

"THE CALL TO SANITY"

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The meaning of the blowing of the Shofar was long ago explained by the great Maimonides in the famous passage beginning uru yeshenim mi-shevatidkem -- "You who are asleep, wake up! You who are in a trance, arise! Search your doings and repent. And remember your Creator, you who forget the truth in havlei ha-zeman, in the vanities of the times ... !" What Shofar means to us, therefore, is a reminder that not all is well with us, that we are in danger of falling in line with the havlei ha-zeman, with the pettiness and vanities of our world, our society and our times. That term, havlei ha-zeman, which tells us that there is something amiss with our society and our times, can be translated in many ways. Some will say, "the vanities" of the times; another may prefer "emptiness," or perhaps "pettiness," or "foolishness." Today, however, we are able to give a brand new and quite radical interpretation to that phrase. I believe we ought to translate havlei ha-zeman as "the insanity" or "the madness of our times." It was the founder of psycho-analysis, who had such a profound effect on the course of modern thought, who concluded his life's work with the pessimistic realization that he had been dealing not with neurotic individuals as much as with a morbid, sick civilization. And not too long ago, one prominent psychiatrist -- himself guilty of serious lapses of judgment -- published a highly enlightening work declaring our society to be insane. Just as an individual can be mad without realizing it, so can it be with a whole society of culture or civilization. So then, that is what Shofar means in 1960: Wake up, slumberer, and remember your Creator, you who forget the truth in the insanity and madness of our times. The call of the Shofar is the call to sanity.

And do we really need proof for this clinical diagnosis of the western world as sick, disturbed, even mad. In the last one hundred years we have

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had an unparalleled prosperity -- and yet killed off millions in the insane arrangement called war. One enterprising scholar estimated that from 1500 B.C.E. to 1860 A.C.E. -- before any of our major wars, hot or cold -- there were signed 8000 peace treaties, each supposed to secure permanent peace and each lasting, on the average, less than two years! Havlei ha-zeman -- what madness!

We live in an economic system where we restrict productivity to "stabilize the market" and where a very good crop is often regarded as a disaster -- while millions are starving. Havlei ha-zeman -- how insane are our times!

"Love" is the most popular word in our contemporary vocabulary. We write about it, sing about it, and project it on our screen. Yet our divorce rate is unbelievable -- one of three.

We have reduced our working hours one-half of what they were a century ago. And having more free time than ever, we don't know what to do with it. We try to kill the time we save. We become restless -- and bored to insanity. We have a 90 percent literacy and movies and television. But instead of giving us the best in past and present literature and music, our minds are filled with the cheapest trash and sadistic fantasies which any half-civilized person should be embarrassed to entertain even once in a while.

We live in an era when misguided liberals have made it their holy mission to protect a lunatic called Rockwell -- liberals who have forgotten that only two short decades ago a similar raving paperhanger was allowed to get away with it under the guise of "free speech" and nearly destroyed the whole world. No, one need not be a psychiatrist to translate Maimonides' havlei ha-zeman as our "mad times." What an urgent challenge Shofar becomes when we regard it as a call to sanity.

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And if we accept the call of the Shofar as a call to sanity and a reminder that our times are lacking in that quality, then I fear that a great number of our fellow American Jews will be sadly disappointed people. For so many of us have staked our lives on the premise that this Western Christian society is superior and admirable and worthy -- otherwise why have we gone so far in the process of assimilating to it? We have re-shaped our very religions, produced a whole series of different kinds of "Judaisms" to conform to the tastes and standards of this Christian society. We have allowed the spirit of this culture to enter our homes, to re-shape our services and affect our very temples. In the conflict between Jewish ways and the so-called modern life, it is Judaism which has been made to surrender. We speak warmly of "integration" and "adjustment" and "acculturation" -- when all we really mean is assimilation. And after having relinquished our Jewish heritage in order to gain acceptance into this Western society, after having struggled with such nervous anxiety to be recognized as part of this civilization, to be told that we have given up a meaningful and life-saving Torah way of life for what is essentially madness and insanity -- what a tragedy! And if we American Jews have indeed, by and large, been caught in this web of the havlei ha-zeman, then the Shofar calls to us today and tells us to remember our Creator and not to forget the truth, to disentangle ourselves from the web of madness, to disencumber ourselves of this insanity, and become sane once again.

One of the five or six most important verses in the whole Torah is tamin tihyeh im ha-Shem Elokeikha, which we usually translate as "thou shalt be wholehearted with the L-rd, thy G-d." To be tamin means to be sane, to keep away from the ways of madness. For tamin, according to the Aramaic

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translator Onkelos, means shelim tehei -- be perfect or whole, be balanced and harmonious -- in other words: sane! And this quality of tamin, this lucidity and clarity, can come only in ha-Shem Elokekha, only when a man is with the L-rd, his G-d. Sanity derives from sanctity. Spiritual health is a prerequisite for mental health. No wonder the sage Bachya ibn Asher explains this verse as tokho ke'varo ... ve'le yachalok alav be'shum inyan, that it means that one's character should not be split, that a man must say what he means, that there be no breach in his life. Just as mental illness generally implies a split between a man's mind and reality, so spiritual illness is a split between a man and his soul, between a Jew and his G-d. Mental disease usually refers to a split personality; spiritual disease -- to a split character. Both derive from havlei ha-zeman. And tamin reminds us to be whole, to retain both sanity and sanctity, and that this sanity can be achieved only in ha-Shem Elokekha, only by returning to our Jewish origins and coming back to G-d and his Torah. No wonder that an eminent Swiss psychiatrist has said that of the thousands of patients he has treated, there has not been one whose basic difficulty could not be traced to the lack of religion or spirituality. No wonder Maimonides regarded tamin tihyeh in ha-Shem Elokekha as too important a statement to count as an individual commandment. It is, he said, fundamental to the whole of Torah. This then is the challenge to us American Jews: leave the havlei ha-zeman, the madness of our times, and tamin tihyeh in ha-Shem Elokekha, become sane once again -- through G-d and Torah.'

Of course, I do not mean to say that each and every aspect of our modern life and society is insane; certainly not. The positive and creative aspect of scientific and medical progress -- that is tamin. Cleaning up slums and building housing developments -- that is sanity. Helping the unemployed, aiding the sick and aged and widowed -- that has a sacred kind of sanity.

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These are the positive, sane, lucid aspects of modern life, and they are the ones we must try to develop and enhance and absorb into Judaism. But unfortunately, they are not the sole characteristics of our society. Generally speaking, ours cannot be regarded as a completely sane society, and these aspects of madness are the havlei ha-zeman which we must resolve to avoid on this Rosh Hashanah.

Somewhat I feel that a conversation between father and son spoken many centuries ago is particularly relevant today. The talmud tells us that Rabbi Joseph was very sick and fell into a coma, whilst his father Rabbi Joshua was at his bedside. Suddenly Rabbi Joseph was revived and recovered. "What did you see or experience, my son?" asked the father. The son answered, "I saw the Upper World, the world of spirit and purity." "And what did they look like?" And he replied: olam hafukh raiti tachatonim le'malah v'elyonim le'matah -- I saw a topsy turvy world, a world standing on its head! "Ah no," answered the father, "you're mistaken." olam barur ra'ita -- "you saw the right world, you saw the clear and lucid and sane world; it is this world of dishonesty and impurity and unprincipled opportunism that is the olam hafukh, the upside-down world! The spiritual world, the world of sanctity -- that is sane. The materialistic world -- that is perverted, and inverted and insane.

That is what the Shofar calls out to us: Get out of the havlei ha-zeman, and turn this insane world upside down so that you will set it aright -- tamin tihyeh -- make of this world an olam barur, a clear and sane world once again. The Shofar challenges us to set the world aright, and not docilely accept its perversion.

And lest there be anyone here today still unconvinced of the psychotic nature of our times, let me take you back just fifteen or twenty years.

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Do you remember the world condition then? Do you recall that in this period of nuclear physics and jet planes and electron microscopes, our civilization butchered and tortured one-third of our people? Is not the blood soaked soil of that accursed European continent not sufficient evidence of the madness of our society? What more proof do we need -- there are six million proofs of the havlei ha-zeman, of the utter insanity of our times!

And lest there are some here who think that the world has changed and healed in fifteen years or twenty years, let me then draw your attention to the recent case when the State of Israel apprehended one of the architects of the destruction of our people during the European holocaust. How many people were there, otherwise decent respectable people, who had never given a second thought to the utter disgrace and blot upon our entire civilization that we allowed the Nazi murderers to find asylum in South America -- when these very same people protested so loudly and bitterly against Israel when it finally did catch the monster whose name we shall not mention. When the murderer receives asylum, we are silent. When he is apprehended, we condemn and damn the victim. What madness -- havlei ha-zeman!

And knowing that this is the world in which we live, my friends, let us ask ourselves: is it really right for us to conform blindly to this society. Must Judaism change to fit this kind of world -- or must we insist that the world change and keep up with Torah. Shall we succumb to the havlei ha-zeman and become inmates along with all the others in a cosmic confusion where universal madness is the norm? -- Or shall we become the healers of the world -- the old Jewish mission -- and teach it the elements of sanctity so that it finally learns sanity. We have the choice of setting the world aright by adhering to the command of tamin tihyeh im ha-Shem Elokekha, or of losing ourselves in the havlei ha-zeman. The way of worthiness and dignity and self respect is also the way of sanity and sanctity. And that is the meaning of the Shofar -- a call to sanity through sanctity.

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We who have come to the Synagogue this day, thirsty for the word of G-d, anxious to hear the trill of the Shofar, desirous of a touch of holiness and seeking the warmth of Torah -- we have come here because we recognize here the olam barur, the sane world, the world where sanctity gives rise to sanity.

And what kind of sanity does Torah preach? In a world where savagery and war is normal, Torah teaches that shalom -- peace -- is the highest function of priesthood, that even G-d Himself is a Peacemaker, and that Shabbat Shalom -- that the Sabbath is a living monument to peace. That is sanity.

In a world of weird economic ideology where surplus spells disaster, Torah teaches us the laws of leket, shikechah u-peah, that we are to create surpluses and leave part of our produce alone specifically for the hungry and for the stranger, for the orphaned and the widowed. That is sanity.

In a world where love has been cheapened and degraded, Torah teaches the value of tzeniut, of modesty, and tells us that a home is wholesome only when it is holy, that where there is true love and devotion the very table becomes an altar to G-d. That is sanity.

In a society which madly saves time in order to kill it, Judaism teaches be'yadekha itotai, that our time is in G-d's hands and hence is not ours to kill; that every spare moment should be taken up with mitzvet -- with good deeds, with charity, with study, with help for the less fortunate. That is sanity. In a world where despite all its s-called progress, racial inequality is still the norm, Judaism unequivocally reaffirms that ha-lo av echod le'Kulanu, that all men are the children of one Father, that we are descended from Adam, and not color but character is what counts. That is sanity. That is what makes of the Jewish world a sane world. This is a

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world infinitely superior to the havlei ha-seman, to the pretty and glistening lunacies of our modern civilization. Shofar is a call to this kind of sanity, a challenge to our society and civilization and culture to transform itself on the pattern of Torah so that man again re-create himself in the Image of G-d.

It is the Yiddish writer, Perets, I believe, who tells the story of a child who was orphaned in a small town in Europe. All he had in the world was a toy wooden fiddle which squeaked badly. Whenever there was a party or a wedding in town, the little orphan would come and play his little fiddle and even when the discordant sounds were disturbing, no one would say a word. But he was an orphan and people would help him. One day the cruel and greedy miser, the wealthiest man in town, made a big wedding party for his daughter and invited the well known orchestra from the big city. Suddenly, at the wedding march the little orphan came and started to fiddle away on his wooden toy. The rich man ran over to him in anger and lifted his hand about to strike the boy. As he was about to hit him, the wedding party gasped, for the heavens opened up -- and as the guests looked upwards they saw all the angels gathered together as an orchestra and lo and behold, they were playing not in tune with the professional musicians but in tune with the little orphan.

Our call of the Shofar has often been resented as a discordant note in the concert of nations. The Greeks called us leopards, the stoics ridiculed us, Cicero called our mitsvot "barbarian superstitions," and the historian Tacitus deplored our laziness which he thought was the reason for our Sabbath. The world laughed at us in ancient days because we deemed it unlawful to kill our children and because we believed in only one G-d. To



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To this day there are tremendous pressures upon us, asking us to still the voice of the Shofar and to join in with the havlei ha-zeman. But on this sacred day as we are about to rise for the blowing of the Shofar, we must recognize that this voice of Judaism, though discordant in the symphony of the people, is in tune with the Shofar that once sounded on Sinai as the clarion call of the Almighty, as the principle of sanity and sanctity. This day as we hear the Shofar we must resolve to recapture the Jewish teachings of tamin tiyeh in ha-Shem Elokecha. We must stand prepared to reject the havlei ha-zeman, those aspects of life which our Torah regards as reprehensible, as abominable, as mad. On this day we who are, as Philo said, the orphans of the nations, we must resolve to keep in tune with the angels. When we hear the sound of the Shofar let us remember the message Maimonides ascribed to it. Ve'sikhru Bor'akhem eileh ha-shokschin et ha-emet be'havlei ha-zeman. Let us remember our Creator, we who are prone to forget the truth in the insanities of the times. Habitu le'nafshotekhem ve'hetivu darkokhem. Let us look deeply into our own souls, and mend our ways and our deeds.