

Shana tova.

If I would have said those words to an Israelite thousands of years ago on this holiday, they would have been quite confused. It's not that they wouldn't have understood the meaning. Just like today, "Shana tova" would have meant something along the lines of "Happy new year." It's also not that they wouldn't have recognized that today is a holiday. Like us, they had a celebration focused on sounding a ram's horn, a shofar, on this exact day of the calendar.

What would have confused them is why I was wishing them a happy new year in the middle of the year.

The Torah and the bible in general are very clear that the Jewish new year starts in the Hebrew month of Nissan, the month of Passover.

When discussing the holiday we are celebrating now, the Torah says it takes place on the first day of the *seventh* month of the year, the month of Tishrei. And when describing this holiday, it doesn't mention anything about a new year or even about forgiveness or repentance. Instead, it says that it is a holiday in which we "remember" the "cry" or the "loud noise" depending on how you translate the Hebrew word תרועה (Leviticus 23:24; Bemidbar 29:1). That's it.

So how did we get from a holiday about remembering a loud noise in the seventh month of the year, to a holiday about תשובה, about transformation, that marks the beginning of the Jewish year?

There is no explicit answer to this question in the historical record, so we can't know for sure. But I want to offer some thoughts that I believe can help us understand the transformation of this holiday, and, more importantly, offer some insight into what this holiday can do for us today.

I believe the first step is to understand the biblical conception of this holiday on its own terms.

The only words the Torah offers are that it was a holiday on which there was a תרועה, which means a cry or loud noise. And that the loud noise is intended as a זכרון תרועה, a memory or a reminder of a different cry or loud noise.

Almost all academic and classical commentaries believe that the loud noise prescribed is the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn. What almost nobody can agree on though is what it is supposed to remind people of.

The reason they have such a hard time is because this is the first place the Torah uses the word תרועה. It is pretty hard to remind you of a particular loud noise when this is the first time you've heard the concept.

So if the Torah never mentions the cry we're being reminded of, it must be something that we could remember even without the Torah. Something so deep in our human consciousness that it does not need to be spelled out.

I want to suggest that it is a memory each one of us has buried deep in our psyche. It is the memory of our first cry as infants. That moment when we breathed air on this planet for the very first time.

It is so important to remember this cry because it marks our entrance into this world as people without baggage. We had not yet been wronged. And we had not yet wronged anybody else. We stood in amazement of everything because we had not yet become jaded. And we screamed out at the overwhelming sensation of experiencing so much new, so quickly.

As we get older, that begins to change. The world becomes familiar. It takes a lot to surprise us. And when we are surprised, it is often in unfortunate ways. We hurt other people. Other people hurt us. And we hurt ourselves.

This holiday offers an opportunity to wipe away the hurt. An opportunity to wipe away the pain. An opportunity to see the world through fresh eyes.

Hearing the blast of the shofar serves as a memory much deeper than words of what that actually feels like. An echo of that very first cry.

I think the early rabbis recognized that the experience of this primal memory is central to living a meaningful life.

Without being reminded of our ability to start fresh, we become tired. We become worn down. We give up.

But starting fresh takes a lot of work. And part of that work involves really reorienting our lives around the fresh start.

For the early rabbis, that meant reorienting the calendar so that people could actually have this new start reflected in their calendar year. Instead of this month of Tishrei being the seventh month, they redid the order of the entire year and made it the first month.

We are the beneficiaries of this legacy. We do not need to recalibrate the Jewish calendar. We have inherited a tradition that treats this time of year as one of rebirth. Our work is to step into it. To let go of the defenses that tell us that rebirth is impossible. To open

ourselves up to the cry of the shofar. To allow it to awaken our pre-verbal memories of feeling like anything is possible.

This is not easy. And transformation is not a guaranteed experience. But one of the key ways of giving it a chance, is to reorient our lives around the new start, the same way the rabbis reoriented the calendar.

If we are trying to stay more healthy, it may mean changing our schedule so that we can go to the gym. If we are trying to be more engaged with friends and community, it may mean cutting down on the time we spend in isolation, on our phones and computer so that we can be with others. If we are trying to heal and work on the broken parts of our friendships and relationships, it may mean setting aside the time to be intentional about talking through our challenges and investing in our connections instead of hoping things just work themselves out.

Whatever your work for this year may be, this is an opportunity to begin that process of change. May the cry of the shofar connect us to the memory of limitless possibility. And may this year be one of deep transformation and growth.

Shana tova.