

The Resounding Silence

A True Story By Rabbi Nachman Seltzer

Two brothers. Both of them experts in the art of shofar blowing. Reb Binyomin Leib and Reb Elimelech.* Both in possession of tremendous fear of heaven. Both well liked by the congregation. Both good looking and learned and both wanted by the tzibur. An acceptable system had been worked out over the years. As the congregation took their places after the short kidush break on Rosh Hashana morning, Reb Binyomin would assume position beside the bima, pristine tallis wrapped around his body and draped over his bowed head. A clap on the bima and his familiar voice reverberated through the simply furnished room. “Lamnatzeiach,” the first notes of the verses that are recited seven times prior to the moment the shofar were heard. At the first sound of his voice, the congregation reacted with a zestful roar; the sound of a people unleashed. An explosive yearning, an outpouring of expressive sincerity.... They waited for this all year round and it was always better than they imagined it would be.

Reb Binyomin’s face radiated stern diligence and mercy anticipated. He waited for these moments of heavenly connection with as much desire and nostalgia as the rest of the shul for he had much to ask for as well. As his heartwarming voice chocked out the last of the verses and he prepared himself to recite the bracha on the shofar blowing, Reb Binyomin couldn’t help but think of his own family and the challenges facing them. He cried and the tzibur cried. He groaned and so did they. And then all was still as the master shofar blower lifted his beloved, gleaming shofar off the velvet covered bima and up to his mouth, his mind a’whirl with kavanos and deep thoughts, his concentration intense and supreme, his visage glowing with righteousness and the fire of the moment.

And with the knowledge that his three daughters were still waiting in the ezras nashim as they had been waiting for the last two decades: single and unwed and with no prospects for change.

Why this should be so was anyone’s guess. But facts were facts and his three girls were getting on in years with no relief in sight. If a small part of his roiling emotion could be attributed to this depressing phenomenon, who could blame him? And that was how it was in the shul every year.

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The brachos recited, Reb Binyomin lifted the shofar to his lips and blew a piercing, glancing, plaintive cry, whose mournful sound raced around the room, through everyone’s minds, up and down the walls and finally through the far off roof on it’s way to shamayim and the kisay hakovod. His listeners savored his tekios, his shvarim and teruos, their magical rays never failing to uplift them to the proper place for that time of year. Shofar blow followed shofar blow and too soon (a feeling shared collectively) Reb Binyomin was replacing the shofar in it’s bag and swaying over his machzor as he began mentally preparing himself to begin the prayer of “Hineni,” the chazon’s tefila directly proceeding Mussaf. Here too, Reb Binyomin did not let them down. His voice wowed them and moved them to great heights. He cried and they cried, his voice grew alternately soft and strong, powerful and unyielding, poignant and pleading.

And when he moved to the omud and began the kaddish, the congregation accompanying him lustily, the walls themselves seeming to shake with the sound of hundreds singing with all their might. Then a stillness enveloped the shul, as the final amen faded away into oblivion and was replaced with the whispering of shuckling talleisim and the tiny zinging sounds of multiple tzitzis strings hitting the table edges in unison.

So it was every year.

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With Reb Binyomin moving towards the omud, Reb Elimelech stepped into position. In this shteibel, the shofar was blown during the silent Shmona Esray as well as during chazaras hashatz. With two such mighty shofar blowers, there was no justifiable reason for Reb Binyomin to blow during the silent part of the davening as well. No, that was Reb Elimelech's portion of the day. His moment. When the gabboim sensed the time had come, a nod would be given to Reb Elimelech and a hand would be forcefully placed on the bima's top. Reb Elimelech eyes would be tightly closed, clouds of holiness emanating from his neshoma to the supplicants standing all around him, the shofar lifted gracefully to his lips and another crystal clear shofar blow filled the room. And another and another.

So it went year after year.

Reb Binyomin led off with the shofar, then moved over to the omud for Mussaf, while Reb Elimelech replaced his brother at the bima for the silent Shmona Esray. A duet of brotherly love. It was the same year after year. The same fire, the same burning passion, the same holy spirit soaring over the assembled.

And then one year it wasn't the same.

Just like that.

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Nobody expected it to happen, Reb Elimelech least of all. And when it did, the people were shocked. But there was nothing anyone could do. Afterwards, people shrugged lamely, looked at each other in silent consternation and lifted their palms upwards, as if saying.... "it was the will of Hashem." But while it was going on, nobody knew what to do with themselves. After all, what can you say when a master fighter steps into the ring only to get beaten by a novice. Reb Elimelech stood beside the bima, shofar in hand. It was his favorite shofar, a beautiful, gleaming ram's horn that he loved and was used to and felt comfortable with. It had always cooperated before. He'd never had a problem with it. Really. He'd pick it up, put it to his lips, and the shofar's voice would ring out.

But not this year.

This year, the shofar refused to cooperate.

Reb Elimelech placed it tenderly on his lips. Made the usual movements with his mouth. Gathered his strength and blew into the shofar....and nothing happened! Reb Elimelech was shocked. Convinced that this was a temporary challenge and nothing that couldn't be overcome, he steadied the shofar, took a deep breath and attempted to blow

yet again. A weak, strangled, newborn's mew hovered in the air, a far cry from his powerful blasts of years gone by. The people standing around were surprised. You could see the shock on their faces. How could it be? Was this their Reb Elimelech standing there at the bima, trying to coax a sound out of what had been his trusty shofar, with little success? What on earth was going on?

Beads of sweat popped out on Reb Elimelech's forehead. A splotch of red began spreading across his normally pale complexioned cheeks. "How could this be happening to him? He was an expert! Had been blowing shofar for years!" A slight murmuring had broken out amongst the tzibur. The sounds of "sh!, nu!" and "sha" resounded from one side of the room to the other as the gabboim attempted to impose order on the chaotic, unexpected, almost unruly scene. Again and again he tried to bring the shofar to life and again and again it refused to obey. Yet all was not lost. This wasn't the only shofar in the world. Hands trembling slightly, Reb Elimelech replaced the beloved shofar in his velvet bag and picked up a different shofar whose demeanor lacked a certain luster, yet which would no doubt be the recipient of Heaven's bounty this year.

Once again, Reb Elimelech was denied.

Frustrated beyond belief and disturbed beyond measure, Reb Elimelech stood beside the bima in the shul where he had blown shofar for more years than he cared to recall and almost wept at the embarrassment and what some might term "injustice" of it all. After all, wasn't he a master? How dare the shofar call the shots? Didn't it need to bow it's will and subjugate it's private inclinations to the decisions of it's owner? And yet nothing.

Time however was passing. They were after all in the midst of the silent Shmona Esray. There was no more time to loose. Face awkward in bountiful apology, the gabbai motioned for Reb Elimelech to hand over the bag of shofars, which he then passed to Reb Binyomin who had been standing at the omud the entire time and who was as shocked by the proceedings as much, if not more so than everyone else in the shul.

The gabbai gave Reb Binyomin a nod.

Reb Binyomin had no choice. The tzibur was waiting. Feeling like a traitor to his brother, he hoisted the shofar (which felt like it weighed about three thousands pounds) to his lips and blew. Wonder of wonders, a piercing sound emerged. The sound of a shofar that knew exactly what to do and how to awaken the hearts of it's supplicants. Yet blow though it might and blow as he may, Reb Binyomin couldn't help but be aware of the terribly forlorn figure standing at the bima, shoulders slumped in agony, face contorted with pain, heart broken by Heaven's refusal to allow him to serve the way he had always served, with devotion, passion and unceasing dedication.

The shteibel was no stranger to tears, but the sheer amounts of that particular year far exceeded the norm. Alas and alack, there was nothing anyone could do.

"It was," as everyone said, "just one of those things."

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Reb Elimelech knocked on his brother's door a few days after Rosh Hashana. Reb Binyomin, knowing how wounded his brother felt, could barely look him in the eye. He, who had never in the past comprehended how families allowed themselves to get torn apart, suddenly understood only too well how such a rip could conceivably come about.

He invited his brother into the dining room and joined him a few minutes later with two glasses of tea and a plate of chocolate biscuits. A profound silence encircled the two of them, as Reb Binyomin waited for his brother to speak, to tell him why he'd come. He could see that his brother had something important to tell him and he wondered what it was. He wondered too, whether he was meant to apologize, to beg his brother for mechila, to demonstrate remorse that he had served in his brother's stead.

Yet he said nothing, both treading on ground never walked.

The minutes stretched on interminably and finally Reb Elimelech spoke.

"My dear brother."

And Reb Binyomin knew... he knew that everything would be okay. Hadn't his brother just referred to him with an endearment! He waited anxiously to hear what his brother wanted to say.

"My dear brother, I needed to tell you one thing."

Reb Binyomin's curiosity was overwhelming.

"While I stood at the bima in the shul, with the shofar in my hands and my lips trying to pull some sound out of a "rock," I was more embarrassed then I have ever been in my entire life! To make matters worse, when the gabbai finally had no choice and handed you the shofar, you blew it effortlessly, as if there had been nothing the matter in the first place making it seem as if I simply had no idea had to blow a shofar. Of course we both know that isn't true," Reb Elimelech said quickly, as Reb Binyomin attempted to interject... to assuage his fears and reassure him that of course he hadn't been thinking anything of the sort. He waved aside his brother's words, before they'd been spoken.

"Regardless of the truth," Reb Elimelech continued, "the average member of the congregation didn't understand how implausible a scenario this was, how it had been a Heavenly set up from step one.

A tiny pause.

"Binyomin, I want you to know one thing. At the moment of my greatest embarrassment, I was not upset at you in the slightest. I did not blame you for my misfortune. I did not think angry thoughts at you for the rest of the day. Still I had just been more embarrassed then anytime before in my entire life. That was the truth. I made a decision right then and there. At that critical juncture. At the moment of my most supreme moment of agony. I was going to take the embarrassment handed to me by heaven and give it to you as a gift, as a bracha, as a present of goodwill, for we both know that someone who has undergone soul stirring embarrassment such as mine, has the ultimate power to bless. And so I bless you my brother, that your three daughters find their shidduchim this very year in the merit of what I underwent a few days ago. This is my wish, my blessing, my fervent hope. My embarrassment transferred to you and yours to be used as a gift, and may Hashem grant us both great things in the year to come.

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The first daughter's engagement was celebrated a few weeks later.

The second daughter's engagement was celebrated around Chanuka time.

And...

the third daughter's engagement was celebrated shortly before the next Rosh Hashana.

Reb Elimelech had so willed and Heaven had concurred with his desire. Because the power of one slighted is immeasurable and the abilities of one scorned beyond imagination. And that's the truth.

As heard from Reb Yehuda Marks

*Names have been changed