

The Liberty Bell and the Liberty Shofar

Parashat Behar, Leviticus, Chapter 25 | May 19, 2022

In 1929, a remarkable scene unfolded in Philadelphia, symbolizing what America has meant to the Jewish people and how Jewish ideas have impacted America. Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the sixth rabbinic leader of the Chabad Hasidic dynasty, visited America. He had not arrived to emigrate (that would occur only 1940). Rather, he had come to speak about the crisis in which Jews in the Soviet Union found themselves, and had also, perhaps, come to express his gratitude—for he had been imprisoned by the Soviets, and one of those who had exerted himself on behalf of Rabbi Schneersohn was then-presidential candidate, and now president, Herbert Hoover. The media described how, arriving in the United States, Rabbi Schneersohn declaimed: “May the Almighty bless this country that has been such a refuge for our people.” The rabbi met with Hoover at the White House, but the most interesting experience of all may have been in Philadelphia, where he made a pilgrimage to the Liberty Bell, an object that forever links our Torah reading this week to the American experiment.

Chapter 25 begins by describing the spiritual cycle of Israelite agriculture, when every seven years all work ceases:

Six years shalt thou sow thy field, and six years shalt thou prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof;

But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. (Leviticus 25:3-4)

The “Sabbath” described here is somewhat similar to the weekly Sabbath; every seventh year in the Holy Land all agricultural labor is forbidden. It is a reminder of creation, and of the Almighty’s absolute ownership of the land. Seven cycles of these seven years take place and then, in the 50th year, a Jubilee occurs. All indentured

servants are freed, and Israelites who had sold their ancestral lands have them returned:

And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. (Leviticus 25:10)

“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land...” These are the words boldly emblazoned upon the bell in Philadelphia that was visited by the Hasidic leader. Thus, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency tells us in an article that:

A reverent crowd of more than a thousand Jews welcomed Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schnuersohn, the “Lubawitscher Rabbi,” who has been exiled from Russia, on his arrival here, with the cry “blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”... [P]olice and the welcoming committee strove to escort him to Independence Hall, where the proscribed leader of Russian Jewry had expressed a wish to visit as the birthplace of American liberty. While guards with difficulty held back the huge crowd, the Rabbi reverently placed a wreath on the Liberty Bell...

If the bell had been chosen as the emblem American liberty by a rabbi released from Soviet prison, it was surely, at least in part, because of what served as its scriptural source of inspiration. As Gary Nash describes in his interesting book on the history of the Liberty Bell, from which I have learned a great deal and to which this piece is indebted, the bell had been created originally not in honor of the American Revolution, but long before. It had been ordered from England in 1751 for the Pennsylvania State House—the most

democratic assembly in the colonies and, perhaps, the greatest embodiment of equality in the Western world at the time. To mark the milestone of fifty years since William Penn's original Charter of Liberties, the bell was inscribed with text from Leviticus 25, which describes the Jubilee, the moment every fifty years when liberty is proclaimed in the land.

Thus, the Liberty Bell captures the fascinating way in which the identification with biblical Israel lies at the earliest roots of the American story. As Nash puts it:

These words from the Bible were freighted with social and political meaning. These were words that would take on new layers of significance in different eras, in different contexts, and in different parts of the world. Little did the bell's commissioners know what lay ahead for this biblical verse. Certainly, they had no inkling that the bell's peelings would echo down the centuries and take on a world-encircling power to affect the modern age.

Nash goes on to describe how the bell came to embody independence after 1776, and how it then was turned into a sacred symbol for the abolitionist movement in the years leading up to the Civil War, thereby giving new meaning and application to the unfolding of biblical and American liberty.

More, however, remains to be said. If you look at the context of the original obligation of Jubilee, you will see that it was not by word of mouth or the ringing of a bell that liberty was proclaimed throughout the land. Rather, what we find is a "liberty shofar." Thus, we are informed:

Then shalt thou cause the shofar of the jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the day of atonement shall ye make the shofar sound throughout all your land. (Leviticus 25:9)

It was through the sounding of the shofar on the Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year that liberty was proclaimed. In fact, the Hebrew word for Jubilee, "Yovel," itself means

"horn," indicating that the role the shofar played in proclaiming liberty was so central a ceremony that the cry of this ancient horn somehow itself summons us to freedom.

Usually for Jews, the shofar seems to symbolize, at least in our yearly ritual, something else entirely: the onset of the High Holy Days, the clarion call to repentance, the reminder that we stand under the judgement of God. What is considered the onset of the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah, is described earlier in Leviticus 23 as a "yom zichron teruah," a "day remembering the shofar's wail." Here, in the context of the Jubilee year, the shofar is meant to connote human freedom. That the two shofars—that of repentance and that of liberty—are linked can be found in the fact that it is specifically on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year that liberty is declared through the sounding of the shofar. This somehow indicates that liberty and repentance go hand in hand, and that human freedom makes itself manifest in repentance.

Why is the shofar sounded on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? There are many explanations, but for Maimonides, it is intended as a wakeup call. We are, for Maimonides, spiritually asleep. What he means by this is that we are often ignorant of our true worth, of the extraordinary moral capacity with which God has bequeathed us: the power to impact and change our own lives and the world. But the correct response to our spiritual somnambulism is not despair, nor a mere acknowledgement of our ineptitude. If our failures are compared to slumber, then the solution provided by the shofar is to wake up, approaching life with an inspired alacrity driven by the moral and spiritual worth with which every human being is endowed. Startled into wakefulness, we realize the capacity that is within us, the freedom with which we are endowed. We are, in other words, *awake to our potential*. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik famously put it this way:

Man is born as an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life...
Man's task in the world, is to transform

a passive existence into an active existence, an existence of compulsion into an existence replete with a powerful will, with resourcefulness, daring and imagination.

We are now perhaps able to begin to understand how Rosh Hashanah's shofar call to repentance is not dissimilar with that shofar proclaiming liberty during the year of Jubilee. The shofar of the 50th year is also a wakeup call to society to discover the image of God that lies within all human beings. The annual shofar on Rosh Hashanah alerts each of us as individuals how to see ourselves. The shofar of Jubilee, like the Liberty Bell's ring millennia later, alerts society to how we ought to see each other, how we should treat each other: "*Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.*"

On Rosh Hashanah, immediately after Jews sound the shofar, we proclaim: "*hayom barat olam,*" "today we remember the creation of the world," meaning that we remember the creation of mankind. It is that knowledge that God creates us in His image that is the source of the Jewish belief that we are free. This is the foundation of the Jewish approach to liberty. Remarkably, the papers reported that as Rabbi Schneersohn in 1929 was about to place the wreath before the Liberty Bell, he turned and said to all those who had come to see him, in what must have been heavily accented English:

Liberty based on faith is the most proper and the strongest.

This is poignant, profound, and true. It is the Bible that gave the world the notion that we are created in the image of God. And it was Abraham's revolutionary tale that taught us we are endowed with the awesome ability to change course in our lives and to chart the direction that our lives take. If the shofar is both a reminder of repentance and a proclamation of human freedom, it is because repentance is only possible because of the freedom and extraordinary spiritual capacity that we have been given. The Bible teaches us that true freedom is not individual libertinism, but rather an embrace of all that lends life meaning. "*Proclaim liberty throughout all the land...and ye shall return every man unto his family.*"

The Liberty Bell reflects the link between the Bible and human freedom at the heart of the American idea. From its founding, America embodied the notion that, as the Rabbi Schneersohn put it, liberty based on faith is the most proper and the strongest. In some forms, the truth is that one who adopts a wholly materialist or unbiblical approach to existence ends up denying human freedom itself, which has happened not only in Abraham's time but also in modernity. As the physicist Stephen Barr put it,

[L]ike the pagan of old, the materialist ends up subjecting man to the subhuman. The pagan supernaturalist did so by raising the merely material to the level of spirit or the divine. The materialist does so by lowering what is truly spiritual or in the divine image to the level of matter. The results are much the same. The pagan said that his actions were controlled by the orbits of the planets and stars, the materialist says they are controlled by the orbits of the electrons in his brain. The pagan bowed down to animals or the likenesses of animals in worship, the materialist avers that he himself is no more than an animal. The pagan spoke of fate, the materialist speaks of physical determinism.

The wakeup call of the shofar is a demand to discover human freedom founded on our creation in the Almighty's image, which is also the foundation of human equality.

Originally, the bell was not known as the Liberty Bell, the verse emblazoned on it notwithstanding. It was called the "State House Bell." As Nash notes, one of the most influential pieces of writing that affiliated the bell with the name of liberty was a short story published in the 1840s by George Lippard, a story which described an elderly man in 1776 charged with ringing the State House Bell when independence was announced—an elderly man who was waiting for a young boy to bring him the news of the Continental Congress's declaration.

The story is, alas, fiction. But as a legend, it does contain a profound truth. Here are some selections from it:

In yonder wooden steeple, which crowns the red brick State House, stands an old man with white hair and sunburnt face. He is clad in humble attire, yet his eye gleams, as it is fixed upon the ponderous outline of the Bell, suspended in the steeple there. The old man tries to read the inscription on that bell, but cannot.

[...]

“Come here, my boy; you are a rich man’s child. You can read. Spell me those words, and I’ll bless ye, my good child!”

[...]

“PROCLAIM LIBERTY TO ALL THE LAND AND ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF”.

[...]

Do you see that old man’s eye fire? Do you see that arm so suddenly bared to the shoulder, do you see that withered hand, grasping the Iron Tongue of the Bell? The old man is young again; his veins are filled with new life. Backward and forward, with sturdy strokes, he swings the Tongue. The Bell speaks out!

[...]

There is a terrible poetry in that sound. It speaks to us like a voice from our youth—like a knell of God’s judgment—like a solemn yet kind remembrancer of friends, now dead and gone.

There is a terrible poetry in that sound at dead of night: but there was day when the echo of that bell awoke a world, slumbering in tyranny and crime.”

It was this story that made the Liberty Bell into what it is known as today: the bell as a wakeup call of human liberty, which roused a slumbering world. Lippard did not study Maimonides; he did not know that the verse emblazoned on the bell does indeed describe a wakeup call—one from a shofar, rather than a bell—but a wakeup call nonetheless. The bell’s verse is a testament to how the Hebrew Bible impacted America, but also reminds us of what the shofar should mean to us today.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik discusses two related meanings of the shofar blast: it both proclaims human liberty and serves as a call to repentance. What else does the shofar symbolize in Jewish texts and thought?
 2. The physicist Stephen Bart compares ancient paganism and modern philosophical materialism. What might these similarities mean for the role of the Jewish people in our age? What might they mean for people of all faiths?
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