

**This Year's Shofar Call to Conscience**  
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth  
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September 19, 2009

In our Torah service first we read about the ram caught by its *horns* in the thicket becoming the sacrifice instead of Isaac, and then we sounded our shofarot, our rams horns, for this *yom teruah*, the day of shofar blasts.

A Reuters news story a month ago reported the following:

Dozens of rabbis and kabbalah mystics armed with ceremonial trumpets took to the skies over Israel to battle H1N1 swine flu virus, Israel media reported Tuesday. About 50 Jewish holy men chanted prayers and blew ritual rams' horns known as shofars in an aircraft circling over the country in the hope of stopping the spread of the virus, some of them told the newspaper Yediot Aharonot. "The aim of the flight was to stop the pandemic so people will stop dying from it," said Rabbi Yitzhak Batri.

(NY Times, 8/12/09)

'couldn't hurt! I confess to being something of a skeptic when it comes to the magical power of the shofar to ward off disease. But I do believe the shofar's piercing cry has the power, if not to ward off disease, surely to ward off some of the effects of our assimilation and apathy. The shofar calls us to examine our lives in the light of eternal truths. *Ribon kol ha'olamim*, Universal God, now that we have heard the shofar, awaken our hearts to *mitzvot*! Stir our souls—as the prayer book puts it— *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*, to do our part, as Your subjects, to perfect the world.

Where swine flu is concerned, this liberal rabbi suspects *tikun olam*, perfecting the world, has more to do with inoculations, and with hand washing and other hygienic measures, than with shofars. But when we are afraid, and many are, prayer is a resource, too. In point of scientific, medical fact, we don't know if the shots will work, either! I pray in all sincerity: May God be merciful to us in the year ahead. We must, I suggest, live with a modicum of faith. God is sovereign, in-charge. We are not. There is a great deal in life we do not and cannot know, including—as we read earlier—“who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not; ... who (shall perish) by earthquake and who by plague.” (*Unetaneh Tokef*, p. 108) As we hear the shofar, may the uncertainties of life and death turn us to what, deep down, we know is most important in life: making our world—God's world—a better, more just and more loving, place.

About some threats we can do only a little. God will do what God will do with the flu. About others we can do much. So, after giving us a ton of *mitzvot*—do this, and this, and this!; don't do these other things!—Jewish tradition acknowledges our predicament: we will never perfect even our own lives, much less the whole world. Still, says Rabbi Tarphon in Pirke Avot, “It is not incumbent on you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stop trying.” (2:21) Keep plugging away. The world can be better.

That is a profound dialectic. Sinners that we are, none of us ever gets his or her life just right. And neither does any society ever comes close to institutionalizing

righteousness. But that is no excuse for giving up the effort to do better. God commands us to pursue justice, commands us to love our neighbors, commands us to work for peace, commands us to have compassion for the homeless, the widows—for all who lack the resources or power to take care of themselves.

I spoke last night about improving our individual lives. This morning let me address our national life. What is on the table of greatest moral urgency nationally? Last year it was the economy, and I suggested that through the lens of Torah, much though we all crave financial security and more, there are more important things, like health and dignity, freedom and family.

Speaking of health . . . . This year the national focus has moved on to the health care system--and that goes way beyond swine flu. The rabbi, philosopher and Jewish law expert, Maimonides, the greatest Jewish mind of the Middle Ages, admonished:

Disciples of the wise must not live in a city that is unprovided with the following ten officials and institutions, namely: a physician, a surgeon, a bath-house, a lavatory, a source of water supply such as a stream or a spring, a synagogue, a school teacher, a scribe, a treasurer of charity funds for the poor, a court that has authority to punish with stripes and imprisonment. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot* IV:23)

An interesting list, the hallmarks of civilization. Sanitary facilities and clean water, education, religious instruction, a system for giving charity, and courts. Worthy things

all, and all largely available any place in modern America. But at the top of the list, #1 and #2, medical care. “The disciples of the wise,” which is to say anyone with any sense should not live where they cannot get health care. But in our society, as we all know only too well, millions of people, not all of them poor, lack health insurance. But can’t anyone get free health care? Just go down to John Peter Smith or one of its clinics? No! Emergency health care you can get that way. But not routine health care and preventative medicine.

Neither should we mistake this as the problem of the poor. God help you if you need new insurance when you have a “pre-existing condition.” If you can get insurance, which is doubtful, you can’t afford it! –This is not a rarity; this is scores of people here this morning! As medical technology improves (obviously a good thing) costs go inexorably higher and higher (not such a good thing).

It is a moral imperative for an affluent society to provide decent health care for all—rich and poor, young and old, healthy and sick. Yes, “healthy,” too. Education and preventative medicine are key components of a decent health care system. Obesity, unwanted pregnancy, chronic diseases related to smoking and other substance-abuse: much of what drives our national health bill higher and higher relates as much to ignorance as to personal irresponsibility.

No one who knows the system—which is most of us!—thinks we use our health dollars wisely. We over-test and over-prescribe and treat for fear of lawsuits. Ask any

doctor or hospital: large chunks of the cost are tied to an incredibly complex and redundant reimbursement system.

Some will be relieved and others disappointed by this, but I honestly do not know which of the various plans being debated is best. And the Torah has not one word to say about public options vs coops, or whether certain medical procedures--abortions, gastric bypasses, plastic surgery, you name it--should be covered. Fundamentalists and extremists of the right or left to the contrary, Scripture is not a cook book which provides clear policy directives for situations thousands of years after its composition. It is, rather, a spiritual constitution, a repository of values which each generation may turn to for inspiration and guidance as we wrestle with novel challenges. The holiness of life, mutual responsibility within societies, fairness for all, compassion for the disadvantaged: these are the Torah-values, divine values, if you will, at stake here. These are what we each must ponder, and what our representatives in Washington must be urged to implement legislatively, if we are to improve the world. Perfection is for the messianic future. Improvement is well within our reach. It won't do to say no and no and no every time a less than perfect proposal is floated. "To perfect the world," *l'taken olam*, is a verb, not a noun, a process, not yet a result, taking one step at a time towards making things better. If you object to one proposal, support another. But the *status quo* ... stinks. The patients hate it. The doctors hate it. The employers hate it. The government hates it. The time has come to do better.

To say out loud what no politician dares say out loud: better health care for the whole nation, even eliminating some waste, may end up costing more. I readily grant that we cannot afford to simply say, “it costs what it costs; the sky is the limit.” But remember those Torah values I mentioned a moment ago. If, despite honest efforts to trim waste, covering everyone and eliminating pre-existing condition penalties ends up costing more, the moral imperatives remain: The holiness of life. Mutual responsibility within societies. Fairness for all. Compassion for the disadvantaged. If taking our values seriously necessitates citizens—and not necessarily only the rich—paying more taxes, so be it.

The shofar blasts are not just a call to correct our personal faults—though they are that, too. They are a call to righteousness, which is a social obligation. We live in community, in society. For Jews righteousness, obedience to God, means caring about, means fixing, or at least bettering, the world—individually and collectively leaving it better than we found it. On the religious side plane-loads full of “holy men with shofars” won’t do it. On the secular side a doubling and redoubling of self-reliance and individual responsibility won’t do it. There are people who work full time and multiple jobs, and still lack health insurance, people sitting right here earning a good living but with pre-existing conditions who cannot get decent and affordable coverage. Judaism supports individual responsibility, too; but some things can only be done societally. No bill will get everything right. So we can make further adjustments later. The time has come to make real changes, systemic changes. The shofar is a call to conscience.

Deep down, we know, individually and collectively: a decent society provides health care to the people, all the people, who live in it.

*Keyn y'hi ratzon.*

May such be God's will. Amen.