



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

### Week 1 Video Teaching Transcript:

Welcome to week 1 of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality Shofar Project. I'm Michal Fox Smart, Chief Program Officer, and I'm happy to welcome you to our Elul intensive, The Shofar Project 5780. I am also pleased that we are able, this year, to partner with congregational, rabbinic and cantorial organizations that span the denominational spectrum.

Our theme for this week's practices – whether mindfulness meditation, yoga, or text study – is Awakening from our slumber, to live our fullest and most meaningful life starting right now.

The upcoming High Holidays will be unlike any most of us have known. The global pandemic has disrupted all of our lives and routines. Even as we yearn for normalcy, many of us sense a desire deep within us to do better than just return to things as they were.

**How can we foster and deepen our awareness as we enter a new year, and more fully embrace the opportunity we've been given to reexamine our routines, and live a life of sacred purpose?**

To help us begin to explore these questions, I invite us to turn to a text about hearing the call of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. These are the words of Maimonides, a Medieval Jewish scholar.

### Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4

אע"פ שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עורו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם. אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל הביטו לנפשותיכם והטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ויעזוב כל אחד מכם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה .

"Although the sounding of the shofar on the New Year is a decree of the Written Law, it hints at a deeper meaning, as if saying, "Awake O sleeper, from your sleep; O slumberers, arouse yourselves from your slumbers; examine your deeds, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator. You who forget the truth for the ephemerality of time, and go astray the whole year in futility and emptiness which is neither effective nor salvific—look to your souls; improve your ways and works. Abandon, every one of you, your wayward course and your harmful thoughts."

According to Maimonides, a person can sleep-walk through life. In fact, he suggests that most of us do. This text suggests that being shaken out of our routines and assumptions can be a good thing, and the call of the shofar is meant to do just that. It is meant to be forceful enough to wake us, while also inviting us to awareness, growth and connection. When we stand together with others and listen to the shofar, we stand in witness and support of one another in waking up out of our slumber, and starting to imagine a better way.

In addition, the text points to specific steps we can take upon awakening to make our lives more aligned with our highest values and potential. "Examine your deeds, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator." The first step is to "examine our deeds"; to become aware of our habits, responses, and behavior in a clear and honest way. Am I taking compassionate care of myself and others? Am I showing up in my relationships and my work as the person I want to be? Whom am I helping, and whom am I hurting? Maimonides notes that a lack of mindfulness leads many of us to spend our time on unworthy pursuits that do not bring us fulfillment, and may undermine our capacity to respond skillfully and lovingly to the need of the hour. He addresses everyone here, no one is perfect and we can all do better. How can we shake off our complacency, stop numbing and distracting ourselves? As we reflect on the past few months, what have we learned about what matters to us most, and how would we like to restructure our lives?

The next step is to return in teshuvah. I love the way coming to serve G-d fully is described as teshuvah, returning, even if I feel I have never actually achieved this level of connection before. The language of return reminds me that my soul is pure, that I have holiness and goodness inside me. Nothing I have ever done or said, and nothing that has ever happened to me can change that or take that away. We are invited to return, again and again, to the goodness and purity that are our essence.

And remember your Creator. When the shofar calls us to remember, it is not reminding us of an event that happened in the past. It is calling us to remember who we are, and why we are here. It is affirming that we are each here for a reason, and inviting us to cultivate and share unique gifts and healing that only we can bring to a world that needs us. And to remember that we are not just bodies, but also souls that long for meaning and for connection to others, to all Creation, and to G-d.

When I hear the shofar each day during this month of Elul, and on the high holidays themselves, I hope to embrace this powerful opportunity to take an honest look at my life, and to do some of the hard thinking and courageous reimagining that I long for. I want to awaken from my slumber, and build a life that is aligned with my values and priorities, where I show up more consistently as my best and most loving self. I'll try to let the sound penetrate through me, and to open my mind and heart, and spirit.

This week, the faculty of the Shofar Project--teachers from across the Jewish denominational spectrum--will be inviting you to continue exploring and deepening your capacity to awaken from slumber to live with greater awareness and intention. Through a variety of practices, including Torah study, yoga, and mindfulness meditation, you will develop concrete skills for growing your ability to wake up--and to examine your deeds, return in teshuva, and remember your Creator. A transcript of this presentation, along with questions for reflection, is available for download in the email you've just received.

We pray that this will be a sustaining week of deepening connection to the call of the shofar as a wakeup call, and that your practice will be of benefit to you and all you encounter.

#### Week 1 Questions for Reflection:

1. What do you think of Maimonides' suggestion that we can get up in the morning, go to school or work, spend time with family or friends, and all the while be slumbering? Do you feel you have gone through parts of your life sleeping? How awake are you now?
2. If you were to awaken from your slumber, what might you see and do? Whom would you like to reach out to? What are you waiting to do, say, or become?
3. As you reflect on the past few months, what have you learned about what matters to you most? How might you like to restructure your life?
4. What do you feel called to do at this time?