

SHOFAR: UMAN 2009

written by Yossi Katz

September 24, 2009

Amidst the silence of 15,000 men breathing in expectation, the Halachic anxiety reigns- until now.

The central core of Rush Hashanah- this year only one day on Sunday- will shortly be fulfilled,

the obligation to blow and hear the shofar and its shrill sounds.

The text reads: lishmoah kol shofar

to listen to the Kol of the shofar- the sound of the shofar

it is not music; it is a sound, a piercing note that cuts to the soul of the listener.

But wait! It is more complex than that.

The voice or sound is broken, punctuated by the very rests-the absence of sound- into rhythms; a syncopation.

So sound and rhythm but no music?

No sequence of varying tones? No.

It is not a trumpet, it is not a musical instrument, it can only convey the product of one of pitch.

So what is the message of this strange hybrid of sound, syncopation, rhythm but no variation in pitch?

The midrash teaches us this is designed to awaken the divine.

In one poignant text we are told He gets up from His seat of justice and moves over to the seat of mercy.

The question however remains who is doing the blowing?

Of course literally it is the Baal Tekiyah-our representative down here among us in the congregation.

and who is doing the listening?

the midrash would have us think of the Almighty!

And who is meant to hear Israel's sounds?

The penitent doing his Teshuva, yes again at the literal level.

On the plane level the mitzvah-the commandments to blow,
and for us who must listen, for this is the hallmark unique to
Rosh Hashanah rituals
to hear the hundred sounds of the shofar but,
clearly it is not only us.

Rather than the moralistic-pietistic version of "awaken ye
slumberers"
the shofar of this clarion call to awaken from spiritual
slumber to activity
it is that but much more;
maybe we are also being exposed,
allowed to listen in on the divine.
And not just the mechanics of His moving from one cathedra to
the other, from justice to mercy
although that too.

The Piacetzne Rebbe told us during the destruction of the
Warsaw ghetto-
that if we are sufficiently empathetic,
if we suffer alongside the divine sufficiently,
for Her pain and exile-
then we too can somehow be admitted into God's private chamber
of weeping and participate in the divine Bechi.

So it dawned on me standing in the silence before the shrill
among these men
in this Ukranian village
on this clear cool autumn day
in the 60th year of my life
that the sound of the shofar
is the cry itself
the Schechinah Herself
weeping for us
for mankind
for the brokenness of our lives
for her separation and exile from the divine her consort.

If so, our task is clear-
not only to be moved by His sound
but to be present to her pain as well
as we gather here in the year 5770
in the ongoing long persistent exile of the Galut
literally and mythically we too participate in the divine
weeping
for mankind who remains alienated from man, from family and
from self.

At this moment I feel the unique fellowship of these 15,000
pilgrims
men from all backgrounds gathered here in emunah
to listen together and be by the Rebbe
who taught us how to listen,
to the Schechina weeping.

These men have taken leave of family, children, wives, friends
and congregation
to gather here for this moment of eerie silence before the
blowing of the shofar,
the ram's horn
echoing Isaac's and all sons' perennial question to their
fathers "where is the ram?"
Where is the very sacrifice we continually make one generation
after the next,
the repetitive cyclic or akeda through history,
for the sake of the fathers and the sake of the Father
the mythic repetition of suffering and affliction
our Rebbe demands we continually as "ayeh haseh laola"

Here some 15,000 sons ask where?"?"
"Where are you Lord; in my life?"
"why are you so concealed?"
"How can I see You in my suffering?"

I need to fly 16 hours to a tiny Ukrainian village to feel
Your presence for a few moments,

a few cherished fleeting moments through the agency of this
shofar and my Rebbe.

At that moment-in the silence before the blowing
I feel Her Presence

Then She weeps piercing shrill notes of one pitch, no
variation, no melody, no counterpoint,
just one pitch that shatters the silent Ukrainian countryside.

And for a moment

We are privy to a piercing of the iron curtain that separates
us from the divine.

Poem by Dr. Jay Ungar