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Hear the Sound of the *Teruah*: Sigh, Sob, Plant and Be Happy
Rosh Hashanah 2006

We are going to begin this sermon with 30 seconds of silence. While we aren't making any noise, I want you think about the sounds you heard this year.

- Electronic sounds: iPod playlists and cell phones.
- Creative sounds: symphonies and poetry.
- Happy sounds: new born babies crying and champagne bottles popping.
- Sad sounds: sirens and bombs.
- Natural sounds: birds and bugs and rain.
- Mechanical sounds: cars and planes.

5766 was a year filled with spiritual sounds, political sounds, and emotional sounds. In the next 30 seconds of silence consider:

- What sounds did you hear this year?
- What did they mean?
- How did you respond?

There are sounds around us everywhere, all the time. Diane Ackerman puts it this way. "Sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives, and we depend on them to help us interpret, communicate with, and express the world around us. Outer space is silent, but on earth almost everything can make a sound."¹

She is right. Everything makes a sound and these sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives. Last spring our family went to New Orleans. Sam, Larry and I didn't go to gawk. We went to bear witness. We went to listen. We heard sounds in places we thought would be silent. We heard sounds that continue to challenge us, to listen more carefully, to ask better questions, to find paths toward hope and wholeness out of the noise. It was not great jazz that motivated us. What inspired us, last May, was the sound of the shofar.

We heard the sound that gives Rosh Hashanah its earliest name, Yom Teruah. The book of Leviticus instructs us, "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall hold a sacred gathering, Yom Teruah, Make the Sound of Teruah Day."² Unfortunately, we don't have recordings or mp3 files from biblical times. In the first century the rabbis of the Mishna tried to define the sound of *teruah*. They argue. One declares *teruah* was a long sustained note. A second rabbi asserts *teruah* was three shorter quavering notes. The third rabbi posits it was three very short wailing notes.³ They finally they strike the compromise we heard earlier today.

By the time of Maimonides, in the 11th century, even less was known about the sound of the *teruah*. A physician, he applied his experience of suffering to the sound of the shofar. Listen to what he wrote, "...We are in doubt as to the precise meaning of the scriptural term *teruah* and the exact sound it represents; whether it is a sobbing sound like that of lamenting women, or a sighing sound like the repeated sighs of a man, whose heart is oppressed by great trouble, or a combination of both, the sighing sound and the sobbing sound that usually follows it. For a man

in trouble will usually sigh first and then sob. Accordingly we sound all three notes.”⁴ Maimonides suggests three possibilities for the sound of *teruah*.

1. The sobbing of a grieving community.
2. The deep sign of a troubled individual.
3. A combination, first the sigh and then the sob.

This is what we heard in New Orleans last spring. We heard the layered and complex sound of *teruah*. Notes in isolation and in combination, ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, like the waters of the flood, like a great piece of jazz music. We were surprised to hear the shofar. We were inspired by the sound of *teruah*.

The first sound we heard, as Maimonides observed, was the sigh. He describes it as *anakah*. The sound of a person, whose heart is oppressed by great trouble, who is anxious about some great matter. The sound the existentialists call angst.⁵ The sound we Jews call OYE. We know this sound. We heard the sigh of *anakah* this year. We heard it from family members and friends. We may have even breathed it ourselves. Unraveled relationships. Lost jobs. Failed projects. Shattered dreams. Weakened health. Fractured lives.

The driver of the car rental van sighs. He tells us with ambivalence about the proposed new levee plans. He reflects, “If they build the new levees 10 feet higher to keep out the flood waters, and if it does flood, we will be 10 feet deeper. I have no idea what to do.” A teenager sighs. She tells us with sadness, “My best friend is moving permanently to Atlanta.” She explains with frustration, “My school will not add my grades, from the fall semester in Houston, to my grade point average. This is really bad since I did so well.” A woman at services Friday night sighs. She expresses gratitude by announcing, “I finally have an appointment with a roofer on Monday.” We hear in her prayer of thanks, cynicism and despair after nine months of waiting. Yom Teruah is the day when we hear people sigh. Today is the day we worry about great matters, about issues that trouble hearts and souls.

- How to live.
- Who are our friends.
- When to be grateful.

Yom Teruah is a day to listen. Rosh Hashanah demands we really hear the *teruah* sound of *anakah*, the sound of pain and anxiety, of burden and disappointment. We don’t have to fix the problems. We can respond to sighs with silence. Think about the story of Job. He experiences terrible calamity, sits on the ground, and breathes a heavy sigh. His friends hear his sigh. The Bible tells us, “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. No one spoke a word to him for they saw the greatness of his suffering.”⁶ His friends sat with him in silence.

Rabbi David Wolpe shares this Talmudic commentary about the episode. “...Their behavior is a lesson in the proper conduct of consoling those in trouble. First you must feel their pain. Sometimes the most reassuring message is the one that need not be spoken. Sometimes the cries that touch most deeply are those we cannot hear.”⁷ It is hard to respond this way. We want to fill the empty painful place with words, with chatter, with advice. Our tradition suggests otherwise. Sometimes the best response is silence.

An extraordinary teacher, Parker Palmer, uses silence in his classroom. He finds community can emerge from stillness. “In most places where people meet, silence is a threatening experience. It makes us self-conscious and awkward; it feels like some kind of failure...Eventually my students feel a sense of community in the silence that is deeper than what they feel when the words are flowing fast and hard. Words so often divide us, but silence can unite. In the silence we are more likely to sense the unity of truth which lies beneath our overanalyzed world, the relatedness between us and other and the world we inhabit and study. When we emerge from silence with this sense of unity in our hearts, it is easier to speak and hear words of truth.”⁸

What an unexpected idea. We can forge community, in silence. We can find a sense of unity in our hearts, find peace, in silence. Isn't this the goal of these most holy days? Isn't this why we hear the shofar? Today, as the New Year begins, we want to speak and hear words of truth easily. Sometimes the best response, to the deep sighs of our lives, is silence. This is not the silence of apathy or distraction or denial. This is the deep silence that can create connection in ways words can not achieve. Today we need some compassionate and careful silence. Today we need the quiet that allows truth and growth and hope to emerge.

The second sound of *teruah* according to Maimonides is *yelala*. It is the sound we heard so often this summer from across the Middle East. Groups of women wailing and mourning: the death of their children, the destruction of their homes, the failures of peace. *Yelala* expresses our deepest sort of loss and loneliness. We know this sobbing sound because we heard it this year: From an empty seat next to us in the sanctuary. In a crowded hospital waiting room. On the front page of the newspaper. Across a silent phone line. Inside the gates of the cemetery. Between the activities that keep us so busy. Hidden in small talk and gossip.

Everywhere we go in New Orleans we hear this sobbing sound. We hear sobbing from boarded up buildings, and broken windows. Open shops and restaurants fight the loneliness with banners over their doors. We hear sobbing when they proudly proclaim, “We're open!” in bright bold letters. These signs are invitations, to shop and eat and not feel alone in this desolate place. My favorite sign is outside one of the Reform congregations, Temple Sinai. Big blue letters shout: “Welcome Back to Sinai.” Sinai is a place of new beginnings—a place of fear and hope and covenant. Mt. Sinai is place where sacred relationships are forged out of loneliness. What more hopeful message of connection could there be?

Yom Teruah is the day when we can offer an antidote to loneliness, with carefully chosen words that grow out of our silence. Again, Parker Palmer offers us insight. “I have learned in the silence that it is often better to speak a question than an answer...[Questions] open up a space where students can listen to their own experiences, to each other, to the subject at hand, not merely to the authority of the teacher...”⁹

A great example of this is what Quakers call “The Clearness Committee.” Individuals or couples gather a group of five or six people to consider a problem. The person with the problem submits the situation in writing to the committee. They read the materials and gather together. The members of the group are only allowed to ask questions. They are not allowed to offer opinions or solutions. The individual, or the couple, answer the questions, which lead to more questions. The questions then lead to deeper responses and eventually, clarity. The Clearness Committee

brings comfort and insight with questions. Warmth and welcome, the embrace of community, the possibility of relationship brings strength to those who sob. Yom Teruah is our invitation to join The Clearness Committee. This first day of the New Year, “demands that we abandon our habit of giving advice and answers when someone brings a question our way; it demands that we learn to listen...that we develop the discipline of asking questions to create a space for truth.”¹⁰

An author writes about what it was like to come home after school as a child. His mother didn't ask him, “What did you do at school today?” His mother asked him, “Did you ask a good question today?” Did you ask a good question today means: Did you listen carefully for the sound of *teruah*? Did you pay attention to the needs of others—to your co-workers, children, spouses and partners, friends, even strangers? Did you create a space for truth in your life and our world?

On Rosh Hashanah the sighing sobbing of *teruah* welcomes us back to Sinai. Today covenant and relationship are possible, with each other and with God. The sound of Sinai is intense. The people see thunder and hear lightening.¹¹ They hear the shofar, growing louder and louder.¹² The sound is so powerful it is natural to withdraw, to sigh, to sob. At Mt. Sinai, retreat is followed by silence. Silence is followed words of challenge. Then, a new way of life emerges from the cacophony of sounds. The 10 Commandments. A path of fulfillment and satisfaction. A way to understand and organize the loss and loneliness. A road toward commitment and covenant, holiness and happiness.

Maybe this is what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote, “*Ashrei*, happy, are the people who know the sound of the *teruah*.”¹³ Surely he didn't think people sighing and sobbing, were cheery. *Ashrei* is a deeper sort of happy—a sense of contentment and satisfaction. The psalmist suggests the person who feels *ashrei*, who knows the sounds of *teruah*, is on the right path, has set out in a new direction, is blessed in ways they may not yet know, by the presence of God. This is what it means to hear the sound of *teruah* and be happy. To find in the sighing and sobbing some optimism, to regain control, to have relationships and be part of a community.¹⁴ To move in the direction of hope.

The street in New Orleans seems quiet. And suddenly we understand the power of *teruah*. 3 adults, 2 children and a dog live in the FIMA trailer. They are landscaping their yard. The mother planted 6 palm trees in front and tells us she has 9 more in the back. Her yard is lush and green and beautiful. She settles a flowering tropical plant into place and tells us, “It is going to be an oasis”. She has heard the sound of *teruah*. She has sighed and sobbed. And now she knows what it is to be *ashrei*, on the right path. She is planting an oasis.

This is the possibility at the dawn of a New Year. After the silence, after the questions, comes the action. This is the challenge still facing the people of New Orleans. This is the opportunity stretched out before each of us. It is the blessing of Yom Teruah. The shofar calls us: listen, ask, plant an oasis, be happy. Isaiah's words on Yom Kippur morning promise the reward. “...Let your voice resound like a shofar: call upon the people to change their ways, [to act with compassion,] [when you do it] ...then you will be like a watered garden...”¹⁵ 5767 is the year to let our voices resound like the shofar. This is the year to hear the sounds of the *teruah*. This

year when we hear sighs we can be silent. This year when we hear sobs we can ask questions. The sound of the shofar is growing louder and louder. It is time to start planting.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. So May it Be God's Will. Amen.

¹ Ackerman, Diane, *A Natural History of the Senses* p.175.

² Leviticus 23:24.

³ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 4:9.

⁴ Maimonides, *Misheh Torah, Seder Moed* (The Book of Seasons), Chapter 3, section 2.

⁵ Zornberg Aviva, "Cries and Whispers: The Death of Sarah" in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days* by Reimer and Kates, p.177.

⁶ Job 2:13.

⁷ Wolpe, David, *In Speech and In Silence*, p.36.

⁸ Palmer, Parker. *To Know A We Are Known; Education As A Spiritual Journey*, p.81.

⁹ Palmer, Parker. *To Know A We Are Known; Education As A Spiritual Journey*, p.82.

¹⁰ Palmer, Parker. *To Know A We Are Known; Education As A Spiritual Journey*, p.82-83.

¹¹ Exodus 19:15

¹² Exodus 19:19.

¹³ Psalm 89:16

¹⁴ Adapted from David Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*. Cited in *Context*, July 2006 Part B.

¹⁵ Isaiah 58:1,11