

# LESSONS FROM THE SHOFAR: UNHEARD VOICES

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Tensions are rising as stark choices between competing voices surround us. **The topics change, but often each voice speaks in a way that either ignores or dismisses the voice of another.** There is no room for curiosity or nuance. Reflecting on my profound discomfort with this oppositional discourse, I turn to the piercing call of the shofar during this month of Elul, focusing on two seemingly competing traditional explanations of the [shofar's call](#).

One tradition in our ancient texts states that the shofar sound is [Sarah's shocked cries](#) of anguish upon hearing that her husband Abraham took their son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. The pain of picturing Isaac's death or even imagining her son about to be killed by his father pierces her heart. Sarah's grief overwhelms her, causing her death. **When we hear the cry of the shofar, we hear echoes of the cries of our matriarch, a mother from our community, for the pain of her child.** Our hearts open to her and we remember our responsibility to care for those in our community whose hearts are broken.

Another powerful tradition states that the sound of the shofar is the [cry of Sisera's mother](#) upon realizing her son is dead. Those who lived in fear of [Sisera](#), a fierce enemy general of the ancient Israelites, experience relief upon his death, while his mother mourns the loss of her son. **According to this tradition, when we hear the cry of the shofar, our hearts open as we remember that our enemies are individuals, each person someone's child.**

So, which one is it? Whose cry calls to us this year? Is the shofar's wail an echo of Isaac's mother or of Sisera's mother? The answer is both, and more. **Our "competing" texts, examples of supposed opposites, remind us by extension that as a full community, we contain the capacity to hear the cries of every fearful parent, whether they be friend, enemy or those we either willfully or unknowingly ignore.** Why must we demonize each other, accusing those who focus on one parent or one perspective, rather than another, as being wrong or uncaring? The ideal is for our community to hold the pain of all mothers, even as we acknowledge that the totality of pain is too much for each of us as individuals.

The sound of the shofar calls, asking every one of us: Whose voice and whose pain is hardest for you to hear? Why? **What inner work must you do to hear the voices and pain of those you turn away from?** This is work that we each must do for ourselves, without judgement of others.

But the shofar message goes further. The examples of Sisera's mother and Sarah remind us that **too often mothers suffer because of events beyond their control.**

Sisera's mother, like so many parents throughout history, must mourn her son because she lives in a society which depends upon and glorifies wars waged with the goal of conquering others.

And, while some applaud Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, **not all traditional commentaries agree.** Regarding the Torah's placement of the story of Sarah's death immediately following the [binding of Isaac](#), the [Piazetzner Rebbe](#) wrote these piercing words in 1939 as he sought to understand the Torah's message as it related to his community's suffering in the [Warsaw Ghetto](#):

*The Torah may also be telling us that our mother, Sarah, who took the binding of Isaac so much to heart that her soul flew out of her, died...in order to show God that a Jew should not be expected to suffer unlimited levels of anguish.*

— Eish Kodesh, 1939 commentary to Parashat Chayai Sarah

With these words, the Rebbe portrays Sarah as the hero of the story. Though Sarah's voice isn't heard in the Biblical telling of the binding of Isaac, her death immediately following it is a tragically delivered message that even God is not beyond reproach when it comes to **questioning a system that results in a mother's anguish.**

The JFS staff understands that everyone is someone's child. They compassionately attend to each person, without judgement. **But a system built on hearing one cry at a time without addressing the underlying sources of those cries is not sustainable.** The needs continue to grow while the sources of pain often remain unacknowledged, and deeply embedded in our society.

When we hear the shofar this year, may we each hear the cries of those whose voices we've willfully or unknowingly ignored. May we then open our hearts and minds to the complex sources of their pain. **When we hear those unheard voices in this way, we might decide to respond with a new approach, or we might intensify our previous commitments.**

Either way, by hearing all voices, we'll reject false dichotomies and won't feel the need to tear down others who respond differently. **Instead, we'll feel gratitude to those who help us hear voices we once set aside, recognizing that we each hold a unique and vital role in easing the divisions and suffering in our turbulent, fractured world.**

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