

The following was posted on Facebook by Natasha Howell, a young woman of color, on July 8, 2016, in Andover, Massachusetts.

"So this morning I went into a convenient store to get a protein bar. As I walked through the door, I noticed that there were two white police officers (one about my age, the other several years older) talking to the clerk (an older white woman) behind the counter about the shootings that have gone on in the past few days.

They all looked at me and fell silent.

I went about my business to get what I was looking for, as I turned back up the aisle to go pay, the oldest officer was standing at the top of the aisle watching me. As I got closer he asked me, "How I was doing? I replied, "Okay, and you?"

He looked at me with a strange look and asked me, "How are you really doing?"

I looked at him and said "I'm tired!"

His reply was, "me too."

Then he said, "I guess it's not easy being either of us right now is it."

I said, "No, it's not."

Then he hugged me and I cried.

I had never seen that man before in my life. I have no idea why he was moved to talk to me.

What I do know is that he and I shared a moment this morning, that was absolutely beautiful. No judgments, No justifications, just two people sharing a moment."

The post was followed with the hashtag [LoveWhatMatters](#)

I don't know Natasha Powell but her post went viral.

Natasha and the police officer moved past skin color and a police uniform. They stopped thinking about their own agenda and deeply paid attention to the other person.

In an era where so many people talk at each other and over each other, these two shared a sacred moment.

There is a dimension beyond hearing, and that is LISTENING, when we use our ears to have a dialogue with people that truly improve our lives. That is what happened between the police officer and Natasha.

And I think this is why the post went viral. In a time when people don't listen anymore, Natasha and the police officer did just the opposite.

People grabbed onto a story of two people acknowledging and listening to one another.

The post reflects what I think is a prominent theme of these Yamim Noraim, that we are constantly reminded of, both subtly and explicitly.

A privilege of being part of the human family is that not only can we hear but we also can listen to one another.

The dual acts of listening and hearing are woven through our High Holy Days machzor, in the liturgy, Torah readings and the haftorah, but they are most profoundly introduced through the shofar.

When we blow the shofar, the bracha, the blessing that is recited is

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam,
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu lishmo'a kol shofar.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
who makes us holy with mitzvot
and gives us the mitzvah
of hearing the sound of the shofar.

The piercing sound of the shofar forces us to stop and listen to it. It is hard to ignore a shofar blast.

We don't need to be able to see it in order to hear it. In fact, a shofar is nothing special to look at.

Its sound is plain.

Its sound is raw.

It is supposed to be clear, simple and obvious.

We are not encouraged to adorn it and make it beautiful, like we are with so many other mitzvot, such as our Sukkahs or our Shabbat tables.

With a shofar, the only one of the five original senses we need to use is our hearing. The shofar reaches our ears like an alarm clock following a long slumber. It is an alarm clock where we can't press Snooze and just turn off and go back to sleep.

We have to listen.

Even without the benefit of the sound of a shofar, Natasha and the police officer did what the shofar instructs us to. It led the police officer in our story to look past the color of Natasha's skin and to discover the spark of God in her, and listen to her, shutting out everything else around them. The clerk, his partner, the protein bar; everything became superfluous.

The did not need a shofar,
but we do.

We need the shofar to get past some of the images that inundate us. That seldom happens in this age of images. Those of us of a certain generation spend so much of our day in front of televisions, computers, phones and video games.

Al chet for checking email and Facebook as soon as I wake up.

Al Chet for keeping the laptop on the table during precious family dinner.

Al Chet for watching our children's lives unfold through our cameras, instead of being present, and listening to their first sounds, sentences and questions.

For so many of us, our lives take place through little screens in front of our eyes. The shofar tells us to put them away and really involve ourselves with each other.

During these Days of Awe we are reminded to rebalance our senses and focus on what really matters.

The sweetness of the honey might automatically increase our sense of taste, but we are tasked with actively increasing what we hear and decreasing what we see.

The shofar is not the only sound that serves that purpose.

In the haunting Unetane Tokef prayer we are reminded of the need to listen to ourselves. So often we prepare ourselves for the "who will live and who will die" portion of the prayer that we pay less attention to the two paragraphs before.

If you want to look, I am on page 143. We read there:

uv'Shofar Gadol Yitakah v'kol dma'ma dakah yishamah
The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard.

We need to concentrate to hear the small voice. The sound of the shofar clears a path for us so we can hear the inner voice deep inside of us and remind us what is uniquely important for each of us.

But how do we do it? How do we learn to let our inner voice speak, and to ensure that our actions reflect that voice?

That is the small voice we need to hear during the Shofar blowing.

It is only them that we can really take in the message of Unetane Tokef; that life is precious and nothing should be taken for granted.

We all pause to hear the shofar. Standing in a room where we hear shofar being blown is often unsettling because we afford ourselves so few opportunities to do that.

- When it rains, we look and watch outside instead of listening to the drizzle.
- When we are by a body of water, we look, but rarely hear the sound of the waves crashing.

Both of these sounds are both so gorgeous, but they often go unheard in our daily rush. The shofar tells us there is another way. But it takes work.

Do we make time in our lives to hear the beauty and power of nature? The shofar's message is clear. We must listen to what is unheard.

In our Torah reading this morning we encounter an example of someone who does not listen at all.

This person jumps immediately to action, causing repercussions which reverberate until this very day.

We read:

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בֶּן-הָעִגְרָיִם הַמִּצְרִיִּית אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.

תֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ
כִּי לֹא יִירֶשׁ בֶּן-הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם-בְּנֵי עַם-יִצְחָק:

She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹתוֹת בְּנֹו:

The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם
אֶל-יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנְּעִר וְעַל-אִמְתְּךָ
כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע:

But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.

The translation of this last verse, taken from our machzor and used in many publications is not the most literal translation of that last verse.

God says to Abraham, don't be stressed or concerned about the lad and your handmaiden. "All that your wife Sarah says to you, שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ listen to her voice."

God does not say do as she says. God tells Abraham only to listen to Sarah. But what does Abraham do? We read in the Torah that early the next morning he packs them a sandwich and a water bottle and sends them on their way, far far away, forever.

Yes, Sarah famously said "cast out the slave woman and her son." But Abraham and Sarah were a longtime married couple. They knew how to read each other by now.

Was Sarah angry? Yes.

Was Sarah jealous? Probably.

Did Sarah want the spotlight on her son and was she concerned that something might happen to Isaac, thereby making Ishmael an heir? Possibly.

What if this had been the scenario? After God told Abraham to listen to his wife's voice, then they went for an evening stroll under the stars, away from their cattle and tents, they sat down and shared a beverage and Sarah cried on her husband's shoulder about how unhappy she was. What if Abraham sat next to his distressed wife, actively listening, stroking her silver hair and then the two of them came to a compromise? Maybe Hagar and Ishmael moved to the other side of the camp? Or to a neighboring village, but were sent with livestock and a biweekly conjugal visit?

Abraham heard Sarah and but he did not take the time to listen and to process Sarah's words properly.

This is another subtle example of how we need to listen deeply to the other person. God told Abraham to shma bkola, to listen to her voice. When we listen to another person's voice, we can often hear their pain or their excitement.

But in today's Torah reading, Abraham felt the urgency to act instead of pausing to listen to his wife.

Our world, this country and Israel desperately need more listening. Our communities and families need to slow down and find new ways to connect.

We need moments.

We need times to slow down.

We need clear spaces to listen to each other and listen to ourselves.

We need to make room to hear another voice speak.

The message of the shofar is clear. During these ten days, the biggest gift we can give to ourselves and to each others it to really take time to listen to ourselves, and to each other.

Find a place away from the static and ask yourself, what must I do in order to actually hear the people in my life?
Try it as an exercise.

It will deepen your relationships with others.

When we conclude our services this morning, and tomorrow, after the Kohanim have finished duchening, the Aron Kodesh, the Ark will open one more time and our voices will join together as we sing Hayom.

In this acrostic poem, there are eight bakashot, eight requests that we ask from God. The penultimate request is Hayom Tishma Shavateinu! We ask God to listen and hear our plea.

If, after a morning of personal and communal conversation with God, we can conclude by asking God to listen to us and to really hear us and our pleas, then all the more so, shouldn't we be able to listen to one another?

We seem to have lost the ability to hear and, worse, the ability to listen, in the hubbub of 21st century life. We can rebalance our senses and recover these necessary human faculties by hearing the shofar and studying the wisdom of our people.

¹On this Rosh Hashana, O Lord, Sharpen our ability to hear.
May we hear the music of the world,
And the infant's cry,
and the lover's sigh.
May we hear the call for help of the lonely soul,
And the sound of the breaking heart.
May we hear the words of our friends,
And also their unspoken pleas and dreams.
May we hear within ourselves the yearnings
That are struggling for expression.
May we hear You, O G-d.
For only if we hear You
Do we have the right to hope That you will hear us.
Hear the prayers we offer to you this day, O G-d.
And may we hear them too.

Shana Tova

¹ Riemer and Kushner