Tikkun Magazine, September/October 2000

Shofar of Tears

By Mordechai Gafni

A hundred blasts shatter the somber silence of the biblical New Year ritual. The shofar, Rosh Hashanah's major prop, is a ram's horn blown in a strange and evocative combination of notes. In mysticism, the words "rosh hashanah"-- literally "New Year"--are understood to have deeper shades of meaning. "Rosh" means "the beginning," while the word "shanah" derives etymologically from "shinnui," meaning "change" or "transformation." Rosh Hashanah, in the mystic's pen, then becomes "the beginning of transformation." This transformation, according to spiritual master Schneur Zalman of Liadi, is essentially connected to the shofar. What is the secret of the shofar's sound, the pleading, broken, and yet triumphant notes?

The word for shofar in biblical myth is "teruah." Teruah is understood by Targum to mean "yevava"--crying. The shofar is a crying instrument; a crying that resounds beyond words, beyond the narrow confines of language. These are tears sourced in the limbic brain--in that fantastic seat of intuition and raw emotion, the amygdala. These are transformative tears.

"But whose tears?" asks the Talmud, "Whose tears are we trying to access in the ecstatic and painful ritual of shofar blowing?" While the ultimate answer is, of course, "our own," the nature of biblical ritual is to access the self through the image of an other, an archetype, who represents us all. In effect the Talmud is asking--who is the archetype for the tears of the shofar?

And here our discussion truly begins. For the Talmud responds--the tears of Em Sisera. Em Sisera, liter ally translated, means the Mother of Sisera. Sisera, a figure from the early chapters of the Book of Judges, is depicted in the biblical midrashic literature as a heinous villain--a Saddam Hussein/Hitler type character, guilty of every atrocity imaginable against the Israelites.

One day Sisera is late, very late, in returning home from battle. The reader of the Book of Judges knows that his intended massacre has been averted. Sisera's forces have been routed and Sisera killed. His mother cries as she peers out the window. Her handmaidens comfort her, assuring her that her victorious son will soon cross the threshold of the house once again. Yet Sisera's mother continues to cry, understanding, as only a mother can, that she will see her son no more.

Empathy for Sisera's mother not withstanding--the talmudic masters are virtually inexplicable. Why is shofar blowing--the one ritual described by the sources as partaking of the sanctum sanctorum--patterned on the tears of a Hitler's mother? Indeed, not only do we trace the crying of the shofar back to this woman, but we go out of our way to pattern the notes of our shofar blasts precisely after the pattern of her tears. Indeed the reason for the variation of different kinds of blasts in the shofar ritual is because we are not quite sure how she cried, and we want to make sure to get it right! Adds a medieval writer 700 years after the talmudic period--" We blow a total of one hundred shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah because Sisera's mother cried a hundred times."

Why Em Sisera? What in the nature of this woman's tears did the wisdom masters find so compelling?

One approach is to understand the choice of Sisera's mother as a lesson to acknowledge the full humanity of our enemies. As studies of propaganda materials have shown, the enemy is never depicted with a face, and certainly not with a mother's tearful face. This lack of particularity is part of the process of dehumanization which allows us to kill. Sometimes we must kill. Sometimes pacifism is deeply immoral. Yet we can never erase the enemy's face. And the path towards re-imaging the enemy is to imagine his mother's tear-stained eyes.

And yet, poignant and powerful as such a reading may be, it still feels insufficient. One intuits another layer of meaning, an additional nuance which understands Sisera's mother as expressing a moment in our own souls, a stage of our journey in which only she can he our guide.

I want to share with you a different understanding of the shofar's music-an understanding that found its way into my soul one night--many years ago--in a moment of connection and clarity.

I begin with a mystical passage from the writings of Abraham Kook, the philosopher, mystic, and Chief Rabbi of Palestine.

> I am in the midst of exile.
>
> The inner essential I of the individual
>
> only reveals itself ...
>
> to the extent of the higher courage
>
> which is drenched with the pure light of higher radiance
>
> which burns within.

The first line of the quote comes from the Prophet Ezekiel who, before receiving the Vision of the Chariot, the lodestone of the Kabbalah, cries out, "I am in the midst of exile!" Kook understands Ezekiel's statement to refer not only to Ezekiel's physical exile, to the fact that he was standing on foreign shores, but as expressing a far more profound sense of inner fragmentation, an inner exile. The inner exile stems from the inner essential "I" being lost. I've lost my self some place: I'm looking for myself, I'm playing all sorts of roles and many assorted games, but I haven't found myself. This search for the "I" is taken by Kook to be the subtext of the Garden of Eden story. Original sin, writes Kook, is the inability to find the essential "I."

> The first man sinned.
>
> He became alienated from his own person-hood.
>
> For he turned to the opinion of the snake and lost himself.
>
> He did not give a clear answer to God's question where are you,

for he did not know his own soul

because his I-ness had perished

in the sin of bowing to a foreign god.

Original sin is listening to the snake. The snake here is not the fiendish villain. Rather, the snake represents any external voice or source of authority which is not my own. The snake, however, is paradoxically almost always a positive value, idea, or group that we have co-opted in our process of identity formation.

Clearly the questions at stake for Kook are questions of identity. How do we locate our essential "I"? In the modern Western context books like David Riesman's Lonely Crowd or William Hollingsworth Whyte's Organization Man come to mind. We were familiar growing up with people who defined themselves by their corporation or workplace: a Westinghouse man, a military man, or a General Electric man. In other societies--Israel for example--political parties played a similar role. One was either Left or Right--whether from a kibbutz or a development town--and that was part of one's essential self-definition. While these old identities have broken down somewhat, the vacuum they left has been quickly filled by other no less insidious false voices of personhood. You walk into a party and say "Hi, I'm Mark, I'm a doctor," or "I'm Pamela, a corporate lawyer." We wait for the earliest opening in the conversation which will allow us to establish our place by almost casually introducing our "profession." We feel like we have little else to profess. We have used competence and training to replace or at least drown out the call of soul and spirit.

If we manage to free ourselves of the professional identity trap, relationships lurk in the wings to seduce us. Our relationships becomes more than places of commitment, growth, and loving. Our relationships become us. Notwithstanding feminism, the role, "the wife of," remains prevalent in our culture, alongside the newly emergent role, "the husband of." If "of" dies then the "wife of" becomes the "widow(er) of." What is important is that "of" still provides a matrix of identity.

And the most beautiful, and therefore insidious, identity trap is children. The Jewish mother is but one archetypal representation of how we use children to form our identity. My children are me and I am my children is the mantra of this particularly common modern idolatry. When I first began teaching as a too-young rabbi in Palm Beach, an older Israeli couple approached me to talk about their marriage, which was apparently on the verge of dissolution. I sat there trying to look appropriately wise but was utterly baffled by the complexity of their issues and surely did not have an inkling of what I could do to be helpful. That is, until they got up to leave.

As they left, he turned to her--in a familiar voice--and said "Ema..." (Hebrew for Mom) and she responded to his rote referral with, "Okay Abba" (Hebrew for Dad). In our next conversation it emerged that their first child was born just a few short months after their wedding. Their youngest son had left about a year ago for school. And it was about a year ago when their marital issues began to take on a new intensity.

They called each other Ema and Abba--indeed, their whole relationship was based on being parents. Neither of them had done any of the work and reflection necessary to form an identity independent of their children. Consequently, when the children were no longer an active part of their lives, their relationship began to naturally dissolve.

There is a story about the Hassidic master Levi of Berdichev. He used to walk home from synagogue through the marketplace to see first-hand the lives of his disciples. One morning a man rushing to fulfill some apparently urgent task barreled headlong into the master, sending him sprawling. The master, however, was not offended; indeed, he noticed the man's alacrity and apparent perspicacity in pursuit of his goal. So he asked him--"Where, my friend are you running?" "Why I'm running to make a living!" The master, not yet satisfied, queried further, "Why is it so important to you to make a living?" The man was somewhat taken aback--no one had ever challenged that assumption or asked that question. He thought and he thought and then, light bulb!--"For the children, for the children. I am working for the children." The master nodded with a strange smile on his lips and they each continued on their respective ways.

Some twenty-five years pass and the master is walking--a little slower perhaps--as he always does, through the marketplace to synagogue. And again a man running in the opposite direction bowls into him. Again the master gets up and says, "Young man, where are you running?" The young man amazingly gives the same response, "I'm running to make a living." And the master asks--you know masters try and be consistent--"Why is it so important to make a living?" No one has asked the young man such a question before, so he stops and thinks, and then, light bulb!--"For the children, for the children of course." The master lifts his eyes heavenward and says, "Master of the Universe, when will I meet that one child for whom all the generations labored so mightily?"

We use our children to define ourselves. That is wrong. We need to love our children; one of the most gorgeous, beautiful, demarcating characteristics of biblical culture is the love and commitment of parents to children through the generations. Nonetheless, even love can become idolatrous.

It therefore strikes us as particularly significant that in the biblical literature, a literature where name is such an essential interpretive key, our heroine has none. The name of the biblical archetype for shofar tears is "the mother of Sisera." Totally defined as a mother, this woman is the paradigm of using our children to form our identity--so much so that her child, Sisera, even overshadows the woman's own name. We need but one more link to reveal the secret of shofar.

Return to an earlier scene in your life. Did you ever baby-sit? If you have you will recall that there are two distinct kinds of crying that a babysitter might hear. The first is a sort of gentle, sometimes incessant, quiet crying. These are spilt tears, to which we sometimes respond and sometimes ignore. There is, however, a second kind of crying, a heart-rending, earsplitting kind of cry, which rivets our attention and brings us instantly to the bedside of the baby. More often than not we find that the baby's security blanket or teddy bear or some other object of affection has fallen from the crib or been otherwise lost.

When we lose what psychologist D.W. Winnicott called one of our "transitional objects"--those objects we use to give us a sense of place and security in the world--we cry a uniquely poignant and piercing cry. Ideal healthy development--which is indeed only an ideal--requires that we let go of our security blanket and claim our true identity. What we so often do instead is trade up. We exchange our teddy bear or security blanket for a title of professional competence, for a socially acknowledged relationship role (wife or husband of), or even for the title and role mum or dad. Anything to avoid the terror of having to claim our own identity. Perhaps, we think in our most private subconscious moments, perhaps I do not have a self.

Although they are not our highest selves, these masks of ours are important. The masks we choose are also part of our identity. The biblical imperative, "You shall not make for yourselves molten Gods" is better translated as "you shall not make for yourselves Gods of masks." The Hebrew for molten is "masecha"--literally "mask." The implicit notion is that masks have their place but "do not make Gods of your masks." If you do not take off your mask then it becomes a God--the sum total of your identity. Masks, however, are hard to take off--it is enormously painful to stand naked in the mirror and say, "who am I for real?!" Yet that is the essence of Rosh Hashanah--the beginning of transformation.

This is precisely the moment of shofar crying captured by Sisera's mother. She has no other name. Sisera is her life, her self, her identity. She realizes that he is not coming home ... ever again. In one instant her mask has been torn from her face. She is left, in the words of Rilke--"with her face in her hands." She cries the cry of a baby who has lost his teddy bear or security blanket, a heart rending, painful, and potentially liberating cry, the cry of shofar. This is the experience we are called to on Rosh Hashanah. We are invited to the liberation of tears which wash away our pseudoselves, revealing underneath--if we dare but look--the self just waiting to be noticed and loved.

Source Citation

Gafni, Mordechai. 2000. Shofar of Tears. *Tikkun 15*(5): 46.