

SHEVARIM:

Birth of a Shattered World

R. Aviva Richman

ROSH HASHANAH RECALLS the birth of the world. When we blow the shofar we say “*hayom harat olam*,” today marks the world’s birth. But sometimes, when we take stock of the year, we see destruction rather than birth. Especially this year, in the wake of October 7th and the devastation of months of war, the call of the *shofar* is a haunting, even taunting, question: What does it mean to celebrate a holiday of birth and creation when we find around us a world full of ruins?

The Yiddish poet, Kadya Molodowsky, takes up this question in her poem, “The *Shofar* Blower - *Der Ba'al Tekiah*.” Born at the turn of the 20th century, Molodowsky immigrated to the United States in 1935. She wrote this poem in the wake of World War II, in 1945, in the wake of utter destruction. In “*Der Ba'al Tekiah*,” we hear the broken sounds of the *shofar* as a cry into the void. Yet even as she mourns unspeakable devastation, the poem’s very existence testifies to Molodowsky’s resilient act of creation; she turns to the artistic craft of words to describe and confront a shattered world. In doing so, she implicitly directs the reader towards a sense of empowerment and hope—just as she finds her creative voice within the emptiness around her, so might we find our way to recreate, even if we do not yet have the words.

דער בעל תקיעה

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון,
אַן אלטן ניגון צו גאָט.

איבער אים –

אַ הימל אָן שטערן,
חושך אין חושך פֿאַרלאָרן,
דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון:
תקיעה, תרועה, שְׁבָרִים.

די פֿינצטערקייט – אַ ווינט, אַ מויער,

עס איז קיין עדה,

קיין מנין נישטאָ.

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון:
הללויה-ה.

לעבן אים אַ פֿאַרלאָשענער דאָרן,

אין חושך נאָך פֿינצטעריר שטאַרט,

דער בעל-תקיעה יאָמערט אויס אַ ניגון,

אַן אלטן ניגון,

און וואָרט –

דער דאָרן זאָל אָנהייבן ברענען,

אויף אַ וואַנט זאָל אַ פֿלאַם טאָן אַ שריפֿט.

איבער אים אַ הימל אָן שטערן,

און חושך,

און טויטלעכער גיפֿט.

נאָר ס'איז נישט מַפֿסיק

עם שטילט נישט דער האָרן:

תקיעה,

תרועה,

שְׁבָרִים.

*The Shofar Blower (1945),
by Kadya Molodowsky*

*The shofar blower keens a melody,
An old melody to God.*

Above him—

*A sky without stars,
Primordial darkness lost in darkness,*

*The shofar blower keens a melody:
Teki'ah, Teru'ah, Shebarim.*

The blackness—wind, a wall,

There is no congregation,

No quorum at all.

*The shofar blower keens a melody,
An old melody:*

Hallelujah.

Near him, an extinguished thorn,

As he stares into even blacker darkness,

The shofar blower keens a melody,

An old melody,

And waits—

The thorn shall begin to burn,

A flame shall inscribe on a wall.

Above him, a sky without stars,

And primordial darkness,

And deadly venom.

But this does not interrupt,

Does not silence the horn:

Teki'ah,

Teru'ah,

Shebarim.

TRANSLATION

Kathryn Hellerstein, *Paper Bridges* (1999)

Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky
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חושך
DARKNESS

Molodowsky's poem undoes creation. It is the creation story in reverse as the world around the *ba'al teki'ah* returns to *hoyshekh*—raw, unformed darkness. The recurrence of the word “darkness” echoes with a sense of primordial darkness before anything was created, the chaos of the void, *tohu va-vohu* (Genesis 1:2). Only darkness surrounds the *shofar* blower, who has no one with him. There is no community, “not even a *minyán*” (“no quorum at all”). There is nothing except darkness. Instead of announcing the birth of the world (*hayom harat olam*), this *shofar* blast marks the undoing of the world.

תקיעה, תרועה, שברים
TEKI'AH, TERU'AH, SHEBARIM

The poem's refrain draws on the familiar triad of sounds of the *shofar*, but importantly shifts the order. Instead of the usual order *teki'ah-shevarim-teru'ah*, this phrase ends with *shevarim*, from the root ש-ב-ר, which means to break or shatter. Bookending the poem, the refrain reinforces the sense that the world is shattered. *Teki'ah, teru'ah... shevarim. Teki'ah, teru'ah... shevarim.* Whatever else the sound of the *shofar* is meant to be, in this rendering the *shofar* is primarily the blast that accompanies the world's brokenness.

הלל-יה
HALLELUJAH

In the second stanza, the *shofar* blower reaches for a melody and this midway point in the poem closes with “Hallelujah.” How does the *ba'al teki'ah* reach for a melody, and even praise, in this context of utter destruction? How does the *ba'al teki'ah* turn toward God at all? Song and praise feel untenable alongside awareness of the world in ruins. How should we understand the meaning and tone of this “Hallelujah”?

On the one hand, the reference to praise and song could be meant as a mockery of High Holiday liturgy. Molodowsky chides us: For hours in synagogue we raise our voices in praise and song exalting God as supreme sovereign—after God allowed the Jewish people to suffer such unspeakable brutality and loss? Hallelujah?!

Or perhaps it is not mockery but an ironic acknowledgment of dissonance. For some reason, we

do find ourselves uttering words of song and praise, even in a shattered world. She asks us to notice that dissonance, maybe even hold onto that dissonance with all our might—not forgetting the destruction, but not abandoning our songs for God either.

Even if the scope of destruction we've witnessed in our own times is not as vast as what Molodowsky describes, if we are honest and not oblivious to our surroundings, “Hallelujah!” should still feel out of place in our broken world—just as discordant as it is in her poem.

חושך נאך פֿינצטעריר
EVEN BLACKER DARKNESS

The *hoyshekh* in the poem represents destruction and the undoing of creation, but paradoxically it also represents potential, where the darkness at the beginning of Bereishit is the harbinger to the creation that follows. Indeed, the Sefat Emet (Rosh Hashanah 1877) teaches that the *shofar's* preverbal, raw, undifferentiated sound takes us back to before the creation of Adam, before any sin, and before any language. This sound of the *shofar* connects us to our source (שורש)—the raw, infinite potential of divine creation that hovers over primordial darkness and dwells within each of us. So, too, in Molodowsky's poem, the *shofar* blower's wordless *nigun* (melody) is embedded in the precreation moment of deep darkness. It is simultaneously an image of total devastation and of absolute potential. Nothing has been formed yet, no contours or boundaries. No one has sinned—no one has done anything or even spoken a word. In this very messy and totally shattered world, we go back to the raw materials and form new building blocks and new structures. Yet, in this telling of *hayom harat olam*, God's voice—issuing statements that will turn chaos into order—does not sound at all. Instead, the only sound and voice comes from a human: the *shofar* blower. In the absence of divine speech, that sound of the *shofar* in and of itself must catalyze creation.

דאָרן
THORN

On closer look, there are actually two kinds of creation in this poem. There is the *shofar's nigun*—a primordial wordless melody penetrating the darkness. And then the *shofar* “horn” morphs into “thorn,” and

the capacity to create through the written word, etched onto a wall of darkness.

To be sure, at first the thorn can't write. At the beginning of the last stanza, we learn that the thorn is extinguished; it is not burning with a flame that has capacity to inscribe. The poet, consumed by the brokenness around her, can only wait. First there is the *shofar* that insists on crying out even with no words. And then the words come. The thorn ignites, able to write.

What is this thorn? Perhaps it is the thorn of the bush of the Akeidah, which we read on Rosh Hashanah. This thorn bush both obscured salvation and produced salvation because of what was stuck inside it. The thorn represents the harshest pain and sacrifice, and it represents stuckness, and yet it also holds possibility. Kadya Molodowsky's thorn writes from this pain and stuckness, neither ignoring it nor pretending it never existed.

גישת מפסיק

DOES NOT INTERRUPT

Perhaps the appearance of song and praise is not gesturing at all towards mockery, or even dissonance. Instead, the poem tells a story of endurance. The very fact that the *shofar* blower continues to sound the song of the *shofar*, from the beginning to the end of the poem, testifies in and of itself to endurance. In the last stanza, we see *nisht mafsik*—nothing can interfere with the call of the *shofar*, not the deepest darkness, not even deadly venom.

SHEVARIM:

HAYOM HARAT OLAM

LIKE MOLODOWSKY AT first holding an extinguished thorn, we too might find ourselves in limbo waiting for the capacity to create. As we are confronted by all sorts of brokenness—unspeakable acts of violence, terrorism, displacement, widespread hunger, colossal failures of leadership—what world could we possibly write into existence this year? What words could we form with confidence to chart our course when so much feels irreparable?

We may want to start afresh this Rosh Hashanah and build a better self and a better world, but Molodowsky's focus on *shevarim* teaches us that sometimes the work of building begins from ruins. We confront *hoyshekh*, darkness, chaos, because our world has become so utterly broken. But ruins can sometimes lead to new creation if we, like the *ba'al teki'ah*, persist in "keening a wordless melody" with our most authentic voice. Our sense that we don't yet know the words in the face of unspeakable devastation does not mean we have to be at a loss. Instead, our loss for words can forge a raw connection with God's infinite creative power which is beyond words. From that power, we might create again.

Like God's words that created the world in Genesis, Molodowsky's poem moves us from utter destruction to a broken sound to the possibility of articulating actual words—as we pray for the inscription of the contours of our lives and our world in the year ahead. "כתבינו בספר החיים - Write us in the book of life!" Give each of us the capacity to write the next chapter in our book of life, as part of a world that can emerge from ruins. ♦