

## **Falling Walls**

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Two old-timers, Max and Jake, spend every hour of their retirement imagining and debating what life is like in the world-to-come. Eager for the answer, they make a pledge that whoever goes first will somehow find a way quickly to communicate the news to his surviving friend. After several years of these debates, Max dies, and Jake promptly takes up his post next to the phone. A day passes, a week, a month, six months--no Max. But just as Jake is beginning to despair--"perhaps there is no world-to-come"--the phone rings:

"Hello, Jake? It's Max!"

"Max, where the heck have you been? I've been worried sick."

"I'm really sorry, Jake, but I had a devil of a time getting to a phone."

"Well, never mind, Max, tell me, what's it like?"

"So I'll tell ya'. First of all, I get a great night's sleep--11, 12 hours. I get up at sunrise, I stretch a little, I take a walk, I eat a good breakfast. After breakfast, I relax a little, I admire the scenery--before you know it, it's time for lunch. Lunch is delicious, but very filling, so after lunch I take a little nap. I get up refreshed, I wander down to the lake, I take a little dip, see some friends and--before you know it--it's time for dinner. I have a little dinner, I take a little stroll, I enjoy the sunset, and then I sleep twelve hours."

"Max - that's amazing. So you're telling me I've been right along - there really is a heaven."

"Heaven? Jake, who said anything about heaven? I'm in Montana. I'm a buffalo."

Whether we're thinking about our lives in the world to come or we're simply thinking about our lives in this world, we have a lot to daven for and a lot to do.

The sixth chapter in the book of Joshua tells the famous story of how the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Joshua and his army never needed a battering ram or a tank. Their lone weapon was the shofar.

Naturally, God could have performed the miracle and delivered Jericho in any number of ways. But he insists that Yehoshua have the kohanim circle the city blowing the shofar. And the question is why?

You'll notice that whenever the shofar is sounded, it signals that a fundamental change is about to take place. It's a signal that the way things have been are no indication of what's about to come.

- Matan Torah changed the world - and the shofar was blown.
- At the coronation of a new a king - we blow the shofar.
- In times of great distress, when peace is not possible and war is demanded - we blow the shofar.
- And at the end of days when mashiach arrives, we will blow the shofar once again.

So it should come as no surprise that it was the shofar that was God's weapon of choice in the battle against Yericho. It was to be Yehoshua's first conquest in the great plan to wrest control of the Holy land. A fundamental change in the course of our national history – signaled by the sounding of the shofar.

And when it comes to Yericho – it's not just about change, it's about a very specific kind of change. The shofar is about bringing down walls. After all, could there be any more powerful opposition to change than the image of a wall? It's the barrier that tells us – in no uncertain terms – here's what's on the inside; here's what's on the outside. This is the way it's been – and this is the way it's going to remain.

If the wall is the most symbolic image of what keeps us out and what keeps us apart, it's no wonder that Hashem would choose the shofar as the weapon best-suited to oppose it.

We all have walls that keep us at a distance – either from Hashem or from other people. Some walls – like those surrounding Yericho – may require divine intervention to help to bring them down. Others stand only because of our unwillingness to remove them. Maybe hearing the sound of the shofar today will help remind us that the *teshuva* season is not only about an abstract notion of change. It's specifically about taking down the barriers that separate us from people in our lives and from Hashem.

That's why – at the great moment of the ingathering of exiles – we will sound the שופר גדול. Because that's the magic of shofar. It can bring people together – it can unite them or reunite them with one another – and with Hashem.

So this morning, allow me to suggest that there are three walls in our lives that should begin to come down in the coming year.

## **I. Walls between us and the people sitting next to us**

The first wall I'd like you to think about is the invisible wall we put up between us and the person sitting next to us. Let's say your usual shul-buddy is away this shabbos and a newcomer sits down next to you. There's a wall. There's a barrier. You don't know this person. And maybe you're not sure that you want to know them. As a cynical acquaintance of mine once told me: I have enough friends – I don't need to go around making new ones.

Maybe there's a little piece of this cynicism in each of us. Or maybe we're just not in the mood. So we put up a little fence. The shofar is our clarion call to take it down.

This year at one our Jewish Center Friday night dinners, I met a young couple who I hadn't seen before. I introduced myself and they told me that they weren't actually a full-fledged couple yet. They were engaged to be married. I congratulated them and asked them how they met. The bride-to-be told me that she was walking to The Jewish Center on Simchas Torah morning when she stopped at a red light on Amsterdam. Also waiting at the light was a young gentleman whom she didn't know. She wished him a good yontif and discovered that they were both headed to The JC – so they walked together. Six months later they were engaged.

Sometimes talking to a stranger can be unbelievably rewarding. Maybe it's not a stranger. Maybe it's someone you see regularly, but with whom you've never had a conversation. This year, take down the wall and strike up the conversation. It's true as a general rule. And it's especially true here at The Jewish Center. You never know what a treasure might literally be sitting right next to you.

## **II. Walls between us and the Torah**

The second wall I'd like you think about is the wall between us and the Torah. We're good at certain mitzvos – we've taken ownership over them. We get them, we've made them our own, and they're a part of us. Maybe it's coming to shul on Shabbos, maybe it's lighting candles on Friday night, maybe it's tzeddakah or Talmud Torah. They're comfortable mitzvos.

But then there are mitzvos – maybe they're small or maybe they're not so small – that we're less good at. We don't really get them. They're a little foreign to us. We're distant. There's a separation. Somehow – we're outsiders. We're on the wrong side of the wall.

Rav Soloveitchik once recalled that when he was a little boy, he would sometimes daven on Shabbos afternoon at a Mudgitzer Shtiebel not far from his house. One Shabbos, as he describes, the Chassidim were singing and singing. And well after nightfall, Rav Soloveitchik turned to one of the Chassidim and said – so nu, when do we daven maariv? And the chassid turned to him and said: What? You miss the Woch – you miss the weekdays so much that you're so anxious to daven maariv?

Tosefes Shabbos – adding a little of our own time onto shabbos – is also a mitzvah. Creating time on Erev Shabbos to transition into Shabbos is a mitzvah, too. But have we made them our own – or is there a wall that keeps us at arm's length.

The sound of the shofar today is your opportunity. Find a mitzvah that has never quite been yours and make it your own. Think about a mitzvah you've never quite understood or felt comfortable with. Study with a Sanford Lurie Scholar for six weeks and become an expert on it. Come to one of our daily minyanim or help out during a shivah – be on the inside. Be the last one to get up from lunch because you've taken a moment to bentch.

As soon as you want them to be, the portals of entry to any mitzvah are wide open. The way to take down the wall is simply to become an insider.

## **III. Walls between us and people in our family**

Finally – and perhaps this is the hardest – there is a wall we put up between us and people in our family. I met recently with a woman in our community whose parents passed away a few years back. I remember the shivah for her mother very distinctly. She and her two siblings were so close – leaning on each other for support. It saddened me to my core to learn that two years later – their respective relationships had deteriorated so precipitously that none of them are on speaking terms.

There's a wall. Maybe there are many walls. We've been hurt or we're worried about getting hurt. So we build walls made of anger and resentment, held together by obduracy and bitterness.

Today, I believe, the shofar is asking us – pleading with us – to think about the person on the other side. Maybe there really is a lot of pain. Maybe they’ve made a mistake. Maybe you’ve made a mistake. And maybe taking down the wall is too ambitious a goal to accomplish all at once. But maybe the Shofar is reminding us that we should at least begin to chip away at it.

For exactly one moment, imagine in your mind’s eye the person in your family with whom your relationship is the least good. After Rosh Hashana, have the courage to pick up the phone and make that call.

The short-story writer, Richard Pindell tells the story about his own estrangement from his father. As a young man, he had left home on the worst of terms with his parents. Having been out of touch with them for some time, he writes the following letter:

Dear Mom,

If Dad will permit it, I’d like to come home. I know there’s little chance he will. I’m not going to kid myself. I remember he said once, if I ever ran off, I might as well keep on going.

You won’t be able to reach me by mail, because I’m not sure where I’ll be next. But in a few days I hope to be passing by our place. If there’s any chance Dad will have me back, please ask him to tie a white cloth to the apple tree in the south pasture – you know the one, the Grimes Golden by the tracks. I’ll be going on by the train. If there’s no cloth on the tree, I’ll just quietly and without any hard feelings toward Dad, keep on going.

Love,  
Richard.

He goes on to describe his anxiety over the next few days – all the questions and complexity of going home. He’s finally aboard the train and his home town is approaching.

But, he writes, he couldn’t look. He was too afraid that the cloth wouldn’t be there – too afraid he would find, staring back at him, just another tree, just another field, just another somebody else’s strange place, the way it always is on the long road – the nameless staring back at the nameless. He pulled himself away from the window.

Finally, he nudged the passenger next to him.

“Excuse me, sir, would you do me favor? Around this bend on the right you’ll see an apple tree. I wonder if you could tell me if you see a white cloth tied to one of its branches.”

As they passed the field, the young man stared straight ahead. “Is it there?” he asked with quivering voice.

“Son,” the man said in a slow voice with wonder, “I see a white cloth tied to almost every branch.”

Perhaps if we take down our wall – somebody else will take down theirs.

Who are the people we’ve kept at a distance? We stand here on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and ask Hashem to judge us favorably. How have we judged the people in our lives? Is there someone who wants back in? How many kerchiefs we do hang on our proverbial apple trees?

You know why we blow so many different sounds on Rosh Hashana? The Torah doesn't say anything about the different notes – it just tells us that today is a Yom Teruah. So how do we end up with shevarim and teruah and shevarim-teruah? Which one is it?

We blow different sounds because we're not sure what it's supposed to sound like. Short sounds, long sounds or a combination. So we do them all – in the unbending belief and hope that one of them is right.

To take down these walls that separate us from strangers, that separate us from Hashem and that separate us from people we love, we need to have the willingness to try different strategies. Gradual, occasional, longer notes. Persistent, regular, shorter notes. A combination of the two. Different strategies will work for different circumstances. But don't let this Rosh Hashana pass by without trying.

And I'll let you in a little secret. If you look closely at the story of Yehoshua in Yericho, you'll notice that it wasn't the shofar alone that was responsible for bringing down those walls. First the kohanim sounded their shofros, but then the people called out in response. The sound of the shofar set the story in motion. But it was human action that caused great things to happen.

After 120 years in this world, we may not have much say about what things look like. Our time to act is now – right here in this world. And there's no good reason to wait until tomorrow. If we start chiseling away at our walls today, perhaps in a year's time we'll be able to look back on 5769 and say with confidence that it was a year in which we came closer to people unknown to us, closer to Hashem and his mitzvos, closer to one another, and closer to the day of our ultimate redemption. I wish each and every one of you a Shana Tova.