

Nomi Lerman
Rosh Hashana 5778
Morning Dvar Torah

In a sea of thousands of people walking in the middle of the streets of downtown Boston, I am surrounded by colorful signs, familiar chants, many new faces, and-- it happens to be a gorgeous Shabbat day. Suddenly I catch sight of two dear old friends marching who I haven't seen in months. I run to hug them, and join in holding their large banner for a few sweaty miles before we reach the crowds gathered in Boston Commons.

Just one week earlier, a few friends drove down to Charlottesville to join those courageously counter-protesting the 'unite the right' rally. Many of us were still raw from what had happened in Charlottesville: we were checking- in with loved ones who were at the counter-protest, and friends who are most directly targeted by the words and intentions of the so- called alt- right who congregated there. The week after Charlottesville, they announced even more rallies-- including one here in Boston! After spending the summer away from Boston, I had been excited to return in time for Shabbat, and so news of this planned march felt like a jab at a fresh wound.

Shabbat is a foundational spiritual practice for me, so how could I abandon it for a march downtown? I asked would my friends want to spend their sacred Shabbat marching downtown to confront white supremacists (who are probably also anti-shabbat). Or should we instead stay back and celebrate Shabbat by **Really** going all out with fancy chocolates, vegetarian chicken soup, and a few of those long nigunim that never end?

Quite a few friends in Boston chose to join the 40,000 people with all sorts of identities who marched to confront white supremacy. Some people didn't go because they had commitments they couldn't break, or due to access or overstimulation, protests aren't their preferred way of showing up. We discussed how they **would** be celebrating

shabbat that weekend-- because that in itself is an act of cultural resistance. I was glad that I chose to march in the end, AND this made me curious to learn more about the different forms of resistance in this time. Is cultural resistance just as important as street protest? Can they work in harmony with each other? Where do we find more examples of resistance so we can **tear down the walls** of the racism and anti-semitism so prevalent in this moment?

In the book *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, Zev Wolf was walking along the fence in Bergen Belsen that separated one sector from another, and suddenly a stone was thrown over the barbed wire right in front of him. He was surprised to notice a string hugging a small piece of paper to this stone. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, and snatched it from the ground as quickly as possible before returning to his barrack where the other Polish Jews lived.

In the note, a Dutch Jew named Hayyim explained that he had been given a shofar, and he wondered if his Polish Hasidic neighbors would be interested in using it for Rosh Hashanah services if he smuggled it into their morning coffee pot. A spark of light stirred in the hearts of the Polish Jews when they heard this, and they came to consensus that sacrificing some of their small portion of coffee and risking their lives was worth the effort if they could hear the cry of the shofar that Rosh Hashanah. Thankfully, the coffee-soaked shofar made it through the barbed wire safely, but then they realized they had another problem. Would it be worth risking their lives again to fulfil the mitzvah by blasting this shofar properly, as they so wanted to do? They debated for a while, and finally agreed that this year, it made more sense to blow the shofar very quietly just enough so people could hear its whisper. When it was time to sound the shofar, those who were present for this hidden Rosh Hashanah service held their breaths through its wail, longing and praying that the muffled sound of this shofar would tear the barbed wire fences of Bergen Belsen down the same way the shofar's blast tore down the walls of Jericho.

Once they finished davvening, they opened their eyes, looked around, and saw that nothing had changed. The barbed wire fences remained rooted in their place. But what they did feel was that the echo of this shofar still reverberated in their hearts. This act of defiance gave them new strength to continue fighting for life, and promised them that someday the barbed wire fences would come down just like the walls of Jericho¹.

The Shofar has been used to announce triumph, to yell out battle cries, and it is the sound that reverberated throughout the revelation at Mount Sinai. In Rambam's Mishne Torah² we learn that on Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar is also secretly communicating "Wake up, and arise from your slumber! Search through your actions and return in תשובה , in reconciliation, so you can remember your Creator!.." Here we learn that the Shofar is a spiritual technology that shatters boundaries and connects us inward to our higher selves, and outward to our community members around us who are all experiencing a version of the same sound vibrations.

I don't know if my grandfather was present in the room when this shofar was blown that Rosh Hashanah, but thankfully the walls of Bergen Belsen did eventually come down to release him and the others who survived. I also want to suggest that although the walls looked the same after the people listened to the muffled sound of the shofar, the imprisoned Jews actually DID tear down the barbed wire fences the moment Hayyim threw his stone over, and his note was received. The shofar busted the barbed wire when people smuggled it through, and held tightly to their Rosh Hashanah even though it was risking their lives. Thankfully, the walls of Bergen Belsen came down for the survivors and their descendants, and yet there are many walls that are still being raised in order to limit and oppress different communities.

¹ Eliach, Yaffa. "A Shofar in a Coffee Cauldron." *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, 1991, pp. 42–43.

² Mishna Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4

There is the wall that might be built along the Mexico and U.S border. The wall that was built on the edge of Jerusalem around and through the occupied territories. Fences are put up when oil and mining companies build on Native American reservations. There are walls that incarcerate people in prisons and ICE detention centers all over this country.

These walls are built to keep people out, or to lock others in. They claim to protect people or resources at the expense of inhibiting other people's freedom. But do walls really offer true protection?

In parshat Shelach, Moshe sent scouts to scope out the land. He asked them to notice if the people who dwelled there were strong, or weak. How could the scouts know just by looking? Rashi says³ that if the city is open, then the people within are strong since they rely on their own strength. But, if the city is fortified and surrounded by walls, then it shows the people inside are weak-- maybe because they are relying on the outward appearance of strength and might.

We learn later on in the *Tanach* that Jericho was surrounded by extremely tall, fortified walls, and our text teaches us just how we are to tear down walls like the walls of Jericho.

As G-d put it,

חזק ואמץ , רק חזק ואמץ

Be courageous and determined, Only be courageous and determined!

After Moshe's death, The Creator echoes this direction to Joshua four times as he grows into his new leadership position. I imagine Joshua was feeling nervous about stepping into his power, just as it is sometimes hard for us to step into our power and to pick up where our ancestors left off.

³ Bamidbar 13:18, Rashi "החזק הוא הרפה"

The words זָרַק וְאָמַץ are also mentioned in psalm 27 which we say throughout Elul and the high holiday season- maybe because entering the new year can be full of uncertainty and we need motivation and trust to continue moving forward, just like Joshua.

After crossing the Jordan river, G-d instructs Joshua to have the people march around Jericho's fortified walls once a day for six days. The 40,000 foot soldiers were led by the ark of the covenant and seven priests who continuously and simultaneously blew seven shofars. Joshua urged the soldiers not to use their voices at all during those six days until the time was right. Once the seventh day arrived, which was also Shabbat, the ark, 7 priests, and 40,000 soldiers circled the walls of Jericho seven full times before the grand finale took place. Towards the end of the seventh cycle, Joshua instructs the warriors to get ready to break their silence with one communal shout, and as it says in the Tanach,

“The moment the warriors heard the voice of the shofar, the people cried out a mighty תְּרוּעָה גְדוֹלָה, a great shout, and the walls fell completely down!”⁴

Can you believe that?!

This story makes me feel excited to think more about the power of music and sound, yet I also am left wondering about the 6 days of marching and shofar blowing that came before the seventh day of victory. Why didn't G-d just instruct the priests to blow their seven shofars at the same time as the shouting soldiers on the very first day? Could it be that the final blast was really the cause of the victory, or, were there other ways that the efforts of everyone together over a cumulative period of time made a difference? How do we experience this type of painstaking and sometimes slow work in our lives and feel confident that it's just as important as the huge final blast?

⁴ Joshua 6:20

I think the six days of circling and marching helped to infuse patience and training for the soldiers. They were silent in voice, but maybe the soldiers were focusing all of their attention on their feet, which rumbled the foundations of the earth in order to urge the walls to crumble. As Rashi taught us back in the book of Bamidbar, the existence of the wall itself reveals the weak nature of the city and its fortifications. Each time the seven shofars and silent concentrated presence of the warriors circled the wall, it's foundation became less solid. Small cracks turned slowly into larger ones. The incremental crumbling finally gave way when all who were present unified their shofars and voices into one big vibrational shout, which completely collapsed the wall!

Walls can be protective. But they also destroy us internally and externally. Walls are sometimes built to visibly mark artificial borders that were won in wars or conquest, yet so many times these borders separate families from each other, and also separate us from connecting to other people and the earth.

Maybe the battle of Jericho actually happened, and this tactic of using sound to topple walls was real. But also, what if the battle of Jericho was a metaphor for so many battles to come, where we struggle against the barriers to liberation?

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that the Hebrew word for land, 'eretz', shares a root with the word "ratzon" which means divine will, and "merutza" meaning to run. A few weeks ago in parshat Ki Tavo⁵ we read, "When you approach the land which G-d your Creator gives you as an inheritance, and you settle upon it, offer up the first fruits of the land into baskets... and cause G-d's name to dwell there" the Baal Shem Tov interprets⁶ this line to mean instead, **"When you run towards divine willpower, which is given as a holy inheritance to all of the people Israel, your task is to make it real by settling and**

⁵ Dvarim 26:1-2

⁶ Schneersohn, Joseph Isaac, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson. "18 Elul." *HaYom Yom: Tackling Life's Tasks: Daily Chassidic Teachings & Glimpses into the Spiritual Lifestyle of Chabad Lubavitch*, Sichos in English, 5770, pp. 456–458

grounding within yourself, and you should draw down the lights into vessels that make Godliness and Divinity palpable to all who are present”.

With the Baal Shem Tov's insight, the story of Jericho can be seen as an internal battle that can affect our own lives personally. The shattering of the walls of Jericho in order to settle the land is the breaking down we must do in order to settle within ourselves and our world. When we ground within ourselves and our communities, we are able to march on the streets of Boston **and** the streets of St. Louis, knowing that our presence and our feet are bringing down walls.

Sometimes walls find their way to our hearts because we feel that we need protection there. And sometimes, that protection might actually be necessary, like when facing people who are harmful. But then there are times that we build up walls between us and loved ones, or between us and people in the wider community, and those walls actually don't need to be there. For example, my sisters and I are very close friends, but right after our father passed away, the relationship between my older sister and I became more strained. We still deeply loved each other, but there were all sorts of stories, patterns, and hurts that built up inside, and we realized that we had stopped fully trusting each other. Last November we went on a two hour teshuva walk where we discussed all the hurts that had built up over the span of years. On this walk, we realized that between us little walls had been built on top of other little walls, and we were still holding on to old hurts. Once we named and explained our stories and hurts, those internal walls fell away. This process strengthened our relationship and reminded me of the incredible power of teshuva.

I'd like to take a moment for us to close our eyes, and place a hand over our hearts to look at all of the walls that are inside of us.

We build walls around our hearts that separate us from connecting to different people with similar goals.

We build walls within us that refuse to own that we inadvertently hurt someone.

We build walls that keep us from connecting to the natural world

There are walls that say our liberation is not bound up with the liberation of other people, and that we should fight for survival for our own.

Because we are human, there are probably a lot of walls in there. Search through all the walls and pick just one for the coming year to focus energy towards. One wall that you can direct the shofar blasts at this year, and that you can stomp your feet at for days. This might be a wall that you hold against yourself, a wall you hold against someone you love, or a political issue you want to dedicate more time to.

Lets open our eyes now and we'll take one collective breath together. *Breathe*

Now that we've identified these walls, we have a whole year to begin the process of breaking it down and connecting more fully to ourselves and those around us. B'hatzlacha, Good luck!

As we catapult into the new year with shofar blasts and shouts of protest, let's deconstruct the walls we carry inside, and challenge the foundation which external fortified walls stand upon. May we unify with other communities that are chipping away at separation walls and fences with a diversity of tactics. Let's envision a world where we know that our liberation and healing is bound with all peoples. As G-d said to Joshua, we must hold on to courage and determination as we boldly take risks!

Reverend Doctor Traci Blackmon reminds us that "prophetic resistance is only possible for those who can still dream." As we welcome this new year in, let's pray for a world where we can still hope and dream, and we can work to tear down the walls within us that oftentimes fuel the building of outer walls in our world. This year may we unify our voices with the steady sound of the shofar.