

{THE DAYS OF AWE}

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On Rosh Chodesh Elul, coinciding with August 21st this year, we begin sounding the shofar for every day leading to Rosh Hashanah, with one final sounding at the end of Yom Kippur.

The sound of the shofar reminds us of where we were last year, including in the midst of a severe drought. Who could have imagined the year that would unfold since that last sounding? What an incredible journey we have all taken in this world, in our country and in our community. Since those Yamim Noraim, we have experienced horrific fires that raged early and intensely and impacted on so many, devastation then overshadowed by the illness, death, uncertainty and disconnection caused by the coronavirus still affecting each and all of us. As we hear the shofar again and reflect on this last year, we remember how frail

and vulnerable we can be. There is vast power beyond us that keeps our life in perspective.

Indeed, according to the rabbinic tradition, one of the meanings of the Shofar is to herald the arrival of “God as King”. The metaphor of the sovereignty of God in fact runs through the entire liturgy from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.

Throughout the prayers we will substitute the Hebrew word “El”, or “God” for “melekh”, meaning “king”. We recite the stirring prayer, “Avinu, Malkeinu” (our father, our king), pleading for the divine ruler’s benevolent compassion and forgiveness. The “power imbalance” between us and the sovereign plays out in

the words of U’nataneh Tokef, acknowledging the sacred power of the day, when it is written “who shall live and who shall die”. Yom Kippur’s specific liturgy, poems such as “*Ki anu amecha*” and “*Ki hineh ka’chomer*” emphasise our vulnerability within the great unknown. Often, when we stay too close to the literal words of the prayers, we miss their significance. How many moderns truly believe that God is a King, that we are clay in the hands of the potter, or that on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed who shall live and who shall die? Yet, if we have learned anything this last year it is how powerless we can be in the face of the forces



of the universe. While we can choose to explain the causes of extreme fires as climate change or poor bush clearance, we cannot escape the fact that the forces of nature can overwhelm us within moments. Even more so, COVID-19 has demonstrated how a virus can totally transform human society with long lasting impact on our physical and mental well-being, on our very way of life. Some may not ascribe this power to a God who is king, but understanding our liturgy at this season as reminding us of our relatively insignificant and vulnerable place in the grand

scheme of things can help us recalibrate. Indeed, the intention of these days is for us to come back to balance.

So let us acknowledge the sacred power of these days. Even though we will not be able to pray and learn together in the same space this year, we can continue to imbue these days with meaning, as is their intent. We can still come together in small numbers with family and friends – for some physically, for some virtually. We can dress up, as if we were really at synagogue on the day. We can create connections as we did

at Pesach and as we continue to do on Shabbat. If anything, this year, the words of our prayers - understood metaphorically as is all good poetry - are all the more meaningful. We now know how vulnerable we are, how little of our lives is in our personal control, and how ultimately, spiritual wealth and general well-being transcends material wealth, fame and power. As we begin hearing the sound of the shofar let us awaken to new perspectives. These are the Yamim Noraim, the days of awe. May it be a good, sweet and healthy New Year. ■