

The Fulfillment of Yom Kippur: Get Ready For Action

By Rabbi Michael Schwab YK 5775 (written for speaking purposes High School)

Very little excites children more on the High Holidays than the sounding of the shofar. My own children *love* the shofar and, preceding the holidays, our home can spontaneously erupt into a cacophony of shofar blasts from a combination of real and play *shofarot* at any time. (For better or worse, our neighbors can attest to the truth of that statement). In shul, at the end of Yom Kippur, it always makes me smile to witness the rush of our youngsters to the bimah to see, hear and join in, the final shofar blast of the holiday. There is simply something captivating about the shofar. I am sure the allure has something to do with its uniqueness, the fact that it is steeped in significance from our tradition, and of course because of its mesmerizing sound. But perhaps on a spiritual level the shofar is so fascinating because of the realization we experience when we hear its blast: that from a single limited person with a simple unadorned horn could come such loud, wondrous and impactful sounds. A shofar, for a person willing to blow into it, has the

power to turn an ordinary individual into a mighty herald who can now influence the lives of the great many people who can hear its blast.

Therefore, at the end of Yom Kippur, when *we* gather to hear the shofar, a great symbol of our tradition, we are reminded that *each of us* has both the *ability* and the *duty* to stand up and be a leader this year in helping the community to *tangibly* realize in the world all of the positive values upon which we have been meditating over these sacred Days of Awe.

For we hear *many* important messages during the High Holiday season. And I truly hope you come away from this experience renewed and determined. Yet, as we all know, for these days to have a *true* impact on our lives, and on the rest of the world, we *must* turn these messages into *actions*. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur the ten days of repentance end, but the *year* that lies before us is just beginning. What will we *do* with the messages we have heard, the inspiration we may have felt, the energy and passion that we now have? How can each of us *use* our experience here, today, to become the *baal tekiah*, the blower of the shofar, a person with the power to herald change – a leader who will

make a difference in the coming year?! In many ways the time we spend in synagogue over the holidays and the very customs and structure of Yom Kippur itself prepare us, direct us and teach us vital lessons about how to do just that – to become true leaders and to fulfill our purpose as partners with God to make the world a more sacred and better place.

Approaching leadership development using the model of Yom Kippur, we learn that the first step in becoming a leader is to work towards our own *individual* awareness and personal improvement. In order to be a *leader* whose goal is to improve the *community at large*, we have to recognize our *own faults* first and understand them as a microcosm of the larger problem. Only once we have done this, can we move forward effectively and bring about change in the larger society. In the Avodah service of Musaf, for instance, recited later in the afternoon and which describes the original ancient rituals of this Day of Atonement, we recall that the High Priest acted on behalf of the *entire* people offering the traditional atonement sacrifices for the whole

community. However the Rabbis note and highlight, that before being able to act in this leadership role, the first step was for the priest to atone *himself* – he had to get his own house in order before acting on behalf of others. He had to personally *model* the *teshuvah* that he expected from the community.

This ancient individual act of atonement most closely parallels the primary experience *we* currently have on Yom Kippur. Today, even while we pronounce the confessionals in the plural, we mostly focus on atoning for our *individual* mistakes and on pledging to personally do better in the future. This process of individual *teshuvah*, with which we spend so much time on Yom Kippur, can be seen not only as an end in and of itself, but as the first step in preparing ourselves to become the leaders we need to be, just as it was then for the High Priest. With this understanding we can see that today, a major part of what we are doing, is personally readying ourselves to make the greatest possible impact on the broader community in the coming year.

Our individual participation in the *Teshuvah* process is also important because it teaches us in a very *personal* way the theological and philosophical *motivation* that underlies the larger goal of *Tikkun Olam*, our greater effort to improve the *world*. Our experience during the High Holidays therefore *spiritually* prepares us for the important work of the year ahead by giving us the opportunity to *individually* encounter the religious power of what it means to stand before God in repentance, helping us to *internalize* the message of how much work needs to be done but also how much God needs us as partners to do it. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Faith is a blush in the presence of God.” This is a very poetic phrase but what I think he means is that when we resolve to stand before God on Yom Kippur we become acutely aware that in the face of God, we are so very imperfect. We willingly come together on this day to stand before the Divine mirror, but we are a bit embarrassed about the gap between us that it reveals. Spiritually, Heschel seems to be saying that part of the enterprise of Judaism, and perhaps religion in general, is to help us become aware of the gap, to help us *see* the space between who we are

and who we know we can be. In other words, as Jews, we are to purposefully *cultivate* this awareness, the awareness that induces us to blush.

And then the key is that we need to use that blush to motivate us to close the gap. So, of course we come to synagogue to be welcomed and fulfilled, but we also come here to remind us of the work we still need to do – within ourselves and in the world. This introspective process both inspires and gives focus to our future leadership. As the great scholar Maimonides taught, the first step of *teshuvah*, repentance, is to identify our faults and then to be *ashamed* of them. This shame was *not* to cause despair, rather the opposite: it was to *motivate* us and *guide* us to become better. As I learned from my friend Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove, the goal here is to inspire us to mind the gap between who we are right now and who we know we can be and then seek the path by which that chasm can be *bridged*, so that we can mend ourselves *and in doing so* lead the way “to allow the radiance of our entire community to shine and help mend the world”. We enter Yom Kippur as inadequate sinners, our

heads held low, but we exit these doors with a new awareness, head held high, ready once again to lead our world with directed purpose into a brighter future.

To do that most effectively our tradition demands that we cultivate this awareness and achieve self-improvement, *in community*, together.

This is not a private affair and we can't do it alone. The participation of *all* of us in this process, every *single* member of the community, in a *public* way, represents one of the most *important* principles of Judaism:

leadership is *not* confined to a small sub-class of people, "the leaders".

Leadership is not a *category* that some fall in to and some do not.

Leadership is a *state of being* that everyone *can* and *should* achieve.

Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that, "every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man". We, as a people, politely but firmly disagree. The

Torah tells us, instead, that we, all of us together, are "*Mamleket*

Cohanim" an entire kingdom of priests – a whole community of leaders.

We *cannot* rely on others, or some small elite, to be the ones to effect change and growth in the world; we *all* must be agents in this great

initiative. Becoming a *Baal Tekia*, a leader who is an instrument of growth and progress, does not mean we have to single-handedly found an organization, rather it means we need to take an *active* and *personal* role within the community in perpetuating the values for which we believe.

This notion of a broader, more inclusive, definition of leadership is also supported by modern research. In preparing this sermon I came across a fantastic TED talk on-line. For those who don't know, TED stands for "Technology, Entertainment and Design" and is a not-for-profit organization whose goal is simply to spread powerful ideas. TED does so by producing short internet videos featuring speakers across the globe in just about every discipline, who present new ideas they have discovered from their unique research. In the piece to which I referred, Derek Sivers tries to trace how leadership is used to successfully begin a movement or initiative. To illustrate he showed real footage of a young man attending an outdoor concert who stood up on the lawn, alone, and started to do a funky dance in view of the other patrons. Sivers

identified him as an example of the *charismatic* leader who is attempting to *start* a movement. Soon after, the video shows that *another* young man jumped up and joined him. The leader immediately embraced the newcomer, taught him the dance quickly and then the new participant called to his friends to join in as well. Soon a small crowd was dancing with them and within two minutes just about everyone in the camera's view had *rushed* to be a part of the phenomenon and were doing the original leader's dance.

What he illustrated using this video, and what he had discovered from more extensive research, was that leadership was not as binary as most people assume – there are not simply leaders and followers. While a *charismatic* leader was needed to begin the process, he stated that what was even more important and what is harder to find was what he called “the first follower”. The “first follower” is the first person to take a risk and follow someone who is demonstrating or professing an important idea or action. Despite the title, the first *follower* is actually a very important *leader*. As Sivers said, “The first follower is an

underestimated form of *leadership*. . . It is the first follower who actually transforms a lone nut into a leader of a movement”. Further, the video demonstrated what his research concluded, that commonly subsequent participants don’t actually follow the original leader, rather, more often than not, they are following the lead of the previous “followers”. What this means is the term “follower” here is not the opposite of a “leader” but a descriptor of a crucial *type* of leadership-role that one can play. In this view, “following” and “leading” are more like synonyms than opposites. This observation teaches us that leadership functions much more like a chain of equal links, or an interconnected web, than as a single leader with multiple followers. We learn, therefore, that to be most effective in creating positive change we can and should most *often* express leadership by first becoming active and dedicated *followers* of the causes in which we believe.

So what does this mean for us? On a personal level this reminds us that we need not start a movement, we need not have a title, we need not be a major public figure, in order to be an impactful leader! If you

proactively and consciously stand up for your values and participate in bringing those values to realization in the world, you *are* a leader – you are fulfilling your role as a partner with God. And that act of leadership, in turn, will *surely* inspire the leadership of others all the way down the line. As Sivers noted, trying to get everyone to become *charismatic* leaders would be highly ineffective and misguided. We do not need each of us to start our own movement. What we need are more people willing to stand up and be counted in the name of the incredible values, initiatives and causes that already exist. On Yom Kippur we face the truth of who we are and we confront the reality of the state of the world. We dwell on the values for which we stand and when in our lives we have not lived up to them. Motivated by that realization we then affirm our true nature: that we are *all* leaders, that we *each* have a noble purpose and that we *are* capable of partnering with God to bring blessing to the world. Accompanied by *this* inspirational insight we can truly begin the year.

Yet, for this to work most effectively *in practice*, we must keep a few more leadership lessons in mind. Sivers noted that it is *crucial*, in order to actually attract followers and change them into leaders, the original leadership has to treat their new followers as equals. The dance leader in the video, for example, demonstrated this by *welcoming* his first follower as a *partner*: he immediately embraced him, taught him the dance with a smile, let his partner dance *independently* and then permitted that first follower to teach the dance *himself* to the next set of people who came to join. What is so important about this, is that in this way the original leader, and then each subsequent participant, indicated both to one another and to anyone else watching, that they understood that the movement wasn't about them as individuals; rather, they as individuals were committed to the movement and they would choose their actions based on what was best for the cause. It is by treating the follower as an equal that one most effectively transforms the follower into a leader. And in doing so, this also makes the act of leadership not about the person or the title but about the value, or endeavor, the community is championing.

As the management guru Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* wrote, a leader needs to have the “paradoxical blend of humility” and initiative. In this way the leader is not simply successful, but successful at *servicing* the core principles of the initiative. “Be it Moses, Abraham Lincoln, a corporate CEO or the captain of a Little League team, a leader’s ambition must be first and foremost for an institution and its principles, never for him or herself”. In this way leadership will be effective in *perpetuating* the great values for which we stand and will always remain focused on the larger goal.

The other component of successful leadership which is modeled by the process of teshuvah on Yom Kippur, is that each should be done *publicly* - for the entire community to see. While there are of course certain exceptions, including certain acts of *tzedakah* and other direct aid which requires a more private approach, generally, for others to be inspired and affected, people need to *see* us stand up for the values we believe in. When we leave the Sanctuary at the end of *Neilah*, we need to decide for what cause we will *publicly* stand up and be counted –

what values we wish to champion in *sight* of the rest of the community. Public leadership could take the form of philanthropy, volunteerism, advocacy work, providing one's professional services or taking on a specific leadership role in an organization. When others *see* you lead, it inspires them to do so as well.

But this could also be demonstrated more *informally*. For example, the other thing to keep in mind tonight after *Neilah* (and I use this example seriously) when we are on our way out to our meals, is that if kindness is something we care about, we need to *model* it in the hall and in the parking lot as our community rushes to exit intent on sinking our teeth into our bagels and lox. To be a leader: let the other in front of you *-despite* your hunger, make the effort to hold the door *even though* you are in a rush, smile at others and take the time to exchange a greeting, even *if* it takes you a little longer. These acts are also acts of leadership. They create a path of continuity from the pledges we made in the service moments earlier to be better people and they serve as our very first actions after atonement was granted. They set a pattern for us

as we begin the year anew. And these actions are *also* noticed by others who will see our leadership in this way too and be inspired to follow suit, hopefully thereby becoming leaders themselves who will consciously model our values in their daily behaviors.

The truth is that the original charismatic leadership on many of the values which we cherish has already been established: by our Matriarchs and our Patriarchs, our Sages and our modern day heroes. To follow in the footsteps of such leaders, both of the past and present, is no less noble than the original act of leadership itself. To suggest to another that they participate with you in an important initiative, or to model an important value that will better the world, is exhibiting the very leadership our tradition asks us to demonstrate. To change the world, to take the values we speak about here and bring them to life, is not something that can only be done by some historical figure – it is something *each of us* can and absolutely should, do!

One of the most moving passages offered by our tradition comes close to the end of the Torah. Moses, speaking to the Children of Israel

as they are about to enter the Land, enjoins the entire community to fulfill, in their actual lives, the values of the Torah, which they had just been taught in detail by Moses. He said, “It is *not* in the heavens ... neither is it beyond the sea ... *no*, it is very *close* to you, in your *mouth* and in your *heart*, to observe it.” The ability to lead is indeed in each one of us, in our mouth and in our heart. The goal that we seek is not unreachable, it is not in heavens or beyond the sea; it is here in this room. Today and during the rest of these Ten Days of Repentance we have prepared ourselves for this task. What is more, gathered as a community in this space, we bear witness to the fact that we are all engaged in this project together, every one of us is an equal partner and potential leader in seeking to make real, the values of the Torah, and of our tradition, in the world.

Therefore, we, each and every one of us, needs to engage in a leadership role in the coming year. In this generation it is *we* who can carry the values of our people which we hold dear, and who realize them in the world through our actions. *Today, we* resolve to match our actions

to the new and re-discovered truths we confronted and uncovered over these holidays. And we need to make this commitment *now*; we need to start this initiative before the immediacy of this moment fades. The fate of the world is up to us, up to all of us and each of us. As Avraham answers the call to God, *Hineni* – Here I am, ready and willing – so must *we*! We have a duty to perform towards our family, our community, and our people – we must do it now. There is someone depending on us for a tangible expression of love and affection, show that love and affection - now. There is a State of Israel that needs our support, visit and advocate on its behalf - now! Your Jewish community needs to be strengthened, for yourself, your children, your grandchildren, strengthen it - now. There is a reconciliation you can help set in motion, no matter how difficult the conversation, reach out, and do it - now. If God is a stranger to you, resolve to seek God - now. There are organizations whose work you admire, support them - now. And there are people in the world suffering from injustice, help them - nowⁱ.

We pass through this world but once. Any good we can promote, any kindness we can show, any mitzvah we can do and inspire others to do - we must do it - now. We must believe that it is in *our* power to build a more noble, better life, suffused with the presence of God until the end of our days. And we must believe in our ability to be agents in order to accomplish this. Will our actions match our values? Will we be a bystander or part of the chain of leadership? These are the questions for which we have gathered over the High Holidays. The *answers* will be given in the actions we take once this day has passed. As Moses said to Joshua when he passed on the torch of leadership, *Hazak V'ematz*, “Be strong and courageous”. When you hear the final shofar blast at the end of the day, remember that you are needed, and that you are able; you *can* be a leader and carry on the great legacy of our tradition to partner with God and strengthen the world. Stand up and be counted. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* – May we all be sealed for a year in which each of us *pursues* blessing and goodness for all, Amen!

¹ Format inspired by sermon given by Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue