



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Week Four Video Transcript:

So far this month, we have practiced listening to the shofar as a way of cracking open our hearts and softening our defenses. We have begun opening ourselves to hearing and acknowledging more fully the pain of the world. And we have cultivated our capacity to respond to this pain with greater compassion for ourselves and others.

Now, in this final week of Elul, this is our practice: to hear the sound of the shofar as a reminder to transform ourselves into a shofar, into a living instrument through which the Divine Voice might flow. The shofar can awaken us to a sacred voice within us which yearns to repair that which is broken and right that which is wrong. This week, we listen deeply to the shofar, so we will remember to elevate our own voices and, in speech and deed, promote justice, love, and wholeness in this broken world.

Our foundational text for practice this week is from the prophet Isaiah. It comes from the traditional prophetic reading for Yom Kippur. God instructs Isaiah to speak to the Israelites, in language that inspires our practice this week:

וְהִגֵּד לְעַמִּי פִשְׁעֵם וּלְבַיִת יַעֲקֹב חַטָּאתָם: כִּשְׁוֹפָר הָרִם קוֹלְךָ קְרָא בְּגֵרוֹן אֶל־תַּחֲשׂוּךְ

K'ra v'garon al tachsoch; ka-shofar harem kolecha;

v'haged l'ami pish'am, ul'veit Ya'akov chatotam

“Cry with a full throat, don't hold back; raise your voice like a shofar! Declare to My people their transgression, to the House of Jacob their sin.”

The people ask: why isn't God pleased by their piety and their fasting? After all, they claim, they are seeking God, and searching to know the right direction. They ask God:

Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, why did You pay no attention?

God responds:

Because on your fast day You go about your business and you oppress your workers; you fast in strife and contention, and strike with a wicked fist!

לֹא־תִצְוּמוּ כִּי־יֹם לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם

Lo tatzumu cha-yom l'hashmi'a bamarom kolchem

When you fast as you do today, your voice cannot be heard on high.

Is such the fast I desire, a day for humans to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when YHVH is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of YHVH shall be your rear guard. Then, when you call, YHVH will answer; When you cry, God will say: *Hineini*, here I am. If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand, and evil speech, and you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the famished – then shall your light shine in darkness, your gloom shall be like noon.

Isaiah teaches us we hear the shofar so that we might imagine our very *being* as a shofar, a vessel through which the Divine can flow. When we soften our defenses, cultivate more spaciousness within us, release our self-focus, empathize with the pain of others, and access our capacity for compassion, we can become *klei kodesh*, holy instruments in a sacred orchestra.

Isaiah teaches us also to notice in the sound of the shofar a Voice yearning to flow through us that expresses the hopes, dreams, and needs of the vulnerable, the dispossessed, the powerless. Our spiritual practice, our fasting, is for one purpose: to spur us to “lift our voices like a shofar,” in word or deed, exposing the brokenness of our world, and generating actions to promote *tzedek v’shalom*, justice and wholeness.

This week, the sound of the shofar awakens each of us to the presence of an ever-present *kol demamah dakah*, a still small voice, within each of us. It alerts us to lift up that Voice, to amplify its message, to help bend the long moral arc of the universe towards justice, even if only a little.

The enormous brokenness of our world can overwhelm us. It can render us feeling powerless and speechless. Or, it can make us want to scream out of pent-up anger and frustration. But our practice this month leads us to the realization that the sound of the shofar is a Voice of love and compassion, as well as of justice.

The late Congressman John Lewis, like Isaiah, implored us to lift our voices like a shofar. “When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just,” he said, “you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.” In his final words,

John Lewis taught that when we allow the sacred wind, the spirit of God, to flow through us, we will be guided by “the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love.”

Listening to the sound of the shofar over the past three weeks, we have cultivated openness, empathy, and compassion. This week, the faculty of the IJS Shofar Project invite you to explore and deepen your capacity to speak and act on behalf of those who are vulnerable. Through a variety of practices, you will develop concrete skills for responding wisely to suffering and injustice by attending to and amplifying the “still small voice” within us, from an inner well of love.

May we be inspired in our practice by the opening stanza of James Weldon Johnson’s [*Lift Every Voice and Sing*](#), the Black National Anthem:

Lift ev'ry voice and sing
'Til earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on 'til victory is won

Week 4 Reflection Questions:

1. Can the shofar help attune you to a “still small voice” within you yearning to address injustice in your life and the world? What does that inner voice sound like?
2. What, if anything, gets in the way of your ability to speak when you witness that which you experience as wrong or unjust? How might you use the practices in which we have engaged to dissolve those obstructions, so that you might amplify the “still small voice” of justice within you?
3. When you speak in response to small or large injustices, do you tend to speak from annoyance or anger? What might help you infuse your words with compassion and love, rather than self-righteous anger?