

## Rosh Hashanah 2017

Joel Lazar

Today I wish to explore a truth about Rosh Hashanah that is rarely examined. This truth occupies a small part of two days of a great deal of prayer. Understanding this part alone is all that we need to grasp the true essence of this day; while it remains buried, beneath caricature or cliché, Rosh Hashana remains inchoate – a golem yet to live a real life.

The Pachad Yitzchak will introduce us to the kernel of this idea. The Pachad Yitzchak is both the text and pseudonym of R. Chayim Hutner, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century polish-born, Hasidic leader of American Jewry.

The Pachad Yitzchak says an astounding thing:

The general, overarching power of the shofar in the history of the Jewish people is that it is in the shofar's power to resurrect traces; to make the trace of a thing into the thing itself.

*To turn the trace of a thing into the thing itself.*

What on earth is he talking about?

What are these “traces”?

What is the nature of the alchemic power of the shofar?

### The trace of Torah

The first trace the Pachad Yitzchak discusses comes from a beautiful piece of Jewish law which says:

One must be careful to honor an elder who forgot his learning against his will – for [remember, after all] both the complete and the broken tablets were kept in the ark.<sup>1</sup>

The learned elder moves towards silence as Forgetting encroaches, becoming a broken piece of the ten commandments. We might pay them less regard as they forget the words and images of their learning. Therefore, we are taught that the elder carries a trace, “engraved upon them by the Torah.” It is for this reason that Rashi says: “even after a righteous person leaves a city, her trace is apparent”. Anyone who has ever lost someone they love, or been abandoned by someone they love, knows the feeling of traces left by people on cities.

\* \* \*

The second trace of which the Pachad Yitzchak's speaks is the trace of humanity.

After every round of shofar blows that we are about to hear, we will all say – *hayom harat olam* – today is the commemoration of the beginning of the world. We are taught that at the

---

<sup>1</sup> Talmud Bavli, Brachot, 8b.

beginning of world, man was so great that “his ankles outshone the sun.” After sin, mankind’s humanity was diminished and degraded.

About this the Pachad Yitzchak says,

The greatness of humanity before our fall [nevertheless] remains as a trace even after the fall.

And... this day [of Rosh Hashanah, the day] of ‘the beginning of Your creation’, is ‘a reminder of the first day,’ on which the greatness of humanity became a mere trace of greatness. It is on just this day that the shofar of Isaac’s ram appears to awaken the dormant powers.

Traces of life are restored to life itself, and the human face that existed before the diminution begins to shine again...

Is it true that the shofar of Isaac’s ram is capable of *reviving* a trace of lost knowledge and lost humanity? If so, how?

\* \* \*

Pablo Neruda will help us understand. Neruda was a Chilean poet, 1971 Nobel laureate for literature, a diplomat and a peacemaker, once described as "the greatest poet of the 20th century in any language."<sup>2</sup> I want us to read together Neruda’s poem, called *Not Everything is Now*, which will help us understand the traces of the Pachad Yitzchak:

### **Not Everything is Now**

*Pablo Neruda*

Something of yesterday remained today  
Shard of a pot or of a flag  
or simply a notion of light,  
algae of the aquarium of night,  
a fibre that did not waste away,  
pure doggedness, air of gold:

something of what has passed persists diluted,  
dying by the arrows of the aggressive sun and its battles.

if yesterday does not endure  
in this dazzling independence  
of the dictatorial day in which we live,  
why like a marvel of gulls  
did it turn backward, as though it would stagger  
and mingle its blue  
with the blue that had already departed?

---

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel García Márquez.

And I answer.

Inside the light  
your soul circles  
winding down until it dies out,  
growing like the ringing of a bell.

And between dying and being born again  
there is so little  
room, nor is the frontier  
so harsh.

The light is round like a ring  
and we move within its movement

Now *hayom harat olam* has new life. “Today is the birthday of the world”, that is: something from the First Cosmic Day, and indeed every day of our lives, remains in us, today, every day, like a notion of light; a fibre that has not wasted away.

Naruda reminds us that the fault line between death and resurrection of our internal selves is a fine line, yes, but the two are powerfully connected, one turning into the other, and back again, over and over, like a ring of light in which we endlessly travel.

But how is it that the *shofar*, this humble horn, could guide us through this ring?  
How does the shofar help bring our buried parts to life again; how does it help us assemble our scattered shards that float almost imperceptibly like gold on the air?

R Soloveitzik will help us understand. He says:

Every animal instinctively and intuitively pours out its heart to the Creator. The bark of a dog, the chirp of birds, the howl of the jackal – all of these combine into a single prayer of all creation...

[So too] a person must not only pray with a quality of spirituality and the force of the Word, but also with the teachings of all Creation. Prayer must convey not only humanity’s greatness, but also its lowliness. Mankind is the greatest of all creations, but also a base and lowly creature, whose thought is limited before the Creator of all worlds. Even as a base creature must mankind pray, and this prayer is expressed in the Shofar – the wordless outcry of man!

...

In this prayerful outcry, words and speech are secondary; rather it is the groan of the Shofar that must follow the prayers we utter.

And why is it inevitable that the outcry of the shofar should come after our words? Because when we finish our wordy prayers on Rosh Hashana, we suddenly realise that we have not

come close to saying what we wanted. At the end of tefilla we think: what did I even say? I've hardly said anything, what will I do now – say it all again? Add more words?

None of that will help.

In order to truly say everything that we want and need to express, one begins suddenly to cry or groan, or to emit the sounds of animals; it is only with these sounds that we are able to say everything that we have to say, everything that we could not say with words.

This is the significance of the Shofar. It transcends our humanity in order to restore to us that very humanity.

Our words are useless in the face of traces; when we are trying to revive the truly important things within us. When I think of the great joys and sadnesses of my life, the key milestones and darkest places I have travelled – not only does it feel absurd to seek out words to describe them, but moreso, it is clear that only when the words finally escaped me, did the trace of the thing become the thing itself. When I cried, or my heart swelled, or my body was filled up, or sweat began to trickle, or I laughed uncontrollably with someone else, or I could not stop smiling, or I caught a glance and gave a glance, or I screamed out in agony – only in these moments, could I say that the true substance of life was unfolding within me.

And let us go one step even further. All those wordless expressions still came from within me, whereas the shofar, we are taught, can achieve what no human can. Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo of Amsterdam explains:

The blowing of the shofar proves that we can surpass ourselves. On our own, using our vocal cords, we are unable to produce this sound – a terrifying penetrating resonance. People can scream, howl, and wail, but nothing more than that... they cannot produce a sound that comes close to the piercing and penetrating heavenly voice of the shofar, which can cause human beings to break down, pick themselves up again, and transform into new individuals.

Not even a chazan's liturgical solo, or an opera singer's aria can touch us what the shofar's vibrations do. The shofar carries us to places unreachable by the human word. It ignores walls and other obstacles, simply forging ahead, long after the human sound has come to an end.

The shofar and the human voice are completely different from each other. The shofar, like a knife, tears our hearts open – just as when the Children of Israel encountered the original shofar sound at Sinai, before God introduced the Torah to them. An experience beyond.

The only way a person can achieve such a powerful resonance is by blowing a light puff of breath into a small hole at one end of the shofar... producing a sound of overwhelming power that pierces the heavens.

...

The challenge of the shofar blower; the anticipation we share with [Daniel Slonim, our shofar blower] about how pure will the sound come out, how unbroken: it is not, and should not, be the anticipation of watching a singer and hoping they will hit the high note, or that they hold out until the instrument ceases.

We are hoping that the shofar can do what we cannot. And if it falters, and breaks, and runs out of breath, this is apt – because this is the summary of us, of our attempts to express what is so hard to express. There can be a desperation in willing on the shofar blower – please, dear god, produce the sound that will end all sounds, that will wrap up ours and be wrapped in ours, that will end all words, once and for all.

No pressure, Daniel, but this is our great hope; that the sound of the shofar will help us surpass ourselves; that the sound, in the words of Cardozo, will “*forge ahead, long after the human sound has come to an end.*”

### ***Teruah as a yevava***

There is one final thing, I want to introduce, before I leave you with a closing poem. For this thought I thank some of the Rabbis of Mechon Hadar in New York, and some random folks on the Mechon Hadar mailing list who responded to my template email.

The other name for Rosh Hashannah is *yom teruah* – the Day of the Teruah. The *teruah* sound is the series of 9 short, sharp blasts which you will soon hear at the end of each set of blasts. *Yom Teruah* being another name for Rosh Hashana, an understanding of the *Teruah* must surely be critical to experiencing the full potential of the day.

Before the advent of Soundcloud and Spotify, the Mishnah was forced to ask a pertinent question: What is the *teruah* actually meant to sound like? The Mishna explains by reference to another sound – it says the Teruah should sound like three *yevavot*.

Still, without Soundcloud, the Mishnah asks: But what is a *yevava*?

The Mishnah replies by taking us deep into the caverns of the Tanakh, where the word *yevava* appears only once. It takes us to the song of Deborah, just as the Israelites have defeated the Canaanite army of Sisera, a sworn enemy of Israel, and Yael has cut off Sisera's head as a sign of deterrence. When Sisera doesn't return home from the war, we are taken to the home of Sisera's mother who is waiting by the window and crying out terribly to her maidservant: “*Why is his chariot so long in coming?*” she says, “*Why are the bells of his chariot so late?*”

In her exasperation we are told: *va'te'yabev em sisera* – the mother of Sisera let out a great wail. 100 great wails in fact, represented by the 100 blasts of the shofar today.

This, one of the most important days of the Jewish calendar, is commemorated by reference to the cries of a mother of our sworn enemy.

Strangely, it is also said in a 1200 year old Midrashic tale that when Avraham was stopped at the final hour by an angel of God from sacrificing his favourite son Isaac, a separate angel, the archangel Samael, was angry. So Samael went to Sarah who was waiting, unaware, back home, and said:

*“Did you hear what is happening in the world?”  
She said to him, “No.”*

*Samael said to her, “Abraham took his son Isaac,  
slaughtered him, and sacrificed him on the altar  
as an olah offering.”*

*Sarah began to cry and shrieked three yevavot in  
juxtaposition to the three tekiot, three shrill  
yevavot in juxtaposition with the three yevavot.*

*Her soul flew off and she died.*

Another Biblical mother letting out a *yevava*, this one being our mother of Mothers.

What is the meaning of this shared *yevava*? The late Rabbi Yehuda Amital of Israel says this:

There are countless differences between Sarah our matriarch, and Sisera’s mother. Yet despite the worlds that divide them, there is one thing they have in common... the natural terror a mother feels for her son.

Rav Shai Held of New York adds further, that on Rosh Hashana, we are *required* to hear the cries of the mothers of our enemies.

So what does all of this add to our question about the *traces* of things and bringing them to life? The Shofar’s sound gets to the very heart of humanity, beneath the chaff, to that which is common in us all. That is the place which we are striving to examine and revive today.

I would like to add a final thought, before ending with a further poem by Neruda. I learnt this week that in the world today, some 2.5 Exabytes are created *every day* in the world, which is equivalent to 530 million songs, 250,000 Libraries of American Congress, or 90 Years of High Definition video. Every day the world is flooded with data and words and information getting louder and louder. Yet it is the sound of the shofar, only, that can get us back to the traces; to what matters to us most, to that which we perhaps may have forgotten is important to us, but is still there, waiting.

In light of all of this, I want to invite you all, and I will try as well, to do two things in a moment:

The first is, when you hear the shofar over the coming few hours, I would invite you not to assess how Daniel is performing, whether the sound he is producing is good or bad, or whether it will last; I invite you not to look to the people beside you and discuss it like a performance. That is, I would encourage you not to look *outward* but *inward*.

Secondly, one you are looking inward, what are we looking for? I would encourage you think about the traces of things that are buried within you; perhaps it relates to relationships with your partners, or children, or parents; perhaps with colleagues or clients; perhaps it is something you are passionate about and have forgotten. And I hope that the power of the shofar to revive traces will in turn give life to those lost traces within you, and long after the sound of the shofar stops blowing, that those traces will continue to grow throughout the year, until next Rosh Hashanna.

Now I would like to end with a final poem by Neruda:

### **Keeping Quiet**

*Pablo Neruda*

Now we will count to twelve  
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,  
let's not speak in any language;  
let's stop for one second,  
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment  
without rush, without engines;  
we would all be together  
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea  
would not harm whales  
and the man gathering salt  
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,  
wars with gas, wars with fire,  
victories with no survivors,  
would put on clean clothes  
and walk about with their brothers  
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused  
with total inactivity.  
Life is what it is about;  
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded  
about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence

might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with death.  
Perhaps the earth can teach us  
as when everything seems dead  
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve  
and you keep quiet and I will go.