What Does This Mean to Me?



Your 18Forty Holiday Guide explores the meaning and relevance behind each of the holidays in the Jewish calendar. Receive this newsletter in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

You are still at your desk late on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the office half empty, the next two days already blocked off. You are not sure you believe in God. You have not sat through a service in years, and yet the day still has so much hold on you. And still, when the day begins you will probably put on a jacket and go.

The Torah barely describes this day. In Vayikra 23:23-25 and Bamidbar 29:1, it gives one instruction—"make a loud blast"—and calls it *Yom Teruah*, the day of sounding. The shofar, the ram's horn you picture, is what the tradition settled on, though it is never named in the Torah. The text says nothing about judgment or kings, or what the loud blast is meant to do. All of that the rabbis derived over the centuries that followed. Where they got that authority is a fair question for another day, and one of several reasons you have kept your distance.

When the day leaves you cold, you do not blame yourself. You blame the tradition for never giving you a reason to care, the teachers who made you memorize the words but never explained their point, or a God who, if He exists, never made Himself felt to you. That is fair, and it is why you never asked the question out loud, what is this supposed to mean to me? You may not be able to put words to the pull Judaism still has on you, whether you are still seeking an answer, showing up for family, or because of some Jewish spark that never fully went out. One thing is worth knowing before you go. The long central prayer, the one that dominates the service, is built from three sections, the three things that perhaps trouble you most. One crowns God as your King. One says He keeps a record of everything you do and are. The last is nothing but the shofar. Start with the one that stings the most, that you are there to be judged.

Why should I spend two days being judged?

The tradition calls Rosh Hashanah the Day of Judgment, and everything modern in you pushes back. Nobody wants to be judged. You have spent your whole adult life escaping other people's opinions, and now the day sets a God you are not sure exists to judge your whole year. When the service reaches *Unetaneh Tokef* and the lines start, "who will rest and who will wander, who will be calm and who will be tormented, who will be raised up and who will be brought down," the part of you that walked out the first time wants to walk out again. Hold onto that. It is the right reaction, and the answer has to earn its way past it.

So ask a simpler question. Who in your life ever judges you? A stranger never does, because a stranger has no stake in you or how your life turns out. The only ones who judge you are the ones invested in you—a parent, a real friend, a teacher who saw something in you. The only people who spend that kind of energy on you are the ones who truly care what becomes of you.

The tradition essentially says this about God. Mishlei says God corrects the person He loves, the way a father is toughest on the child he cares about most. It is why the day's prayers call Him both at once, *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father and our King. He is not a judge weighing a stranger in a courtroom. He is a Father who has not written you off, which is harder to face, because you can shrug off a stranger, but not someone who wants the best for you.

And when this Father looks at you, the older sources insist He is not scanning a crowd. The Mishna states that every living person passes before Him individually, not as part of a mass. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that God does not look at your résumé, but at who you have become, which is the only thing a parent truly cares about in a child. If you have spent years feeling like one more face in a crowd too big to be noticed, being seen individually, for who you have become, stops sounding like a threat. It means the life you live outside the synagogue is not hidden from Him, because there is no place He is not. He has seen all of it, and has not shut the door on you.

Sarah Hurwitz spent years writing speeches in the White House before she took her own tradition seriously, coming to it as an adult, the way you might, sure it had little to say to her. On the *18Forty Podcast*, and in her book *Here All Along*, she described expecting a religion of guilt and finding one with far more depth than she was handed as a child. What she expected is what you expect, a day that merely adds up everything wrong with you and holds it against you, instead of one that sees who you have become. And God judges you not merely as a King, but as a Father with a vested interest in you.

Why crown a King I'm not sure exists?

Rosh Hashanah is not only about judgment. It also asks you to stand and crown that same God as your King, and that may trouble you even more. If you are truly free, your life is yours to run as you see fit. And that is where the old argument between determinism and free will starts. If you have free will, why does God get to rule you at all, and if He grades you by His rules and no one else's, what is your freedom really worth? The doubt goes deeper than whether anyone is up there to crown. It is whether a King who is up there has left you any real freedom at all.

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But here is what may surprise you. The Torah and its commentators are clear that you have free will. In Devarim, God sets life and death before you and tells you to choose either way. Rambam made this the foundation of Jewish law, writing in his laws of repentance that free will is given to every person, and that a God who rigged the outcome could not justly judge anyone for it. God wants you free even more than you do, because without the freedom to choose, your decision to keep the Torah, or not, means nothing.

That does not make the hard part go away. If you are free but only rewarded for choosing His way, how free are you really? Look at how you live. Nothing has ever forced your hand. If you walked away, no one came after you, and no one is making you stay. The standard is real, and so is your freedom to choose.

Look at it from another angle. Does rejecting religious observance really let you walk away from authority, or do you just trade one kind for another without noticing? In school you answered to the teacher. Now you answer to your boss, to the people whose approval you live for, to the pressure to succeed and be liked. You never consciously chose any of it, but you absorbed it as a natural part of your life. Erich Fromm wrote a whole book, *Escape from Freedom*, on just this, that the modern person who threw off the old traditions did not become free, only stopped noticing what replaced it.

And here is the catch. Not one of these new authorities has any stake in you as a person. You are replaceable to all of them, and you know it. Your job would fill your chair within a week, and the people whose approval you chase would forget you the moment you stopped performing. So the real question is not whether you answer to someone or something, because you always will, but whether who or what you answer to actually cares about you as a person. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in *Worship of the Heart*, called crowning God the deliberate act of a free adult choosing what he will live for, and you do not have to be sure God exists to see that what runs your life now never chose you and never cared what became of you.

The King you are asked to crown is the same Father from before. He tells you what He hopes for you, then lets you go and live your own life, keeping the door open, still caring whether you ever come back through it. You are free to walk away from all of it, the crowning included, and nothing will stop you, which is what freedom means. All the day asks is that this year, whatever you choose, you choose it with your eyes open, knowing what you are giving up. No argument can make you weigh that honestly, so the service stops making its case in words, and comes down to two long days of prayer with the shofar at their center.

Two days, a service I can barely follow, and it comes down to the shofar?

Grant all of it, and the most stubborn objection is still there. Two full days, a prayer book you cannot make sense of even in English, and in the end it comes down to a man in a tallis lifting a ram's horn to his mouth. And it is not one blast. Each morning of Rosh Hashanah the tradition sounds it 100 times, in sets, through that long prayer, the same broken notes again and again until you lose count and the kid next to you asks how much longer. Of the three hard questions, this one has the plainest answer.

Go back to those two bare verses. The Torah asks for the blast with no words attached and no creed to recite. Rambam heard something in that command to sound the blast, and wrote in his laws of repentance that the shofar says one thing, wake up, you who are asleep, and take an honest look at your life. Notice what it does not ask. Not that you follow Hebrew you lost years ago or settle the argument with God you have carried for as long as you can remember. The prayers are made of words, and words are easy to argue with, to mouth without meaning, or to stop hearing. The shofar is just a sound. There are no sentences to parse, translate, or argue with. Before you can answer it, you have already heard it.

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And listen to what the sound is. The Talmud asks what a *teruah* even is, and calls it the sound of a person crying, a groan and then a wail. It ties the 100 blasts to one cry, a mother at her window in the Book of Judges, watching the road for a son who is never coming home, sobbing, the tradition counts, 100 times. That is what the shofar does, 100 times over. It is crying. And the reason it reaches you, if you open your heart and mind to it, is that the cry it makes is the one honest sound every one of us carries. You can suppress it, consciously or not, and keep it bottled up, but it stays part of you, mixed into whatever you carry, noticed or not. Every so often it surfaces on its own, when a relationship comes apart, when work disappoints you, when you are alone at night and the noise finally stops. You have kept that crying inside, where no one could hear it, and once a year the shofar gives it somewhere to go.

Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at Berkeley, spent years studying awe. In his book *Awe*, he found that a sudden brush with something bigger than yourself quiets the anxious, self-protecting voice in your head and turns you outward. A raw blast in a silent room does exactly that, half a second before your guard comes back up.

But the sound is only the opening. What matters is what you do with the two long days around it. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *The Sabbath* that Judaism builds its holiness out of time rather than things, out of days set apart rather than places. The whole Jewish calendar works that way, the week, the month, the season, each one asking you to stop and face what you would otherwise rush past. But a day like that only works if you let it. Shani Taragin argues on the *18Forty Podcast* that the hard parts of Jewish life are hard on purpose. A ritual you go through on autopilot leaves you exactly as it found you, because you brought nothing to it. What turns an ordinary date on the calendar into a day that can move you is the effort you bring, the attention you pay, going in wanting it to reach you. Treat the two days as a checklist and you leave empty and bored, wondering what the point was. Go in open and it can reach you. Go in closed and nothing will.

The point of the shofar is not the sound of the ram's horn, but what it does inside of you. According to Rambam, its purpose is to let you reach the struggles you keep buried and draw them out. Think deeply while listening to the sound and allow your struggles to surface, and then look around at those surrounding you. Every person there is carrying something of their own. Your struggles do not make you broken. They make you human.

Do not ask the day for more than that. You will not walk out fixed, or healed, or changed because you sat through one service. Nothing you do a single time remakes a life. You will carry home most of what you carried in. But if you let the day reach you instead of waiting it out, you walk out having spent two days in honest contact with yourself instead of killing time, knowing your struggle is an ordinary human one, and that it was seen, by the Father the whole day is addressed to, Who cares what becomes of you whichever way you go.

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