

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5774
Temple B'nai Israel, Amarillo, TX

All of the Jewish holidays have a story to tell. At Chanukah time, we learn of the great victory of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil. Passover tells an epic tale from slavery in Egypt to freedom. On Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, we are taught that the major stories are the creation of the world and the sacrifice of Isaac. I'd like to offer up yet another story for Rosh Hashanah, a story of the deeper meaning of the celebration we begin this evening.

Once it happened that a boy named Shmulick from a small village, a Jewish shtetl, came to the big city for the first time. He stopped at an inn, on the outskirts of the town to rest. Suddenly he heard the strong loud sound of the bugle. He jumped from surprise at this great noise! He asked the innkeeper what it meant.

"Whenever we have a fire," the innkeeper explained to the boy, "we sound the bugle, and the fire is quickly put out."

"What a wonderful idea!" thought Shmulick. "What a surprise and sensation I will bring to my village! This bugle is a great invention."

So the next day, Shmulick went to the store in town and bought himself a bugle. When he returned to his village, he couldn't control his excitement. He called all the villagers together for a town meeting. "Listen, good people," he exclaimed. "I have solved our problems! No need to be afraid of fire ever again. Just watch me, and see how quickly I will put out a fire!"

Saying this, he ran to the nearest hut and set fire to its straw roof. The fire began to spread very quickly.

His father scolded him, "Are you crazy? Get some water and put it out this instant!"

"Don't be alarmed! Stay where you are!" cried the lad. "Now watch me."

The lad began to blow the bugle with all his might, interrupting it only to catch his breath, and to say, "Wait, wait, this will put out the fire in no time!" But the fire did not seem to care much for the music, and it didn't stop for the silly boy. It hopped from one roof to another, until the entire village was in flames.

You see, Shmulick had made a grave mistake. It was not the trumpet itself that would put the villagers out of danger or stop the threatening flicker of flames. The trumpet served only as a call of alarm, to call the people to take the

proper action to control the forces of destruction before them. I am reminded of this story every year when Rosh Hashanah rolls around, when the beautiful, ancient tones of the shofar echo in our ears many times in a short period. So resonant and symbolic is the blowing of the shofar that it is possible that we may forget its true purpose. It marks the New Year of course, but it also ushers in the annual period of repentance, self-reflection, and renewal. Simply listening to the shofar holds no immediate affect or impact on our lives. The shofar is a call—it is we who must answer.

This task of *chesbon nefesh*, accounting of the soul's deeds and past year's actions, is not easy to take on. Then again, we Jews are no strangers to wrestling with ourselves. In the Torah, our patriarch Jacob's name was changed to Israel, meaning "one who struggled with God" after he wrestled with a mysterious figure. Some interpretations say that this man was an angel of God. Others however remark that what Jacob was actually facing was his biggest fear, his doubts, and his inner turmoil. Once he confronted his own state of mind, he was able to move on, transformed by this holy vision.

This is a generally well-known story from the Book of Genesis in the Torah, and I will admit it has no direct correlation with Rosh Hashanah. Still, I believe we can learn the same lesson from young Shmulick of the shtetl and Israel, the father of a great nation. Our baffling visions, like Jacob's experience with the man he wrestles, and the symbolism objects and rituals like the shofar, are only the beginning. I can fully admit that these moments for me personally are often learned the hard way. How many times have all of us had to go through a challenging time, made things intentionally more difficult for ourselves, and ignored the alarms sounded by our instincts or our loved ones? Not only have we had these moments but also after a time, when the dust has settled, we are the better for it. We learned from it, changed our ways, or developed new strategies for taking on what comes next in our lives.

The shofar can connect us to the past. Its sound is ancient and almost primal, an instrument used to communicate with an entire people. The cry began holidays, it was used in battle, and called the people of Israel to worship God. At this season it can also remind us of our own pasts. Where were we the last time we heard it? What has changed in our lives since this moment? How did we get from one tekiah to the next? The shofar can signal the past of our people and our stories.

As we learn in the story of Schmulick, we learn about the blow of the shofar to cause action. We can hear the shofar and remember to live in the present and be aware of the moment. The shofar holds many purposes, and historically we know it was a sound with many meanings. Today, we hear it far less frequently. To us, it is even more startling. The shofar calls on us, at this season, to gather together for many purposes. We come together to worship, to learn, to say we are sorry, and to simply sit in community. Not only this year, but next year, and for all future seasons of awe.

Rosh Hashanah comes every fall like clockwork, but every year it creeps up on us. It isn't like the secular New Year on January 1st, where we all have time off from work with our neighbors. Rosh Hashanah comes in the midst of work projects, packing up our children for school, summer to-do lists that are long forgotten, and the changing of the seasons. I believe it is exactly at this hectic, muddled time that we today need to be listening for the ancient echo of the ram's horn. We can take this time, as we usher in the new year of the Jewish calendar, to step back. It is a period to ask questions, to doubt a little, and to delve into ourselves to search for honest answers.

It's not the shofar that will do the job. It's not the instrument but what we hear when it sounds. A call to return to a higher plane, to examine our choices, to spend time with community. The stories associated with our sacred moments still ring true, whether they come from texts, folk traditions, or our own lives. This Rosh Hashanah, let us rededicate ourselves to learning from these moments and our own stories. For the first time we have gathered to hear the shofar sound. So, now where do we go from here?