



Temple Rodef Shalom

“Wake Up Calls”

Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013

I used to set an alarm on my iPhone every night to make sure I would wake up in time for work. That’s no longer necessary. I now have three living wake up call applications, named Shoshana, Aaron and Jonah. They vary from morning to morning, but they usually go off around six o’clock. Aaron is the earliest riser, and he will often talk and sing peacefully for a while, occasionally throwing in a playful, “Mommy,” or “Daddy.” But there’s always a point when the play turns to protest, and then there’s no more procrastination. One of us has to get up and attend to the tasks at hand: changing, milk, books, hugs, breakfast, and so on. Little kids are great in this way: they will not allow you to sleep through what needs to be done. Their needs are always urgent and always obvious; as a new parent, there is no option to ignore your most important responsibilities.

But for almost everything else in life, it is possible to remain asleep. As we sit here, far from any crying children or screaming alarms, it’s easy to become lulled into a slumber, unconscious to the things in our lives that are actually crying for our attention. This is why we are commanded to hear the ancient Jewish instrument that sounds the alarm on Rosh Hashanah: the shofar. Twelfth Century Rabbi Moses Maimonides offered this interpretation of the shofar blast: “Wake up you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber.” Perhaps he imagined us



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listening to tomorrow's/this morning's shofar blasts and gradually being brought out of our slumber, our awareness increasing with each call – tekiah, shevarim, truah, tekiah gedolah – until we stand alert and fully sensitized to the world around us. One thing we know: we will stand here and listen to the calls, maybe with appreciation and even anticipation – how long will the blast be this year? How red the face of the blower? Maimonides asks us, though, ***what will the sound of the ram's horn awaken in us?*** Will we hear it as the wake up call each of us needs?

The very first wake up call ever is the one that goes out to our first biblical ancestor, Adam. He and Eve have been living in the garden long enough to have lost sight of the one rule God gave them, and they have just eaten from the fruit of the forbidden tree. They have now become obsessed with their nakedness and covered themselves with leaves, and they are looking around, disoriented, not sure what to do, when they hear God's voice moving through the garden. God's wake up call comes to Adam in a question, perhaps the same question we should all be hearing in the shofar's call: "Ayeka," God says, "Where are you?"

Where are you? God's isn't really looking for Adam's location. I'm guessing God knows that. The question is actually more like the one we might be asked when we're on the phone with someone and they haven't heard a response from us for some time – "Are you there?" – or when someone is talking to us and we're staring right past them – "Hello?"



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The value of every good biblical story is our ability to put ourselves in the place of the main character. Thinking about Adam lounging around in the garden of Eden, with a guilty look and apple smudges all over his face, inspires me to imagine the modern-day Adam. Where is he, what is he doing, and how does he respond to God's call of "Ayeka?" I have to assume that Adam is sitting at Starbucks – But not just any Starbucks – one of those Starbucks with a constant hum of noise – pairs and groups of people there for a work meeting, parents with their little kids, and scores of people, each sitting alone with his or her beeping phone, computer, or tablet with headphones blasting. Adam is one of those individuals, sitting, with his Triple Venti Americano, with an extra shot and lots of cream and his laptop, trying to sift through his list of emails – some are work and some are advertisements. Still more are news updates he's signed up for, and of course some are from facebook. This Starbucks Adam spends a lot of his time, at home, at work and in his leisure, wrapped up in this other world. His wake-up call might come from a passerby asking for the time, or it might come on his phone, which is set on vibrate. The call could be from his mother or father, his wife or his kid or one of his friends. The real question is, will Adam answer, or will he just touch "ignore" on his phone screen? For that matter, will he hear this wake up call at all?

This is the shofar blast that reminds us of the importance of our interactions with the people around us. For many of us, the distractions



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of modern technology threaten to get in the way of maintaining meaningful relationships with other people. We need to close the computer, put down the phone and look around at the human beings who are *asking for our attention*. In addition, the constant pace of information and activity in our world demands that we remember how to slow down.

This can be a challenge. Last week, I was rushing to get Shoshana into bed, but she was in no hurry. She wanted to wash her hands one more time. Then she wanted to watch every last bubble pop in the sink after the water had stopped. After that, she stood at the sink for a long moment, making faces at her image in the mirror. Aware that her bedtime had come and gone, I opened the bathroom door and asked her to walk out. *This was when I received my wake up call*. As I listened to Shoshie remind me through her tears that she had wanted to open the door herself, I realized that we were only late by my clock, not hers. After all, sometimes those few minutes before bed are the best ones I spend one on one with my daughter. We can all be busy and fail to notice what is precious to another person: the chance to stand at the sink with your daddy and watch the bubbles, or to finish your homework with your mom; a few minutes to catch up with your spouse at the end of the day, or an invitation to have coffee with a friend; a letter left on a mirror or in a lunchbox saying, "Have a great day!" We can forget how precious these interactions are to us as well. Let's allow the shofar blast to remind us to



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nurture our interpersonal relationships.

Now let's imagine a different Adam. The classic wake up call, the one that gave it its name, is the one you order in a hotel. This Adam just got dropped off at Dulles for a conference the next day. Settled into his room and thrown off by jet lag, Adam calls down and asks the front desk to set him up for a call in the morning. Then he flips channels for what seems like hours until he fades off to sleep. In the morning, when the call comes, it's a rude surprise. It's caught him in a deep sleep. First he thinks it's a wrong number – who would even know how to reach him here? Then, he grabs the phone. He hears a computerized recording. “This is your requested wake up call. The time is 7:15 am. Have a nice day.” He puts the phone down, throws his feet to the floor, rubs his eyes, and struggles to wake up.

This is the shofar blast that jolts us into awareness and shocks our system. Sometimes the wake-up call and its response are immediate – your kid jumps off the couch and you to rush him to the hospital to get stitches. Sometimes it will come from our own bodies, but it might not hit us until someone else mentions it. I heard a woman tell her story: she realized she had cancer after watching a television show about that topic, and noticing that she had eight out of the ten symptoms. When doctors told her that it was something else, she kept going to specialists until her cancer was found. The timing for her was good, and she caught it in the



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early stages. I was at an event in DC where people stood up and told their wake up call stories: having a stroke at twenty years old; being unable to have a family and deciding to adopt; discovering a disability; realizing that you need to learn something in a different way. A friend of mine who is scared of hospitals was badly in need of a hip replacement. He put it off for years until he couldn't play tennis anymore. Then, after watching his friends play one day, he had a wake-up call that he may never play again. Scared but determined, he went through the process of healing the body. At the hospital, they taught him how to walk with metal in his hip, and after a while, he was encouraging others to get this much needed operation. At times, we can be each other's wake-up calls. Now my friend plays tennis and is really good at the net. He runs every day on a treadmill and, most importantly, he can go for walks with his family.

Some medical wake up calls give us enough time to get help, and others come quickly with only enough time to say goodbye to loved ones and pray for a peaceful and painless ending. In this year, I pray that if we have medical wake-up calls, we may hear them early with enough time for process, for healing, and for health.

There is one more type of wake-up call I frequently get myself, one that tends to happen during the summer, in the pouring rain. I grew up outside San Francisco, and I don't think I'll ever get used to the experience of an east coast thunderstorm. My family makes fun of me for



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this, ever since I once locked myself out on the front porch at three in the morning, in my pajamas, so excited to watch and listen to the rain: the loud hiss of the water pouring down; the trees shaking from the impact; the darkness, the lightning and the thunder adding a sense of danger; and the supernatural in nature. The feeling of being in the center of such a powerful and spontaneous event is breathtaking for me.

It is Thursday night and Adam is doing the last bit of cleanup at the end of a long workday. He starts the dishwasher and turns out all the lights. Everyone else in the house is getting ready to go to sleep, and he goes outside for a moment to wheel the trashcans to the street and retrieve something from the car. As he steps out the door, the sight of the trees, the stillness of the forest and the blast of the crickets engulf him in wonder. He has an urge to drop everything, grab his sleeping bag and his flashlight and spend the night outside. The late hour and his waiting family pull at Adam to go back in. "Ayeka." He feels God beckoning him to linger.

In that moment Adam is able to answer God's question of "Where are you?" "I am in Your world, *Adonai*, enveloped by and connected to the whole of Your creation. I am amazed!" *This is the answer God was hoping for in the Garden of Eden, and this is the wake up call we seek every Rosh Hashanah.* The Midrash suggests that the breath of life God first breathed into Adam was the breath of the Tekiah blast of the shofar. God is *calling*



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us back to that moment of our creation, when our connections with our bodies, with other people and with the world around us were fresh, full of amazement and full of life. With each shofar blast tomorrow/today, let’s feel ourselves more and more ready to respond to our wake-up calls, however and whenever we hear them. Whether these wake-up calls come quietly with a whisper or in a loud voice, saying to us, “Ayeka,” may we *hear* them this time, may we not hit the snooze button; and may we be able to answer.