolah* at the very end is merely a signal that the calls are now completed. I try to blow it louder and louder to simulate what must have been heard at Mount Sinai.

The shofar is never merely about looking backward. It always calls us forward.

The shofar is the most ancient of natural instruments, but it not a museum piece. It is an alarm clock that never ceases to awaken us. The ancient piercing emotionally raw sound gives us hope that Jewish life is always capable of renewal.

As we leave our beloved Main Sanctuary, the shofar challenges to ask: What new forms of Jewish life will emerge? How will we strengthen Torah learning, acts of kindness, worship, and community? What legacy will we leave to those who come after us?

The true measure of Temple Beth-El has never been the size of its sanctuary. It has always been the strength and dedication of its people.

If we continue, under the brilliant and caring leadership of Rabbi Brian Stoller supported by President Jordana Levine and Executive Director Stu Botwinick, to study Torah together, welcome strangers, comfort mourners, celebrate our children, support Israel, pursue justice, and care for one another, then Temple Beth-El will remain exactly what it has always aspired to be—a sacred community.

Yes, the closing of the Main Sanctuary is an ending. But in Judaism, endings are never the last word. New beginnings always follow.

The shofar specifically reminds us that every ending also contains the possibility of a beginning.

So perhaps this year, as we have heard the *tekeiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*, and the final *tekeiah gedolah*, we will have heard them with fresh ears. May the memories of our Main Sanctuary always be for a blessing.

May the community that sanctified that space continue to sanctify this future space located in Temple Beth-El's oldest building—the very same space where High Holiday services were held in 1928, the year when our Temple was founded.

And may the voice of the shofar comfort us in this challenging time and inspire us, as it has inspired generations before us, to move forward as one—with gratitude for the past, confidence in God's presence, and hope for the future. [SOUND TEKEIAH GEDOLAH]

SHANAH TOVAH and G'MAR CHATIMAH TOVAH!