

I don't know about you, but if you are anything like me you probably spend a lot of time reading email. Usually, it is time that could be better spent doing something more constructive. One of the greatest culprits of eating up my time at work is the ubiquitous "list-serve" - the online forum devoted to this or that special topic. In my case, it is a list-serve exclusively for Reform Rabbis, called RavKav.

Maybe you can imagine what topics Reform Rabbis tend to post about. Probably it is better if you didn't try too hard to imagine! Typically the same few people will post most of the time, and even though I have never met most of them, I feel like I can anticipate the reactions of some of the "regulars" based on their email persona before they even respond.

But then, sometimes, there are sublime exceptions to the rule that time spent reading RavKav is a waste. Let me share one recent example.

Last month, one of the rabbis posted a question, comical at first, but he assured us that it was quite serious: "How do I get the 'stink' out of my shofar?" For those of you who have never been close enough to the shofar for this particular pleasure, let me assure you, the smell of most shofars as they are being blown and for minutes afterward is a very... pungent and unpleasant smell.

Well, some questions that get posed on RavKav go completely ignored and unanswered, but this one brought a torrent of responses - mostly from rabbis who, like me, were avoiding writing their High Holy Days sermons by wasting time in the great abyss of email!

This one said, "I am not sure this is THE solution to deodorize a shofar, but I run 5% vinegar through it. I then may run water through it afterwards. I haven't tried it, but I wonder if a baking soda wash would be better. Or perhaps both because the 'stink' is probably from both acid and base sources."

Another said, "You have to reach inside with a rag soaked in alcohol and scrub it with a toilet-bowl brush."

The most elaborate post said, "You have to stop up the small end with an earplug, fill it with aquarium gravel, then pour in sterile alcohol, stop the large end with a squishy Nerf™ ball, and then shake it around like you are playing the maracca."

There were more folk-remedies for the stinky shofar, but all were geared at, as the last writer explained, "getting rid of all of the sinews and flesh stuck inside of the shofar, which are decaying and creating the smell."

Finally, I read a response that I found a little more helpful. It was posted by my colleague and friend, Rabbi Sandra Katz, who was the rabbi of the Golden Slipper Home in Northeast Philadelphia, where my family has had a long involvement and where my grandmother spent much of the last year of her life. Rabbi Katz posted the

following:

"Shalom, colleagues - I rather like the notion that my shofar smells ... organic. It can stimulate a great discussion about where it comes from. One of my Hebrew students complained about the smell of the parchment of a Torah scroll. [We have to ask ourselves:] How does modernity intersect with the ancient traditions of this faith we cherish? How do we articulate these connections?"

I wrote off line to Rabbi Katz about just how much I appreciated her response. You see - I, too, prefer my shofar stinky. We went back and forth a few times, considering exactly why it was that the stinky shofar was more compelling to each of us.

One draw seems to be the fact that so many areas of our lives are unnaturally sanitized today. We live in closed, temperature-controlled environments, with air filters and ionizers. We clean everything with "anti-bacterial" wipes, even squirting Purell™ on our hands after every twist of a doorknob. Our food comes either flash-frozen or shrink-wrapped, and is always pre-washed. An area of scientific research, the "hygiene hypothesis," suggests that our overly-clean environments may actually be making us sick!

There is very little real, dirty life left in our world. Perhaps the shofar should be a hedge against becoming too sanitized, something like getting dirt under our fingernails working in the garden.

I wrote, as well, that perhaps on a deeper level, we can recognize that "Sometimes life stinks - and that's the way it should be." I know that sounds harsh, and perhaps it is. But, try as we may, none of us will escape the reality that life can be very difficult, challenging, unfair, and yes, stinky. Real life is messy.

Rabbi Katz has worked full-time in nursing home chaplaincy for many years, and I also spent many years, first as a Music Therapist, then as a rabbinical intern in nursing homes. Many people who visit nursing homes experience them as "stinky" places. There is the reminder of lost independence, disease and even decay that is ever-present in the nursing home. No matter how hard fine facilities attempt to keep clean and sanitized, this will always be the case. No fancy air filtration system can keep up with the sensory reality of the home.

However, very few people who work in nursing facilities and hospitals consider them "stinky" places. Do they smell different than our houses? Of course. But my experience was that this scent was the smell of life, and in some cases, of death. People who were very much alive. Human beings who were preparing for death. And in all cases, those smells were real and they were holy.

Finally, on the metaphoric level, we hear and see and smell the shofar at Rosh HaShannah to remind us of the section of Torah that we will read tomorrow morning - the *Akeidah* - The Binding of Isaac. The shofar reminds us of this greatest of

Abraham's trials, the sacrifice of his son Isaac. Rabbi Fuchs will teach specifically about this when he joins us as our Scholar in Residence in October. I know he, as anyone who has ever contemplated this story, wrestles with what it could possibly mean.

The Akedah reminds us of the terrible task that was demanded of Abraham - "Take your son, your only one, the one that you love...". It reminds us of the faith, the obedience, the belief of Abraham that we reference and indeed claim for our own merit every time we pray. It recalls, perhaps, the failure of Abraham to put an end to this game before the damage was done to his relationship with Isaac.

The "original shofar" was the horn by which the living ram was caught in the thicket, thereby becoming the substitute sacrifice for Isaac. The ram's horn, the Torah scroll, these were connected to the living beings that became holy objects. They retain a bit of essential life within them, and that is represented by the distinct smell.

Each of us is Abraham. We will all be asked to do what seems impossible. If not this year, then next. Perhaps not next, but be assured that in the course of every human life, we are each called upon to overcome what we believed to be the limits of our faith, our strength, our ability.

The SWEET SOUND OF THE shofar, smell and all, sustains us. It reminds us of Abraham's response when called upon to go beyond himself, to affirm God.

"Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. God said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered '*Hineini* - Here I am.'" We are sustained by that SWEET SOUND, even as the dichotomy between sound and smell alarms us. The visceral, real, and stinky shofar reminds us of that answer to God's call - "*Hineini* - Here I am."