Changing the Channel: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

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In his short story, “The Last Channel,” Italo Calvino portrays a man who has been deemed to be insane. When this man watched television, he kept clicking his remote control button without watching any program for more than a few seconds. At some point, he started to take the remote control panel outside his house. He clicked it at buildings, stores, banks, neon signs, and at people.

But this man claimed that he was not at all deranged. In his defense, he stated that he kept clicking the remote control button because he did not like what he saw! He was looking for the “true” program, a program without drivel and artificiality and hypocrisy. He asserted: “There is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, MY story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I’m going.”

This man flashed the remote control button because he was looking for the “real” program, the “real” city, his “real” self. He wanted to turn off the chaos and senselessness around him and was certain that if he kept clicking the remote button he would at last find the “right” channel.

While the man in Calvino’s story seems to have crossed the line between sanity and insanity, his desire for self-understanding and for the perfection of the world were not insane at all. Don’t we all wish we had a remote control button that we could click and make everything right, find the “real” picture, the “real” world that makes sense to us. When we confront lies and hatred, violence and injustice, hedonism and meanness—wouldn’t it be nice to have a button to click to change the channel to a better picture?

In some ways, the shofar of Rosh Hashana serves as our remote control button! It evokes a world yet in progress, a vision rooted in antiquity, fixed in the present, and arching into the distant future. It alludes to a “real” world, a finer world.

The original shofar dates back to the story of the Akeidah, when Abraham was called upon to bind Isaac on a sacrificial altar. The story teaches that God does not want child sacrifice. We are to demonstrate our faith not by murdering our children but by strengthening them in life. At the end of the episode, Abraham noticed a ram caught in the brambles by its horns. He offered the ram as a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac. The shofar blown on Rosh Hashana evokes memories of the Akeidah.

At the conclusion of the Akeidah narrative, the Torah informs us that Abraham and his retinue “rose up and went together to Be’er Sheva.” Why is this detail provided? Why do we need to know where Abraham went after the Akeidah?

If we look at the passage just before the recounting of the Akeidah, we find that “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Be’er Sheva, and he called out there in the name of God Lord of the Universe.” The Akeidah was a setting of trauma, terror, spiritual confusion. Such a crisis could have broken anyone. But Abraham clicked his remote control button. He went back to Be’er Sheva and reconfirmed his faith in God Lord of the Universe. He found inner serenity, the power to transcend the vicissitudes and trials of life. He clicked on to a better channel! When faced with overwhelming crisis, it is right and proper to return to our starting point, to our essential selves, to our rootedness in our faith. The shofar prods us to seek a firm and grand framework for life.

Just as the shofar harks back to the Akeidah story, it also reminds us of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. That dramatic occasion was accompanied by “thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud.” The voice of God was heard by the trembling assembly. But we might ask: with all the thunder and lightning and voice of God, what need was there for the sound of a shofar?

The shofar’s essential sound is a “teruah.” The Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as Yom Teruah. The shofar is alluding to something mysterious and profound.

A teruah is a sound without words, a crying plaintive sound that does not verbally articulate anything. The shofar is symbolic of human feelings and thoughts that are too deep for words. The teruah transcends glibness; it pushes away banalities and pretenses. In a sense, it is a remote control button that allows us to penetrate beyond surface successes and failures, prompting us to think more carefully about our lives, about the world we live in. The teruah is the sound of self-understanding…and the sound of protest against an imperfect world and an unjust society.

And yet another symbol: the messianic age will be introduced with the sounding of the shofar. The shofar calls to mind the utopian vision of Judaism. We do not believe humanity is condemned to live forever with injustice, corruption, hatred and war. We may look at our contemporary world and be overcome with discouragement. The shofar reminds us: click the remote control button! A better time will surely come, redemption will emerge, a messianic age beckons to humanity.

The shofar suggests a grander, truer vision of who we are and who we can become. It cries out to us to keep striving for a better society and a better world. It invites us to strengthen our faith in the Almighty…and in ourselves. One day, we will find the right channel.

Angel for Shabbat