

RH1 – Community

It is so nice to see all of you again – I'm always excited when it is Rosh Hashanah again. I think that most of us feel drawn to Rosh Hashanah for one reason or another. Whatever its pull upon you, you are here. There are some who come because they are moved by the majesty of the liturgy, there are some who appreciate being together with family and friends, there are some who are curious what I will speak about; I love seeing everyone come together again each year. Take a moment to look around the room - what a gathering we have! At no other time of the year do we have so many diverse members of our congregation together as on the High Holy Days. As diverse as our draw to Rosh Hashanah may be, we are united by a common thread: the desire to hear the sounding of the shofar. How disappointing, then, that we won't hear its call today as it is not just Rosh Hashanah, but also Shabbat. Let's explore together for a moment why we do not sound the shofar on Shabbat.

One might think that it is part of the prohibition against musical instruments, however, that prohibition exists on Rosh Hashanah as well and yet we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah when it is not on Shabbat. So there has to be more to it than that.

The earliest source on the subject is Mishna Rosh Hashanah 4:1 compiled around the year 200 CE. It reads: The festival day of the New Year which coincided with the Sabbath - in the Temple they would sound the shofar, but not in the provinces. When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai made the rule that they should sound the shofar in every locale in which there was a court.

From this we can see that the blowing of the shofar on Shabbat was prohibited even at the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, however, that particular locale had a dispensation to blow even on Shabbat which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai sought to expand after the destruction of the Temple, but he was not successful. Consequently, later rabbinic sources (Yerushalmi and Sifra) concluded that not

sounding the shofar on Shabbat was a Biblical prohibition. However, the rabbis of the Talmud drew a different conclusion and connected this prohibition to that of carrying on Shabbat. Whatever the origin of this prohibition we can see that it is ancient and has been followed for millennia even though it means that we miss shofar blowing when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.

So when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat we do not enjoy the call of the shofar to call to us, to wake us to do the work of the High Holy Day period. Do we ignore the omission and go forward as if it doesn't matter or do we work to make the silence meaningful? The silence is filled with prayers and memories; the rabbis said that in those years when we don't blow the shofar on the first day of Rosh Hashanah that we recall the sounding of the shofar. Silence too can have its place, but you have to develop an appreciation for silence. Often silence is portrayed negatively – “After his comment, there was an awkward silence” or “They were not sure how to fill the silence” why must silence be filled?

If you stop and think about it, silence is not so easy to come by. My colleague Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, Director of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem has written, "We live in a world of constant noise, an unending din. Even when alone, people today are connected, to their cellphones and MP3 players as if they were oxygen." It is not so easy to find silence. One man has made it a quest and written a book entitled, One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Search for Natural Silence in a Noisy World by Emmy Award winning acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton. He traveled across America finding and recording sounds of nature where "progress" had not yet encroached. The idea is an outgrowth of the designation on Earth Day 2005 of the quietest place in America, called One Square Inch of Silence; it is in a remote part of the Hoh Rain Forrest in Olympic National Park in Washington State. Stop and think about it when is the last time you heard true silence, no voices, no cars, no planes, or other sounds that distract us. We are constantly bombarded by noise.

Often we have to get past the noise that distracts us to find the essence as in Elijah's experience of God as described in I Kings 19:11-12: There was a great and mighty wind, but the Lord was not in the wind...the Lord was not in the earthquake...nor in the fire... but in the still small voice." Silence can also be golden. Silence gives us a chance to think and to process. I've spent much time this last year in contemplation about the synagogue and the role of the rabbi. And I've come to the conclusion that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Judaism, Conservative Judaism and Shomrei Torah are all having a hard time right now. But I think that the answer can be found in our tradition, knowing what to do is half the battle, the other half is doing it.

So let me tell you what I think we need to be doing from a Jewish point of view. In Pirkei Avot, The Wisdom of our Ancestors, we read, *Al shelosha divarim ha'olam omed: al hatorah, v'al ha'avodah, v'al gemilut chasadim*; The world is sustained by three things: by Torah,

by service to God and by deeds of loving kindness. (Avot 1:2) That is a traditional description of Jewish living – engagement with the study of Torah, prayer to God and doing mitzvot. That is certainly what synagogues were based upon; they were established as places where Jews could come to study, to pray and to do mitzvot. Jewish communities grew up around the synagogue and that is where the *Yidden* hung out. However, in 20th century American Jewish life, the Jewish community no longer lived near the shul, nor hung out there, nor made it their primary community. Synagogues became primarily places for Jews to worship and to educate their children, but it lost that community feel and became more of a congregation.

Now in the 21st century we have learned that people want more than a congregation to come and worship. Many people describe themselves as “Spiritual Seekers” and are looking for something personally meaningful which can be found in Judaism, but is not necessarily easy to come by. Others want something more from their synagogue than they have found in the past. Ironically, what

they seem to want is that sense of belonging that we have lost to the modern congregation. There is something compelling about the feeling that comes, as they said in the theme song to the popular television show *Cheers*, “Where everybody knows your name” it is a sense of belonging that we crave.

To try and improve ourselves as a congregation we began the process of strategic planning to help us get where we want to be as a synagogue rather than just being – existing as we have been and could continue to be. We wanted to be more, better, to be all that we can be; to live up to our potential; that does not happen by accident very often. And so we began to plan under the tutelage of consultants provided by UJA NNJ without cost to us. Rather than add to the burden of the small hard working cadre of volunteers that sustain us a volunteer organization, we sought a diverse and varied group of people to work together; and we found them. Some who had never been involved before, some who had not been involved in years, together with some who have their fingers on the pulse of

our current activities. One of the tasks was to recreate a Mission Statement for the synagogue, which they did and we approved as a congregation last June. It says, Shomrei Torah is an egalitarian Conservative congregation dedicated to worshipping God through prayer, Torah study and community service. We provide a cultural, spiritual, and religious home for a diverse Jewish population. Our congregation fosters strong Jewish values and a commitment to Jewish living through pride in our Jewish heritage, lifelong education, *tzedaka*, and *gemilut hasadim* (doing good deeds). It sounds a lot like the statement by Shimon HaTzadik from Pirkei Avot! It seems that in terms of what is really important not much has changed over the millennia.

I decided that it was not enough for me for the synagogue to try and improve without my trying to improve myself as a rabbi too. And so I also applied to a rabbinic growth program by STAR: Synagogue Transformation and Renewal – Good to Great Rabbis. They encouraged us to reconnect with our dream that brought us to the rabbinate in the first place – My dream was and is to create a caring community of Jews living life and learning; celebrating and

comforting together. As I looked at my dream I was struck by how closely aligned it is with the Mission Statement and the teaching from Pirkei Avot. So that tells me that I'm in the right place doing the right job.

When we first approached Federation about the strategic planning they told us that we were too small that we didn't have enough volunteers to both plan for the future and to run our day-to-day operation. We told them that we thought we could do it; and as far as the strategic planning Team from last year, we succeeded. We had a very diverse group of people who worked together to identify our areas of critical concern and then to write a plan to address those concerns. However, this year is about implementation of the plan and we have discovered that we do need more hands to help get the job done. Which brings me back to the original community vs. congregation discussion where we began – a community is more than just a congregation, a community is people who want to spend time together, who like doing things together, who find satisfaction in

achieving goals together. To be a place where “everybody knows your name” you have spend time with each other.

We are a congregation, but if we take seriously the plan that has been approved, then you want to be more than a congregation, you want to be a community, which is my goal as well. There is a spirit of volunteerism permeating American life in a way that we have not seen in many years. Congress declared the most recent Sept. 11th to be a National Day of Service in commemoration of all those who lost their lives on 9/11. I have heard about more college graduates spending a year in Teach America than in recent years. People are still going to New Orleans, as I did a year or two ago with Raffi, to help rebuild that devastated city. While I was there I met people who had gone for a week and decided to spend six months or a year helping out. People want to make a difference and have rediscovered that together they can. Together we can too. We can make a difference, we can transform our congregation into a community, but you have to want it to do it. It isn't easy, it takes time

and commitment. It used to be that synagogues recruited volunteers by telling people how much you are needed and while that remains true, it misses the point. If you want to get that feeling of belonging to a community, then you have to put in the time and effort or it won't happen for you. So yes, we need you; but you also need us. And that is a very good situation.

We are a congregation and my dream is that we become a community. To accomplish this we need to work together, community can't be done alone. If you see yourself as an ally in this endeavor, then please let me know, so that together we can make this transformation. I can tell you that doing this will be to your benefit as well, you will get as much as you give. So come let me know your thoughts, ideas, and dreams then perhaps together we can forge a new path in the New Year for Kehila Kedusha Shomrei Torah – The Holy Community of Shomrei Torah.

We have always had people involved in the life of our synagogue, but no longer enough to sustain us. So if you want us to be more and if you want to get more, then you need to give more. Harvey Miller has suggested a number of times that we focus more on the prayer for those who serve the community that we mumbled through earlier as we do every Shabbat. It is a lovely prayer and certainly fits with the theme of volunteerism.

May God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless this entire congregation, together with all holy congregations: them, their sons and daughters, their families, and all that is theirs; along with those who unite to establish synagogues for prayer, and those who enter them to pray, and those who give funds for heat and light, and wine for Kiddish and Havdalah, bread to the wayfarer and tzedakah to the poor; and all who devotedly involve themselves with the needs of this community and the Land of Israel. May the Holy One reward them, remove sickness from them, heal them, and forgive their sins. May God bless them by making all their worthy endeavors prosper; as well as those of the entire people Israel. And let us say: Amen.

Wishing you all a Shanah Tovah – A Good and Productive Year!