

**Rosh Hashana:
The Shofar Reminds Us to Listen for Unheard Cries**
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There are no tears like a mother's tears.

At the opening of the Book of Samuel, in a story we retell each Rosh Hashanah, we are introduced to Hannah, a woman distressed for the child she yearns to raise, but cannot conceive. The Book of Genesis recounts yet another story we read on Rosh Hashanah, the story of Hagar, a mother who, unable to stay with her son and watch him wither away to death from lack of water, can do nothing more than walk away from him and weep.

The Book of Jeremiah, in one of the most poignant and heart-wrenching scenes in the Bible, paints a picture of the Israelites suffering under oppression—men plagued by disease, children starving in the streets— and ultimately being taken into exile. Over the sounds of their cries another cry is heard, the sound of the matriarch Rachel: “Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard on high— Wailing, bitter weeping— Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone” (Jeremiah 31:15).

There are numerous other women in our tradition whose cries—even if not explicitly mentioned—we can hear through the pages of our texts: our matriarch Sarah, upon learning of the intended sacrifice of her only son; Naomi, mourning the loss of her husband and two children; Batsheva, whose firstborn son is afflicted with disease and subsequently dies only days after his birth, a punishment for a sin not his own.

Yet, despite the myriad of examples of crying—and specifically of mothers crying—when the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud discussed the sounds of the shofar—when they debated the multitude of types of cries the shofar represents—the model of wailing they chose is not that of Rachel or even of Sarah. Instead, they chose the cries of a woman who is never even named and, in the singular reference to her, is known only in relation to the son who evokes her tears: the mother of Sisera, a warrior and enemy of the Israelites.

The mother of Sisera, a woman who appears in the Book of Judges with no significance to the Jewish people other than in birthing a man who, as commander to the king Canaan, ruthlessly oppressed the Israelites for 20 years before he was killed at the hands of the Jewish heroine, Yael. His cruelty was so well known that his own mother comforted herself as she awaited his return by imagining he was late because he was busy raping and pillaging. God foretold to the prophetess Deborah, and then overtly assisted in, the demise of Sisera. His death marked a victory in the war that ultimately freed the Israelites from their subjugators and established a period of peace that lasted 40 years. Needless to say, his downfall is not one that is mourned in our rabbinic tradition.

So why do we model the cries of the shofar on the cries over our enemy? Why do we remember the tears of mourning for a death we celebrate?

It is clear from the texts that we believe the actions of Yael to be justified, and they do not require repentance—one of the central themes we think about on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Indeed, the Israelites have God on their side and are seemingly rewarded with victory in battle.

But it is not Sisera's cries that we are hearing in the sounds of the shofar; it is the cries of his mother. Despite the fact that Sisera's death may be justified, Sisera still has a mother. And that mother has a son who will never return home.

It is her cries that we are obligated to hear, and to listen for—the cries of unintended consequences, of innocent bystanders, of unknown victims. Hers are the cries of a woman we have no idea we hurt. Hers are the cries of a woman we do not even know exists. Hers are the cries of a woman whose name we never learn.

We do not need the shofar to think of the tears of the people we know we hurt. Some of those are tears for which we already feel remorse—we said something hurtful to someone we love, we forgot something important and caused a friend pain, we acted insensitively. Some of those are tears for which we do not feel remorse—we undermined a coworker who made our lives difficult, we took revenge on an acquaintance who spoke about us behind our backs, we cut off the driver who honked at us—and for that we struggle to find the compassion and strength to ask forgiveness and repent. Nevertheless, those are cries that we hear. The cries of the shofar are for the cries that we cannot hear. They are the cries of the people who suffer because of our actions, whether intentional or not.

Like the mother of Sisera, they stand at the window, peering out from behind a curtain, unseen, unheard, unnamed.

This Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we listen to the sounds of the shofar, let us listen for the cries of all the mothers of Sisera in our own lives and in our communities. Let them finally be heard.



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