

**THE CALL OF THE SHOFAR**  
**ROSH HASHANAH 5770**  
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What is the spiritual challenge and task of Rosh Hashanah? What does God really want from us on this day? The ritual of sounding the Shofar is the key to understanding what we are supposed to do and become on this day. Listen to how Maimonides describes the significance of the Shofar.

*Although the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree from the Torah (without any explanation), there is a clue to its meaning: "Awaken you sleepy ones from your sleep! Get up you who are sound asleep! Search your deeds, do Teshuvah (repentance), and remember your Creator! Those of you who forget the truth by wasting your time with the unimportant and spend your year with things that have no value and cannot help-----look at yourselves and improve your ways and deeds! Every one of you should abandon his evil way and thoughts that are no good. (Hilchoth Teshuvah 3:4)*

The sound of the Shofar reminds us that an essential spiritual aspiration in life is to be awake, attentive, and alert. The sound of the Shofar urges us to open our eyes to the world around us and to listen to others. The more aware we are of ourselves, our loved ones, our colleagues, our community, and the world we live in, the more likely it is that we can sanctify and redeem our own lives and the lives of others. The sound of the Shofar beckons us to remove our blindfold and to unplug our ears to our destructive and dangerous spiritual habits: arrogance, lack of generosity, bearing a grudge, being vengeful, speaking ill of others, being deceitful, and hating for no real reason. We are supposed to look inward and become more aware of our many faults. For if we are not aware---if we are in a deep sleep---then we cannot begin to change. The sound of the Shofar is a call to freedom: freedom from destructive habits and traits that undermine our relationships with God and with those we love.

But we can also be blind to the oppression of others who are living in our midst. We have trained our ears not to hear their cries for help. The sound of the Shofar urges us to open our eyes to the oppression of the poor so that we pay attention to how the powerful take advantage of the vulnerable. The shofar calls us to engage in the world, to promote justice so that others can be free. The Shofar calls us to end our indifference to injustice that may be close by. As the prophet Isaiah teaches, "Cry with full throat, without restraint; raise your voice like a ram's horn." Let our voice be as strong and powerful as the sound of the Shofar in confronting injustice and oppression in the world so that others can be free.

This Rosh Hashanah I want to explore with you this dual meaning of the sound of the Shofar. Tomorrow, I will speak about the importance of becoming more aware of our own destructive spiritual habits. Today, I want to open your eyes and ears to an injustice that happens all the time but of which most of us are unaware. I hope my words, like the sound of the Shofar, will

increase your awareness, expand your vision, and make your ears more sensitive.

Let me begin by telling you a story about a young woman named Rose. Rose was born and raised in the African country of Cameroon in West Africa, just south of Nigeria. Rose was 14 when a friend of her aunt stopped by her house. This woman told Rose and her family that a Cameroonian family in the United States needed someone to help around the house. In exchange, the family would send Rose to high school in the United States. For Rose and her family this was an opportunity of a lifetime. They talked it over and decided to send Rose. The next day Rose met with the family for whom she was going to work. They bought her an air ticket and escorted her through customs and immigration, passing her off as a member of their family. Everything was fine until Rose reached her new home in America.

The husband and wife showed Rose the jobs she had to do. Soon the jobs filled her day completely. Up at six in the morning, Rose had to work until midnight. When she protested that she needed some time off, she was beaten. Whenever Rose made a mistake, such as spilling milk on the floor, she was beaten. In a strange country, locked up in a strange house, Rose was cut off from help. If she tried to use the phone, she was beaten. If she tried to write a letter, it was taken away from her. The promise to send her to school was just the bait to hook her and her family. The family living here had no intention of sending Rose to school. In Cameroon, her parents received no word from her, just reassuring messages from her captors. The beatings and constant verbal attacks broke Rose's will; her life dissolved into a blur of pain, exhaustion, work, abuse, and above all fear. Rose lived in slavery for two and a half years.

Where did this story take place? Not far from here in a Maryland suburb of Washington, DC. Slavery is alive and well in the United States and in many parts of the world. Rose's story is not unique. In fact, she is only one of thousands of people who are trafficked and enslaved in our country. "The U.S. Department of State estimates that as many as 17,500 people are brought into the United States **each year** and forced into agricultural work, prostitution, domestic service, or sweatshop labor. According to conservative estimates, there are tens of thousands of slaves in America today. Anti-slavery activists also estimate that 27 million men, women, and children are enslaved worldwide."

In our country, au pairs, like Rose, of foreign nationals, businesspeople, and Americans with permanent residence abroad are particularly vulnerable to abuse. There are no protections for them as there are for au pairs who come from Western European countries. The government insists that such young women attend several orientation sessions, and that they develop friendships with other au pairs. The law also stipulates the number of hours these women can work per week and what their minimum wage should be. Yet there is no orientation nor are there such rules and regulations for au pairs who are young women from the Philippines, West Africa, or Indonesia.

Other groups of workers who are vulnerable to being enslaved are farm workers and workers in the meat processing industry. Many of you may remember the Federal raids on the Postville Kosher Meat packing plant last year in Iowa. Most of the workers in that plant worked in near slave-like conditions. They were brought into this country illegally and deceptively. They were given little if any training in one of the more dangerous jobs in the United States. Those workers were victims of bosses who exploited them and deceived them. And yet they were

jailed before they were deported from the country. They were victims and yet we treated them as criminals. Many of the tomatoes grown in Central Florida are harvested by immigrant workers who are vulnerable to being enslaved. Agents bring them into the country legally, but deceive them about their wages, housing, and working conditions. Often such workers have to pay exorbitant rent for squalid housing. The rent is so high that they have to pay almost all their wages back to their bosses.

Young women such as Rose and the workers in Postville were brought into this country and abused. But many American born women and children are enslaved by pimps in the sex industry. According to an FBI report issued in 2005, "between 244,000 and 325,000 American children and youth are at risk each year of becoming victims of sexual exploitation, including as victims of commercial sexual exploitation (e.g., child pornography, juvenile prostitution, and trafficking in children for sexual purposes.)"

The sound of the Shofar urges us to become more aware of oppression and injustice in our midst. Slavery and trafficking of men, women, and children are illegal in our country ever since the passage of the 13th amendment. Since it is illegal, slavery is hidden, but often exists nearby. It is time that we take slavery and trafficking out of the shadows and make it of common concern. The most important first step is to become aware of slavery. We must become aware that slavery exists in our country, that it can exist where our food is picked or processed, and that it can exist in our neighborhood. The young girl Rose escaped from being enslaved, because she met one person who was troubled by what he saw. He befriended her. When Rose had the opportunity, she ran from the home she was in, to a mall, and begged a person for some change to make a phone call to this one man who had taken an interest in her. Anti-slavery activists teach that slavery is often uncovered when ordinary citizens sense that something is not right about a person or situation. The first step is to become aware. Opening to this awareness is also what the sound of the Shofar teaches.

We should become more aware of the labor conditions under which our food is picked, harvested, or processed. Postville is most likely not unique. In this country, slave like conditions still are present in the fields and factories where our food originates. We need to become more aware of where our food comes from. Keeping kosher has to include safe working conditions and fair labor practices and not just how the animal is slaughtered, or what the ingredients are in a product.

And we should be concerned about how other consumer products are produced. Asian rugs and cocoa beans, the source of chocolate, are products that have a long history of being produced or picked by child slave labor. In recent years, the chocolate manufacturers have taken positive steps to see that the cocoa beans that come from Western Africa are not picked by slaves. But much work needs to be done. Similarly, some rug manufacturers have labels attached certifying that the rug was not made by forced labor. As consumers, if we begin asking retailers about how their products are produced, this could become a powerful incentive to change. But we have to become more aware. The sound of the Shofar calls to us.

Finally, we need to reach out to the victims of slavery in our midst. Too often the victims are treated as criminals, especially if they have entered the country illegally. The victims have been traumatized and they need a safe place to recover. There are agencies and groups who offer

services to victims of slavery. We can support such groups by volunteering. I hope that our Social Action Council will add to our list of projects a shelter that gives assistance to victims of slavery.

In the book of Leviticus, the Torah teaches that the Shofar was sounded at the beginning of the Jubilee year on Yom Kippur. This was a year when all slaves were freed and every person could return to his holding; each person to his family. "U'kratem dror ba-aretz l'kol yoshveha: You shall proclaim liberty in the land to all its inhabitants." The Shofar is a call to freedom. May the sound of the Shofar make us more aware of the slaves in our midst. May that sound open our eyes and our ears so that we are inspired to join the effort to bring slavery out of the shadows. May we truly become a land of the free and the home of the brave.