

## The Shofar of Elul

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*The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.*

– Albert Einstein

*One should always be flexible like a reed, and not hardened like a cedar tree. Look at this reed, when the winds blow, it moves with the wind – when the winds are silent, the reed returns to its place... But the cedar tree doesn't stay in its place, rather when the [strongest] southern wind blows, it is uprooted....*

– Avot de-Rabbi Natan 41

Reed Hasting's company was in trouble. The year was 2000 and the dot-com bubble was bursting. He desperately needed a partner to help him weather the financial storm and managed to secure a meeting with the CEO of a large corporation that he hoped would acquire his company and keep it afloat. Much to Reed's dismay, the CEO actually laughed at his proposal.

You may have heard this story before. Reed Hasting is one of the co-founders of Netflix, the streaming company that is currently valued at more than \$30 billion. The company he visited was the successful movie rental company Blockbuster. (Anyone who grew up before the year 2000 remembers going to Blockbuster to rent videos and having to rewind them before returning them!) At the time of the meeting, Netflix did not provide streaming but sent DVDs to people in the mail. The Blockbuster team did not see a future in this digital approach to

movie rental! Blockbuster is now bankrupt, and Netflix is a major player in entertainment.

We chuckle at the David-and-Goliath feel to the story. But there is a more fundamental lesson here. We all develop patterns that psychologically “work” for us. To shift these patterns can feel as unnecessary as acquiring Netflix did for the CEO of a successful movie rental chain. But if we fail to adapt, we risk becoming ossified in our interactions with God, others, and ourselves.

The first step in the process of change during the High Holidays is to foster flexibility in our lives. With the blowing of the *shofar* on the first day of the month of Elul, we are reminded of the words of Maimonides:

...its blast is symbolic, as if saying: “Those that sleep, awaken yourselves from your sleep, and the slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, return in repentance, and remember your Creator!” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4).

The *shofar* awakening is from stagnation to self-reflection and is a fitting start to the High Holidays. Its jarring sound reminds us that the journey to self-transformation starts with awareness of the self, separate from our usual patterns of thinking. Psychologist Steven Hayes, one of the founders of ACT, puts it this way: “The general goal of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility – the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, a major goal of ACT is fostering flexibility. This flexibility allows one to experience life fully and to live in line with their values. In research trials, cognitive flexibility has been associated with psychological health across cultures and disorders.<sup>2</sup>

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1. [https://contextualscience.org/the\\_six\\_core\\_processes\\_of\\_act](https://contextualscience.org/the_six_core_processes_of_act) accessed 11/12/2017

2. Kashdan, Todd B., and Jonathan Rottenberg. “Psychological flexibility as a fundamental aspect of health.” *Clinical psychology review* 30.7 (2010): 865–878.

## *The Shofar of Elul*

To create change we must be willing to be flexible in our thinking about ourselves. To best benefit from the lessons of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, (and the ideas in this book), we must allow ourselves flexibility in approaching these new ideas. A puzzling tradition about the *shofar* connects beautifully with this concept. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b) explains that the *shofar* is blown to confound Satan. The Maharal<sup>3</sup> explained that this is accomplished by the marking of the transition from restriction to freedom.<sup>4</sup> Since Satan prosecutes only when God is in a rigid state of justice, through *shofar* the bonds of strict justice are broken and mercy can prevail. So on the highest level, the *shofar* works through creating Divine cognitive flexibility! The *shofar* at the start of Tishrei reminds each of us to be open to change, to allow ourselves to escape a state of psychological restriction that is keeping us trapped in negative patterns.

In embarking on the journey of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, the first requirement is the ability to integrate new lessons and ideas without feeling that we are uprooting our basic selves. Here is an exercise to reflect on the story you are telling about yourself and to consider making a change:

*Find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed when you have some time to reflect.*

*Ask yourself, "What stories about myself do I believe?" To answer this question, think about how you introduce yourself to people and about how you define yourself. Do you define yourself as a good friend, a religious person, a hard worker? Or do you have a more negative narrative? Once you have identified your story (or stories), notice how it feels in your body when you believe it. Also notice what thoughts arise when you believe this story.*

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See also Hulbert-Williams, N.J. and Storey, L., 2016. "Psychological flexibility correlates with patient-reported outcomes independent of clinical or socio-demographic characteristics." *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 24(6), pp. 2513–2521.

3. *Chiddushei Aggadot, Rosh Hashanah* 11b.

4. Maharal cites the example of the *shofar* of the *yovel* (fiftieth year) heralding the freeing of slaves and the *shofar* of the final redemption and the return from the lands of captivity.

## REIMAGINING REPENTANCE

*Ask yourself who created this story. Begin to imagine what it would feel like if you didn't believe the story and see how it feels to let go of it, even for a moment. Observe how this feels in your body and what thoughts come to mind. Ask yourself what you would do differently if you didn't believe this story.*