



## The Roar

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779, Rabbi David Kasher

First of all, I want to say two special thanks. One to Rabbi Ronit Tsadok who usually holds this position and let me step in tonight, I'm so grateful to my friend and teacher. And the other one is I want to thank again Jennie Coyne, who is interpreting into American Sign Language for my mom, who is here. My mom is deaf, and also not much of a shul-goer, but she's here to see her boy give his first Rosh Hashanah sermon tonight.

Now you may think that Rosh Hashanah, of all the Jewish holidays, is a bit of a funny one for me to pick to invite my mom to - because it's mostly about sound. That's the only thing the tradition insists we do, really, on Rosh Hashanah, is hear the sound of the shofar. But - in honor of my mother - tonight I want to try to show that the sound we're supposed to be accessing on Rosh Hashanah is far more than just an auditory experience.

This day came to be associated with the shofar-sound because, in the Torah it isn't even called Rosh Hashanah, which means 'the head of the year.' It's called '*Yom Teruah*,' which literally means 'The Day of the Teruah Sound.' Teruah, that's one of the sounds we blow on the Shofar. But what an odd name! The Day of the Teruah Sound. And what do we do on that day? Unclear.

Yom Kippur, by contrast, is called Yom Kippur (or *Yom HaKippurim*) in the Torah - meaning, The Day of Atonement, and we're told to afflict ourselves - with fasting for example - and then we receive atonement. That sounds right. That's Yom Kippur, the holiday we know and love. And because Rosh Hashanah is so close to it in the calendar, Rosh Hashanah comes to be associated with Yom Kippur, and marks the beginning of a ten-day process of self-reflection and righting wrongs.

But again, Rosh Hashanah itself, is just the Day of the Teruah sound. No explanation. No particular practice mentioned. The only other piece of information we get about it is that it is described as "*Shabbaton Zichron Teruah*," "A day of rest, in memory of the Teruah sound." So we have to... remember the Teruah sound?

But what is it, and where are we remembering it from, and why should we remember it? It's all very mysterious.

We have seen shofars in the Torah before - at the revelation at Mount Sinai - but it never says they made that distinct Teruah sound. So when have we ever heard that sound before? We're being told to take a whole day to remember this sound - but remember what?

I try to be a good rabbi, so turn to the classical commentaries. They offer their interpretations, but none of them finds me an actual mention of this sound. I try to remember, have I seen it somewhere before.. I can't come up with anything. So then I pulled out what's called a concordance - a book that lists all appearances of a word root in the Hebrew Bible. I look up the root of Teruah, which means a blast, or shout, or roar... And I'm thumbing through the listings and....

There it is. I found it. Now let me blow your mind a little, okay?

There is ONE, and only, use of this word before it is mentioned in what we now call Rosh Hashanah.

It is not, as I said, during the revelation at Mount Sinai. But it comes not long afterwards. So let me set the stage a little.

The Children of Israel have just fled from Egypt, they're beginning their journey into the desert, when suddenly God announces, "Tell the people to prepare themselves, because I'm going to come down upon the mountain in three-days time." And, three days later, God comes down upon Mount Sinai.

This ragged band of newly-freed slaves are now standing face to face with the Infinite. And this Great Power then speaks, and pronounces the Ten Commandments, a new system of Ethics, a new way of Living. A Revelation.

It's the greatest moment of Divine Encounter ever. But it's also totally overwhelming. And it's just too much for these people to process. In fact, they begin to worry that any more of this intensity will actually destroy them. So they say to Moses,

"You speak to us, and we will listen, but let not God speak directly to us, lest we die."

So Moses goes up to Mount Sinai, to get more laws from God. He stays there for 40 days and 40 nights, and he receives from God the two Tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Great! And then, Moses goes back down the mountain.

But in the meantime, while he was up there in the clouds communing with the Divine, the people have gotten restless. Their leader is gone, God seems to have disappeared as well, and they're starting to freak out – and they make a rash decision. An angry mob gathers together around Aaron, Moses brother, and demands, "Come, make us a god who will go before us" because we don't know what happened to Moses, and we need something to worship NOW!

And so they build a Golden Calf. These people, who had just heard the Second Commandment, which was not to make or worship any idols, have now melted down all their gold and built a gigantic statue of a COW. And they bow down to it, and they offer sacrifices to it, and they dance arounds this god of gold, shouting and screaming.

And Moses is coming down the mountain. With the writing of God in his hands, escorted by his student Joshua. And they hear something, down below. וישמע יהושע את קול העם ברעו. “And Joshua heard the sound of the people, roaring...”

And there it is. “The sound of the people roaring.” It’s in a different form, so it’s hard to catch, but that word for the roar of the people – *rei-o* – has the same root as the word *Teruah*. It is the only appearance of that word before we are told to take “a day of rest, in remembrance of the Teruah.” And so, the only possible moment we can be asked to remember is this one, the moment when Moses realizes that the people have done something terribly, terribly wrong, and can hear them roaring and raging down below. Roaring and raging. And Joshua turns to Moses and says, “It sounds like war in the camp.”

And all this means that Rosh Hashanah, the Day of the Teruah is about remembering how we stood at Mount Sinai, and had this moment of glory, this unbelievable peak experience, and then we screwed everything up. It’s about how we were this close to the Source of all Life, and Power, and Wisdom, and 40 days later we were roaring, in hysterics, because we made a big shiny thing! This day is asking us to remember that we were once at the edge of greatness, but we couldn’t be patient, and we got scared that we had lost what we had, and then our fear turned to rage, and we descended, ever-so-quickly, to depravity.

This time of the year, during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we spend a lot of time trying to right our wrongs, and confess our sins, so that by Yom Kippur we can be forgiven. We call that process *Teshuvah*, which is often translated as “repentance.” Your modern, kindly rabbis will remind you that *Teshuvah* more literally means “Return.” Maybe, they will tell you, gently, that it’s not about self-punishment, but returning to your “best self.”

Well, they are right! Because Rosh Hashanah is not about how we start bad and try to become good. Rosh Hashanah about how we started out so good, and then we took something beautiful, and ruined it. How we went from a Holy Nation to a band of idolaters. And what that means is that we have to start this process by remembering how great we were, how full of promise and passion and hope, but we couldn’t keep it together, and we gave in to our worst instincts.

Maybe I’m thinking about myself here. I’m an okay guy, you know, good intentions and all, pretty nice most of the time. But I have my failings and struggles, like everyone. Now, many of our sins are best confessed in private, just to God, in our prayers - but one of the things I can say I’ve been struggling with, that I think it’s okay to share, is my anger. And when I say anger, I’m not talking about the righteous indignation that our great rabbi sometimes speaks about. I’m talking about irritable, hot-tempered, grudge-bearing, mean-spirited anger. I have this cauldron boiling inside of me, that I can forget about, until it suddenly boils over. Sometimes, it’s just a bit of road rage, cursing in my car, behind the protection of my rolled-up windows. But sometimes I snap at real people, in real time. People I love, my friends or family. They can tell you. I must confess, I’ve yelled at my mom, violating one of the Ten Commandments, by the

way. And occasionally, I catch myself in a moment, having lost control, relishing in the meanness, it's so ugly... And I'm suddenly ashamed of myself. What happened to me? How did I get here? The Talmud says that giving into anger is like worshipping the idol of one's own worst instincts. So It's like my own little Golden Calf. So I'm thinking about myself tonight.

But I'm also thinking about my community. We Jews are one of the most remarkable peoples in the world. We've been around for thousands of years, and we've produced some of the most beautiful works of literature and ethics and theology the world has ever known. And we have manifested incredible diversity and dynamism as we've moved through the world. And we've suffered so much, that we of all people, should be the most compassionate people in the world. But we are often so paralyzed by infighting, and fear of extinction and ugly prejudices, that we are anything but compassionate. So much of our communal discourse is driven by rage, against one another, or against our neighbors, our fellow human beings, and sometimes I'm ashamed of what we've become. Is this the path that the Am Segulah, my precious people, have chosen? So I'm thinking about my community.

But I'm also thinking about my country. I remember my father telling me, when I was a boy, "You live in the greatest country in the world." And I remember, when I got older, studying the remarkable documents that formed our system of government, and feeling so proud and inspired. And then I remember coming to understand that at the core of our nation's history was the terrible legacy of slavery, which seemed so impossible to reconcile with our stated ideals – but there it was, that's who we actually were - and in so many ways that's who we still are.

And I remember that not too long ago, I felt hopeful once again that we were moving back towards those ideals of equality and freedom, and justice for all.

And now, I look around, and it seems like – so quickly – something has been ruined. Some chance has been lost. And we find ourselves mired a culture of hatred, and anger, and selfishness. A culture that worships golden riches, and cares not at all about justice.

What happened? How did we get here? We had so much promise, and we've fallen so far. And now, now what do we do?

Well, what did Moses do - when he heard the first sound of the Teruah, the roar of the raging masses? At first, he couldn't contain himself. He, too, exploded with rage, and he took the Tablets, inscribed with those high ideals, and he smashed them to the ground. And he said, if this is how you are going to live, then you don't deserve these.

But the next day, after he had taken some time to reassess, he decided to go back up the mountain, and ask for God's forgiveness, because he said - listen to this -

אולי אכפרה בעד חטאתכם , maybe I can ATONE for your sins. That's Yom Kippur language right there!

And he went up, and he begged for God's forgiveness. And then he carved two more Tablets, with those same commandments. And, amazingly, it is at this point that we get the description of God that is at the center of our High Holiday liturgy.

ה ה אל רחום וחנון, ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת

Merciful and Compassionate God! Slow to anger, full of kindness and truth.

God forgives. We can repair the damage done. We get back to who we were supposed to be. And so Moses went back down to the people, new Tablets in hand, to start over again.

What do we do with our sins, with our screw-ups, with our shame? Are we beyond hope? Are we doomed to stay in this lowly place forever? Is our community? Is our country?

No. The sound of the Teruah on Rosh Hashanah is meant to remind us not just of how we have failed, but of how noble, and hopeful, and good we once were - even if just for a moment - and ultimately this sound is here to remind us that we can be that again.

This process is not about our being bad. It's about our being so good, so full of promise, and then betraying ourselves – because we were too afraid to live up to our full potential.

We're too good for this. We're good, and because we're fundamentally good we want to get back to being good. We long for it. We want to make things right with our parents. We want to make things right with our children. We want to make things right with our friends. We want even – the best part of us wants – to make things right with our enemies.

We still have the potential, the capacity, to change everything. To live life in our communities, our country, our planet, with integrity and kindness and responsibility.

We can do this. We can become who we already are.

And the sound of the Teruah reminds us of that. The sound of the Teruah reminds us of how easily our best intentions can slip away, and how terribly we can destroy what we love. Ruin everything.

And it reminds us that when that happens, we stand for a moment – maybe a while – in shame and bewilderment.

And then we pick ourselves up, and we climb back up the mountain, and we try to make things right, and we find atonement. We carve ourselves a second set of tablets, and we move forward and try, once again, to live out our highest ideals.

That's the process that Rosh Hashanah starts, as we turn back to remember the Teruah.

The sound of the Teruah is a sound I think we all can hear. It's a sound my mother can hear, because it is a sound inside of us. It is the roar of our soul in the process of rediscovering itself.

The sound of the Teruah is coming. It's time to remember who we are.