



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Week 2 Video Teaching Transcript:

Hi, I'm Sam Feinsmith, of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, 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 the congregational, rabbinic and cantorial arms of movements across the denominational spectrum.

Welcome to week 2 of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality Shofar Project. Our theme for this week's practice -- whether mindfulness meditation, yoga, or text study -- is Hearing the Pain of the World. The sound of the shofar can be understood as an expression of the pain and grief in our world, commanding our attention. Our practice this week will focus on attending to that which calls out for healing and repair, including our implication in the suffering of others and our planet and our capacity to respond.

The upcoming High Holidays will be unlike any most of us have known. We may have woken up to our deep interconnection to all people and our own fragility. We may have seen more clearly the deep injustice of systems and power structures in our country. We have heard voices pleading for life. Perhaps we are awake in a way we have not been before, or long to be so. How can we ignite, maintain, and even deepen this awareness as we enter a new year?

The global pandemic has disrupted all of our lives and routines. For some of us, the pain is too intense, and we avert our gaze or spend our time on unworthy pursuits that don't bring fulfillment or relief. In light of this week's theme, how can we more readily hear the pain of the world without becoming numb, resigned, cynical, or overwhelmed? How might we acknowledge and take responsibility for our role in perpetuating that pain? And how might we respond more skillfully to alleviate that pain by holding it within a larger, more spacious container of wholeness?

To help us begin to explore these questions, I invite us to turn to a text from the Talmud that seeks to understand the nature of the broken *teruah* blasts that come sandwiched between two *tekiot*, unbroken, even blasts. What we shall see in a moment, is that the Talmud understands these broken sounds to mimic a human sob. The shofar thus invites us to attune ourselves to pain and anguish: in ourselves, in others, in our community, and society.

For Abaye, the broken middle sounds of the shofar are patterned after the anxious, pained cry of our enemy's mother as she wonders why her son hasn't returned from war at the appointed time. Indeed, the reader knows that her son is dead. How surprising it

is that on one of the most hallowed days of the Jewish year we use an instrument whose call brings to mind the suffering of our enemy's mother. In this regard, the shofar is a call that beckons us to step out of our normal dualistic way of thinking, our us vs. them mentality, and recognize instead our shared humanity and connection with all people, even those who may threaten us.

How so? To pattern the call of the shofar after her cry -- be it a sob (*teruah*), a moan (*shevarim*), or both (*shevarim-teruah*) -- is to suggest that the sound of the shofar is meant to awaken us to the most visceral and universal shared experience of human pain, one that transcends religious affiliation, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender identity, or ability -- that of a mother bereft of her beloved child.

What's more, Sisera, the Canaanite army General, was assassinated by Yael, an ally of the Israelites, and according to some commentaries, Moses' mother-in-law. Though the story is told from the perspective of a presumed Jewish author, it does suggest that the Israelites were complicit in Sisera's death, and by extension, in causing his mother's suffering. He may have been our sworn enemy, but he was someone's child, and we took that child away. In this light, the shofar confronts us with a question -- in what ways have we been complicit in causing suffering in the world?

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Ha'shanah 33b

מתני'. סדר תקיעות שלש של שלש שלש. שיעור תקיעה כשלש תרועות. שיעור תרועה כשלש יבבות...
גמ'. שיעור תרועה כג' יבבות:
והתניא שיעור תרועה כשלשה שברים אמר אב"י בהא ודאי פליגי דכתיב (במדבר כט, א) יום תרועה יהיה לכם ומתרגמין יום יבבא יהא לכון וכתוב באימיה דסיסרא (שופטים ה, כח) בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא מר סבר גנוחי גנח ומר סבר ילולי יליל.

Mishnah

The prescribed length of a *teruah* should be like three *yebavot* (lit. cries).

Gemara

But did we not learn [in a baraita]: **The prescribed length of a *teruah* should be like three *shevarim* (lit. broken sounds)!** Said Abaye: There is most definitely a debate here, as is written, "It (Rosh Ha'shanah) shall be a day of *teruah* (blasts) for you" (Numbers 29:1), and the Targum [Onkelos] translates, "It shall be a day of *yebava* (crying) for you" (ad loc.). And it's written further regarding Sisera's mother, "Through the window peered Sisera's...behind the lattice she cried (*va'teyabev*), ["Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the chatter of his wheels?]" (Judges 5:28). One master believes she was moaning, and the other believes she was sobbing.

Indeed, when I listen to the shofar with this text in heart and mind, I become aware that the shofar call is asking me to notice my habitual tendency to revert to a tribal us vs. them mentality that causes me to demonize, objectify, and dehumanize whoever I perceive as "other" and ignore their suffering and pain. As an antidote to that tendency,

the shofar reminds me to return to an awareness of the common humanity I share even with my supposed adversary. In this regard, the shofar functions much like George Floyd's dying words, "I can't breathe!," reminding me that we all draw the same breath, are someone's child, depend on the kindness and tenderness of our mother as infants, and as such are inseparable in our common stake as human beings. As I bring this shared humanity to heart and mind, I find I am better able to allow the pain of all others to penetrate deeply into my heart, touch me, and soften my feelings of being separate from them.

Likewise, when I listen to the shofar, I awaken to the fact that I am complicit in the pain and suffering brought about by injustice and ecological devastation. My own greed, inattention, mindlessness, willful ignorance, and unexamined habits have allowed destructive, oppressive, and rapacious systems and structures to continue and even thrive on the backs of other human beings, our planet, and countless species. I am part of the problem. I cannot stand aloof from the pain in the world. Of course, this truth can be quite painful, which might then cause me to avert my gaze, deny my culpability, harden my heart, or assert my supposed moral superiority over others as a way to avoid my own shame and guilt.

When this happens, I try to remember that the broken sounds of the *shevarim* and *teruah* are embraced by two *tekiot*— steady, unbroken, whole blasts. These point to the possibility that I might hold my own pain and shame in the embrace of a larger wholeness. That wholeness, which I experience as awareness itself, is so radiant, accepting, expansive, and steady that it can look directly at my broken heart without judgment or fear, cradle it with tender care, allow it to be as it is. In the light of this awareness, which transcends and includes all the brokenness and pain, I can use my pain to soften my defenses and mobilize me to compassionate, responsive action on behalf of those I have harmed.

The poem, [Please Call Me By My True Names](#), by Vietnamese Zen Master and peace activist, Tich Nhat Hanh, points to our complicity in the suffering in the world, and suggests that we might hold the pain of that complicity in the embrace of a larger whole. I invite you to read the poem after watching this video. A link was included in today's email.

This week, the faculty of the IJS Shofar Project will guide you in mindfulness meditation, yoga, and Torah study as supports to grow in your ability to hear the suffering in the world, allow it to deeply touch your heart, and hold it in the embrace of what is innately and immutably whole in you. They will support you to look -- honestly and tenderly -- at the pain of your own complicity in the suffering of this world and grow your resolve to respond lovingly. 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 those who badly need your love and kind attention.

Week 2 Reflection questions

- How did you experience the Talmud text? In what ways did it touch you (if at all)? What in the text was challenging? What was delightful or surprising?
- In what ways do you notice yourself tuning out, refusing to hear, see, or feel the suffering and pain in our world and your complicity in causing it? Which techniques does your mind use to avoid hearing, seeing, and feeling that pain-- distraction, willful ignorance, repression, avoidance, blame, self-righteousness? All or some of the above?
- What have you discovered this week, if anything about how to get around your mind's defenses?