



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Week 3 Video Teaching Transcript:

Hi, I'm Jonathan Slater, 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 congregational, rabbinic and cantorial organizations from across the denominations.

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 call of the Shofar is powerful, evoking in us varied recollections, experiences, and associations. In the first two weeks we have investigated how the Shofar's call can soften our hearts, to then open to hear the pain of the world. This opening is not separate from that which we bring to our own hearts. Allowing our own hearts to feel that pain can be overwhelming. To remain open to this awareness, we must attend to our own suffering, bringing compassion to our own hearts. We are pained at the awareness of our implication in some of the suffering of others. We are pained at the awareness of the immensity of the effort called for to ease that suffering. When we bring compassion to our own hearts, we create spaciousness instead of constriction. Cultivating this compassion can free us to do what we are called to do.

The Sages of old recognized this. In the face of דין/*Din* -- judgment, but also constriction and suffering -- they saw the need for רחמים/*Rachamim*, compassion and spaciousness. The Shofar is that which instigates the shift from one to the other.

Vayikra Rabbah 29:3

רבי יהודה ברבי נחמן פתח (תהלים מז, ו): עֲלֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּתִרְעוּעָה ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר, בְּשַׁעַת שְׁהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹלָה עַל כִּסֵּא דִין, בְּדִין הוּא עוֹלָה, מֵאֵי טַעַם, עֲלֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּתִרְעוּעָה, וּבְשַׁעַת שְׁיִשְׂרָאֵל נוֹטְלִין אֶת שׁוֹפְרֵיהֶן וְתוֹקְעִין לְפָנֵי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, עוֹמֵד מִכִּסֵּא הַדִּין וְיוֹשֵׁב בְּכִסֵּא רַחֲמִים, דְּכָתִיב: ה' בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר, וּמִתְמַלֵּא עֲלֵיהֶם רַחֲמִים וּמְרַחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם וְהוֹפֵךְ עֲלֵיהֶם מִדַּת הַדִּין לְרַחֲמִים, אֵימְתִי בַּחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי.

Rabbi Yehuda son of Rabbi Nachman opened up this verse: "Elohim ascends in tru'ah [one of the sounds of the Shofar], YHVH in the call of the Shofar" (Psalms 47:6). In the moment when the blessed Holy One sits on the Throne of Judgement, God ascends with

judgement. How do we know this? The Psalm says "God ascends with the *tru'ah*". But when the Jewish people take their shofarot and sound them before the blessed Holy One, God stands up from the Throne of Judgement and sits on the Throne of Mercy, as it says, "YHVH in the call of the Shofar." And God is filled with mercy and then has compassion for them, and switches their treatment from the attribute of judgement to the attribute of mercy. When? In the seventh month.

The seventh month is Tishre, which begins with our observance of Rosh Hashanah. The sounds of the Shofar and the Holy Days propel God's shift from the Throne of Judgment to the Throne of Compassion. The Sages intuit this in the verse cited: they connect God's Name *Elohim* with God's attribute of Judgment, and *YHVH* with the attributes of Compassion and Mercy. At first, at this time of year, God sits in judgment, but moved by our prayers and the sound of the Shofar, God shifts to Compassion.

We are invited to do the same, even now, in the month of Elul. If God can find mercy for us, despite our mistakes and flaws, perhaps we can do the same. To do so we are invited to listen for the "still, small voice" echoing in us of God's promise: *Salachti*, I have forgiven. (Num. 14:20)

In my own experience, when I am confronted by my mistakes, I sense an inner impulse to explain them away, to blame someone else, to find some excuse to argue why I am not culpable. When I recognize that inner movement, I try to pause -- to feel the heat of shame, the anger at myself for having made this mistake, my pain at the pain I have caused the other person. All of that is quite unpleasant, and it is not surprising that I want to push it away. But, when I can pause to feel those feelings, I can then also pause to bring some compassion to my own pain. That salve calms my heart, and instead of lashing out, I can take responsibility for my acts and make amends. The compassion I bring to my own heart creates the space in which I can bring ease of spirit to another who is in pain, and bring reconciliation.

To take our place with those whose suffering is now so present before us, to find the energy to engage in repairing the world, bringing justice and well-being, and to have the capacity to persevere, we need to cultivate compassion for ourselves. Rather than being overwhelmed by the calls upon us, we can dedicate ourselves to participating in bringing the changes needed to heal our country.

This week, the faculty of The Shofar Project will be inviting you to continue exploring and deepening your capacity to cultivate compassion for yourself through a variety of practices, including mindfulness meditation, yoga, and Torah study. We pray that as you listen for the still, small voice in your heart, calling you to justice, that it will also call you to shift from judgment to compassion.

Week 3 Questions for Reflection:

1. The Torah teaches “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). One understanding of this phrase is that we have to love ourselves first to truly be able to love our neighbor. Does this make sense to you? Has this been your experience? When? What was it like, and what did you learn?
2. Can you imagine that bringing compassion to our own pained hearts is an act of love? Can you love yourself despite your mistakes? Can you love yourself with your mistakes? How might extending this loving compassion to ourselves free us to extend compassion toward others?
3. As you listen to the sound of the Shofar this week, allow it to awaken you to your own pain, to the suffering around you, to the awareness that you are not separate from that suffering. Then, allow it to calm your heart, and steady you. Allow each day to deepen your capacity to remain connected to pain -- your own and others -- with compassion.