

On Shofars and Sirens: Hope in Prayer

During my freshman year of college, I had a suitemate named Kelly,<sup>1</sup> who forever changed the way I thought about ambulances, and also prayer.

Kelly was from rural North Dakota. In the early days of college, as all of us were adjusting to living in our dorm building, one mile from the hospital, at the intersection of two busy city streets, Kelly told us about a tradition her family had at home: whenever they heard an ambulance pass by, everyone in her family would stop what they were doing and pray for the well-being of the person in the ambulance.

Can you imagine that?

I couldn't, really. I had had experiences of hearing ambulance sirens and then thinking to myself or even saying aloud: "*I hope those people are okay.*" But never an experience where I and the people around me had stopped what we were doing and *prayed* – as though the sound of a siren was a tether pulling us to another person, maybe one we knew and maybe one we would never meet, and we knew we had to answer the call of that tether, had to take our place in lifting that person up and buoying them forward to help.

Kelly told us about her family's tradition for a poignant reason: in our new lives in college, in our dorm building one mile away from a hospital, at the intersection of two busy city streets, she could no longer keep her family's tradition up. Had she done so, had she paused to pray every time she heard a siren, she never would have gotten off of her knees.

For many years - way too many, at this point – our world has felt, to many of us, a lot like a city street, blaring with sirens. We have lived and are living through so many crises, it's almost hard to pick what to name. From climate change and its devastating storms, to threats to our democracy, to the devastation of both October 7 and its aftermath, for Israelis and Palestinians, [which hangs especially heavy for many of us this week as we approach the one year anniversary] ... to rising antisemitism here in the United States ... it has been a roller-coaster of a year. Different for each of us, and I hope, for many of us, with many joyful moments too, but also really hard. Even as we have a wide variety of experiences in our daily lives, many of us imagine our collective futures with some mixture of fear, and hope, and resignation.

What will happen next? Will we be able to rise to meet the challenge?

These existential questions are at the heart of the High Holy Days experience in which we now find ourselves. Every fall, Rosh Hashanah crashes into our lives, proclaiming with the sounding of the shofar, "a new year is beginning!" And ten days later, Yom Kippur adds, "life is finite! Do what you can to make amends now!"

It can be a lot. It can leave us wishing we had a way to ask for help.

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<sup>1</sup> Her name is fictionalized in this story, but the rest of the story is accurate (to my memory).

Years ago, the children's television personality Fred Rogers, of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood fame, shared advice from his mother about navigating the overwhelm that can come when witnessing disaster. The advice was: *look for the helpers*.<sup>2</sup> Look for the people rushing into danger to save others, the people who are reaching out in challenging times with kindness and love and determination, who are giving whatever they can.

When we hear ambulance sirens – which for many of us are a symbol of crisis – Mr. Roger's mom might have said: don't just think of the crisis, think of the paramedics in the vehicle who are rushing to help someone, the 911 operators who answered the phone, and the people who funded the vehicle, making it all possible. Look for the helpers.

And certainly, when we look at some of the most horrifying events of the past year, there are no shortage of helpers, no shortage of people rushing in – sometimes to mortal danger – both to try to save lives in the short term, and to try to heal conflict in the long term. When you stack all of these people up, not to mention when each of us adds in all of the people who have ever been kind to us, interpersonally, it is hard to feel totally cynical about humanity. We are so far from alone, and many of the people with whom we share the world are doing their best to live lives of goodness, and righteousness, and healing. Many are incredibly brave.

So – look for the helpers. This can be great advice when we want to restore our faith in humanity, but it has some limits, too. Humanity is not just something we need to believe or disbelieve in (though I vote - believe!). Humanity is also something we need to be part of. It's something we need to take our place in.

For many of us, part of what is overwhelming about some of the problems our world is facing is their complexity. We may see *lots* of people doing good work to try to address these problems, but *also* see that the problems themselves aren't going away. How do we take our place in work that is far beyond what we as individuals can do? How, in other words, do we reclaim our ability to hope, and act on that hope?

One of the answers that Jewish tradition provides, especially at this time of year, is *prayer*. Prayer can be an opportunity to ask for help. It can be an opportunity to identify what we think needs to be different – in our lives, in our behavior, and in the world – and ask ourselves how we can participate in that transformation, and how other people around us, and maybe God too, can be resources for us.

But there's a challenge (at least maybe, for some of us!), which is that our prayers at this time of year *also* use a number of archaic metaphors – and not all of them work so well for many of us!

The biggest example for me is that Rosh Hashanah is full of metaphors of God as a king – for example, *Avinu Malkeinu*, the prayer of hope that we are going to hear and then recite together in a few minutes, literally means “our father, our king.” It's not so much that I'm offended by these

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers initially shared this advice from his mother in his 1983 book *Mister Rogers Talks With Parents*. You can find a short history of the quote's life in popular culture (especially during Fred Rogers' lifetime) here: <https://slate.com/culture/2013/04/look-for-the-helpers-mister-rogers-quote-a-brief-history.html>.

metaphors as that they don't have much resonance. I have a father (he's great, he's right over there, and he's definitely not God) ... and I've never had a king, but I suspect that if I *had* had a king, kings still likely would not be my go-to God metaphor. Maybe you can relate!

On top of all of this, Judaism is not a religion that mandates belief in God, and it's certainly not a religion that mandates belief in a God that can intervene in our twenty-first century world. So what do we do with all of these prayers replete with metaphors that might suggest otherwise?

Jewish people throughout history have answered this question in many ways – and we each get to make our own answers, too. For me, the most important part of *Avinu Malkeinu* is the “voice” of the prayer, which is first person plural. *Our* father, *our* king, we say. Or, in a less gendered and less hierarchical way – *our* God, or *our* world – that which is beyond all of us, but which we all are a part of.

(In the Hebrew, every time you hear the sound “nu” at the end of a word, it means “we” or “us.” In a few minutes, we will say Hebrew words ending in “nu” 31 times in just 8 lines.<sup>3</sup> We will affirm over and over that we are connected to each other.)

*Avinu Malkeinu* is a prayer of hope, not for each of us as individuals, but for a vast collective – certainly all of us here praying, maybe even every Jewish community coming together on Rosh Hashanah, and maybe even all of humanity, as one. And when we look at the specific things the *Avinu Malkeinu* invites us to ask for, the decision to set the prayer in first person plural makes a lot of sense – because most of the hopes in *Avinu Malkeinu* aren't hopes that can come true for just one person, and no one else. They are hopes for all of us, together.

For example, in a few minutes we will pray: “*Avinu Malkeinu, kaleh dever v'herev v'ra'av me'aleinu.*” “*Avinu Malkeinu, protect us from plague, from war and violence, and from famine.*” Plague, war, and famine all impact huge swaths of people ... or no one at all. While individuals and groups of people can get lucky, and happen to avoid their worst ravages, the greatest protection from all three comes when we work together for peace, for prosperity, for good healthcare.

*Protect us from plague, and war, and famine.* The *Avinu Malkeinu* invites us with these words to feel our own – realistic – fears of epidemics or pandemics, of war, of environmental disaster (including famine), and to notice that these are shared fears. The way through them is together, through building communities and broader societies of mutual respect and shared enterprise. Even though fear can be a terribly isolating feeling – much as grief, when we've experienced loss or disaster, can be an isolating feeling – the *Avinu Malkeinu* invites us to shift our frame, to see the way we are all tethered together, so that we are not just an *I* but an *us*, and our hopes become a collective project.

We are invited to begin to look around the world and see not just the *helpers* – important though those are – but also all the opportunities *each* of us have to help, honor, and love each other.

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<sup>3</sup> The version of *Avinu Malkeinu* we recited together at the 2024/5785 Erev Rosh HaShanah Top of the Town service was eight lines long. The full prayer is longer – and each line of that prayer tends to have words ending in “nu,” meaning “we” or “us,” 3-4 times.

When we pray in this way, really trying to see and hear each other, we are reaching out not just to God, but also to each other.

So too are we reaching out to each other when we say: “*Kaleh kol tzar u’ mastein me’ aleinu.*” “Protect us from all oppression, and from leadership that causes pain and terror.” We need each other to pull this kind of protection off.

And we are certainly reaching out to each other when all say together: “*Avinu Malkeinu, hamol aleinu, v’al ola’ laynu v’ tapeinu.*” “Avinu Malkeinu, have compassion on us, and on our little ones.” All of us, not just parents, say these words together, and when we do, we affirm our collective responsibility for *all* of the children in our communities, and in this world we share. We are all responsible for each other, and our fates are tied together, whether or not we agree with each other or even like each other.

What might become possible for us if we took the invitation of some of our Rosh HaShanah prayers, and especially the *Avinu Malkeinu*, to focus on our interconnectedness? To hope for safety and well-being not just for ourselves or people we know but for all of us, in ever-expanding circles of connection? If we heard the calls of sirens and of shofars not just as jarring interruptions but also as invitations to be present with each other, as we all navigate life?

Jewish tradition imagines many different meanings for the sound of the shofar. One is as a cry of distress – many ancient stories liken the sound of the shofar to wailing<sup>4</sup> – and another is as a call to action,<sup>5</sup> a call to gather in community.<sup>6</sup>

One of the invitations of the *Avinu Malkeinu*, and of this time in the Jewish year generally, is to see the many ways in which cries of distress and even of helplessness, on the one hand, and calls to community and connection and action, on the other, can be part of the same continuum.

When we hear each other in distress, we can reach out to each other, to be helpers and also to receive help. When we reach out to each other, we have an opportunity to work together – for shared safety, and also, ultimately, for shared liberation and joy.

This is the *Avinu Malkeinu*’s greatest invitation and hope: *hadesh aleinu Shana Tova*. Renew us all, help us feel renewed and ready to re-enter the world and re-connect to each other, for a *shana tova*, a year of goodness.

This Rosh Hashanah, may we draw near to each other. May we hear each other. May we pray or hope for each other, and in so doing, begin to see a way forward, together. *Shana Tovah*.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Vayikra Rabba 20, and Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezar 32:8, which both describe Sarah’s cries on learning what has happened to her son Isaac (in the story of the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22) as akin or corresponding to the sound of some of the shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah. We hear shofar many times on Rosh Hashanah (100 times, in some communities) and different blasts are likened to different stories in Jewish tradition, and different emotional experiences.

<sup>5</sup> Including repentance. See for example Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Isaiah 28:13.