

## The Shofar's Call to Justice

Rosh Hashanah Morning  
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Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim  
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(I am indebted to my colleagues Rabbis David Adelson, Dara Frimmer, Eric Gurvis, Don Goor, and Andrea London for their words and wisdom which I have incorporated into this sermon.)

As one who cannot *for the life of me* get a sound out of the shofar, I marvel at those who stand before us and so masterfully elicit its primal noise. Other instruments change size and shape; their materials vary depending on time and place. But it wouldn't matter if you were in 21<sup>st</sup> century Charleston or 1<sup>st</sup> century ancient Israel – a ram's horn is a ram's horn, and I am so grateful to those who can bring its sound to life. For the mitzvah of this day, thank God, is not to *blow* the shofar (a commandment that only a select few of us could ever fulfill), but to *hear* it, to listen to its call. Yet what is it that we're listening for? What is the great and unique sound of the shofar meant to teach?

Every year, on Rosh Hashanah morning, we hear the story of the Akeidah – Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. We consider the depth of Abraham's faith, the state of Isaac's well-being. And the rabbis reflected upon Sarah's frame of mind, as well: How must she have felt when she learned that her husband nearly sacrificed her only son? There is a midrash that likens the sound of the shofar to her cries when she learned of Isaac's near death, ninety wailing sobs – and then she died, the very next detail revealed in the Torah and, for the rabbis, no coincidence. Ninety sobs, corresponding to the number of shofar blasts in a traditional synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. And so our tradition teaches that the sound of the shofar is a wailing sound, just like Sarah's cries – broadcasting the pain and incoherence of a contorted world. Our command to hear that sound on this day is a reminder to listen to the pain and brokenness of those around us. As we think back over the past year, how attentive were we? it asks. How well did we listen?

A few weeks ago, as the Gulf Coast readied itself for Hurricane Isaac, news stations all drew parallels to the devastating Katrina of seven years ago. It was a natural connection to make – Isaac even made landfall on the exact anniversary of Katrina's to the day. Captions below videos asked, "Have we learned?" – questions which, judging by their images of levees and canals, were apparently addressed at mechanics and engineering. But I couldn't help think instead of the question a colleague heard from a Religious School student in the aftermath of Katrina. Profoundly moved by the pictures of families sitting on their rooftops desperate for rescue, this twelve year old wanted to talk to her rabbi. The pictures of cars packed on the freeway leaving New Orleans behind – leaving hundreds of thousands of poverty stricken families behind, angered and frustrated this young girl. Good human beings left other human beings behind. There was no sense of decency, of caring, of community. Looking over to the many boxes of donated food that her congregation had generously collected to send to those stranded in New Orleans in their hour of need, she made a deeply perceptive comment: "All this food will help

for a short time, but how will we ever create a community that cares enough not to leave all those people behind in the first place?"

Thank God Hurricane Isaac didn't bring its worst against the levee system in New Orleans. Thank God mechanics and engineering seem to have been improved at least for the time being. Perhaps the questions of the news agencies have been satisfied. Yet *we* must still ask: "Have we learned?" We're good at attaining short term goals; we're good in a crisis. We're good at providing food to fill empty stomachs, clothing for those in need – and we shouldn't discount for a moment the import of these acts of loving kindness and compassion. But the sound of the shofar calls us to something more. "How will we create a community that cares enough not to leave all those people behind?" The shofar blasts, like the question of a twelve year old girl, remind us that our ultimate challenge as Jews is to serve as God's partners in creating a better world. This is the challenge, beyond social *action*, of social *justice* – to create that better world for our generation and generations to come.

For we do live in a broken world, and since that brokenness is all around us, we can't help but face it. Every day men, women and children go hungry – around the globe, yes, but here in our own community, as well. Too many right here in Charleston are homeless; too many do not have adequate, affordable access to healthcare. There is violence in our streets and disparity in our schools. And while our leaders – both in Washington and here at home – have the power to address these issues, all too often that power is tangled up in knots, and true leadership is lacking.

But there is also power within us, the community. Though it often goes untapped, when the members of a community come together; when they get to know one another and each other's concerns; when they join hearts, hands, minds and souls, the power that resides within us can make incredible things happen.

We've *seen* it happen...

In Columbus, OH, there was a policy in school handbooks that students could not be kicked out of school for not coming to school. Yet the superintendent was not enforcing the policy, and as a result numerous kids were in fact being expelled for truancy, creating a downward spiral for their futures and the future of the community. When congregations in Columbus organized in an interfaith coalition, they were able to win a commitment from the superintendent to uphold the rule on the books and devise other creative options to address attendance instead. As a result, they were able to keep 300 kids in school that would have otherwise been kicked out.

In Jacksonville, FL, the infant mortality rate was surprising ... and staggering. After congregations organized together, and researched potential solutions, there were able to ask for and get commitments from hospitals to implement proven baby-friendly practices. In those hospitals that have done so and enacted the recommendations, the infant mortality rate is now the lowest it has been in 20 years.

And sometimes it's just a no-brainer. In Boston, MA, members of their Interfaith Organization (GBIO) were concerned that youth from a particular neighborhood in South Boston were afraid

to walk home at night. The problem? The streets were too dark! Their fear might have led some to avoid participating in after school programs in the winter; it might have led others to carry guns. But when congregations came together, the youth themselves identified lighting at the Old Country Housing project as a priority, and the GBIO worked with them on a successful campaign to get the 50 plus lights that were out turned back on. A simple and pretty obvious solution, but it solved a significant problem – and it took pooling the community's resources (not of money, but of people) to gain the attention of their leaders and make it happen.

There are many more stories like these from cities all over the country, but perhaps the most exciting of all is the story we are just beginning to write here in our very own community of Charleston...

16 months ago, five other clergy and I gathered together with a professional organizer to explore the possibilities of congregation-based organizing in Charleston. That meeting took place in our board room here at KKBE. We began by reflecting upon what we each saw as the most pressing issues in our community, and brainstorming who else we might invite to join us at the table. When Reverend Joe Darby – whom many of us have come to know through our annual MLK commemoration – said that the six of us represented the most diverse assembly of clergy to truthfully reflect upon the challenges facing our community ... well, I was all in.

From those initial six, we have expanded to more than 20 congregations, with numerous lay leaders now working alongside their clergy in each synagogue and church – and with each meeting our numbers grow. Each participating congregation has invested funds which have enabled us to hire a lead organizer to steer our effort, our synagogue (and, as of this past week, our Brotherhood) included. And our wonderful organizer, Treva Williams (who is here with us this morning), has jumped right in with both feet, meeting continuously with clergy and lay leaders alike, to help us strengthen our justice network and work toward making the real differences in our community that we know we can make.

And now there are ways for each and every one of us to get involved. In the coming weeks, all of the participating congregations will be holding house meetings for their members to surface community issues and concerns. These “meetings” are unlike any you have ever attended before. In addition to learning more about the initiative as a whole, you'll be asked to reflect upon and answer just a couple of simple questions: What are the passions and fears that keep you up at night? Where would you like to mobilize the power of an interfaith community to make a difference? Like the mitzvah of hearing the shofar, our first task is to listen to these stories, because only then can we know their common themes and set our goals.

LuAnn Rosenzweig is our justice network captain here at KKBE. You can contact her to attend one of these upcoming house meetings, or even to host one of your own. Or send me an email, and I will happily make sure you are connected with LuAnn. I assure you that nothing could make both of us happier than inboxes inundated with your interest and willingness to participate.

Those who attend a house meeting are then invited (if you choose) to attend a Community Problems Assembly with members of all of the other participating congregations on October 29th. There we will share the issues raised in each congregation and vote to decide where we

want to focus our efforts community-wide this coming year. We can't tackle everything, of course, but as the Chasidic teaching instructs us: "When I say to myself, 'I can't do everything,' let it not be in order to do nothing." So we can't do *everything*, but we *can* do something – and that something, whether in the realm of healthcare or education or crime, can make an immeasurable difference.

Once we've chosen our community's focus on October 29th, Treva will lead a committee to research what we can ask of our leaders to make a concrete difference for the good in addressing the issue of our common concern. We'll look to other communities and cities to see what has worked there; we'll talk to experts and those intimate with the issues here. And then we'll *ask* for what we want. At an assembly, scheduled for April 29th – when we are aiming to turn out 1500 people from across the community (and we know we can do it) – we'll translate those numbers into power. We'll share the depth and urgency of our collective concern and urge our leaders to commit to take specific action.

Now let me anticipate at least one question I imagine is on the minds of some. Isn't this political? Doesn't it have the potential to be divisive? On the contrary, my friends. There are more than enough problems about which we can and do agree and, as we recognize our shared concerns, our community will feel closer than ever. Consider the following...

This summer, so many of us were devastated by the tragic murder of 17-year-old Marley Lion, found in his car in a West Ashley parking lot. I listened to the anguish of several in our congregation who had known Marley, a recent graduate of Academic Magnet High School, and others who didn't know him, but were nonetheless deeply shaken by the senselessness of his death. Then last Monday, at a Charleston Justice Ministry meeting, Maxine (a team leader from Morris Brown A.M.E. Church), was asked what community issue keeps *her* up at night. She immediately answered: "Crime," then continued, "that innocent boy who was murdered in his car...", and her voice trailed off with sadness. Friends, there is no doubt in my mind that the members of KKBE and Morris Brown, Grace Episcopal and James Island Presbyterian Church, the Unitarian Universalist Church and Circular Congregation ... all of us and so many more can unite over our common fears, embrace a shared sense of hope, and all but move mountains to make a difference wherever we set our minds to do so.

I want to be a part of a community like this. I want to lead a community like this. And I think you do, too.

Why did you join KKBE? For the Religious School? To worship in this beautiful sanctuary? Because we're the only Reform congregation in town? Those are all *true* reasons and *good* reasons. But what about this one: "Because I wanted to practice a different way of living that would help bring about a world filled with justice and peace." OK, that might not be the first reason to roll off the tongue, but think about it... Isn't that also true? I think we *do* want to practice a different way of living – because our sanctuary would be empty if we were all doing just fine. As my colleague, Rabbi Dara Frimmer has written, "We're in search of a different way to live and we have a sense – maybe only a vague, distant, far-away sense – [but a sense nonetheless] that we might learn it from our Temple."

We use KKBE as a sanctuary in the full sense of the word – a place to seek refuge from the assault of the everyday world. We come on Shabbat and the holidays, for a workshop or event, to refuel our spirits so that we're able to “get back out there” with hopes of surviving another day, week, or year. And this is OK, it's more than OK. We hope our community can help us learn to live through the inevitable moments of anxiety, uncertainty and pain.

But what if KKBE were a place where we didn't just go to deal with the impact of the world on us? What if we were also a place where we learned how our words and actions could have an impact on the world? What if it were a place where we could pool our collective resources, join in meaningful relationships, and realize our communal power? What if, in this sacred community, we could work to create the world we most desire? Well, we can! *Please* call or write me or LuAnn to attend a house meeting in the next couple of weeks. 90 minutes of your time and you will know that you are part of just that kind of sacred community that is working to change the world.

This Rosh Hashanah and throughout the coming year, may the mitzvah of hearing the calls of the shofar be our guide to building a more just society.

***Tekiah:*** The Torah teaches us that *Tekiah* was sounded to gather the Israelites at times of alarm and joy. It was a call to come together as a community. This Rosh Hashanah, may we hear the call to come together, pursue justice, and work to bring about a more perfect world.

***Shevarim:*** A broken sound, *Shevarim* is the sound of suffering. It implores us to respond and repair. This Rosh Hashanah, may we hear the call to *respond* to the pain in our community and work to *repair* the damage humanity inflicts on humanity.

***Teruah:*** An ancient signal to the Israelites that it was time to break camp and move forward with vision and purpose in our journey to the Promised Land. This Rosh Hashanah, may we hear the call to move beyond programs and projects, to address the root problems of our community, to leave no one behind; to move beyond the boundaries of our synagogue and reach out to others so that together we can move forward together toward our messianic vision for all of humanity.

And ***Tekiah G'dolah:*** A long and uplifting call, the call of ultimate hope and triumph. This Rosh Hashanah, may the long, resounding note of *Tekiah G'dolah* sustain our vision and strengthen our faith that we can, through our actions, come closer to our ultimate vision of how our world should be.

May the calls of the shofar motivate us to create a world in which the words of the prophet Isaiah are realized – peacefully, collaboratively, and in our day: “Let justice well up as the waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

*Kein y'hi ratzon* – may this be God's will, and our own. And let us say: Amen.