Awesome Days of Awe: In the Hospital, from Shofar to Psalms, 5771 Begins

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The sound of the shofar reverberated through the room – tekiah, teruah, sh’varim; tekiah, teruah, sh’varim; tekiah, teruah, sh’varim.

No blessings. No calls. Just shofar blasts, and then silence. Silence that vibrated the air. The Silence of the Presence.

Not a sanctuary filled with people. Just two listeners, a patient paralyzed from the neck down by the power of a wave, and the patient’s wife. Two listeners to the Sound of the Silence.

We held the moment. Then Peter and his wife expressed their appreciation, and I moved on. It was erev Rosh HaShanah, and I had other people to visit before I left the hospital to begin my final personal preparations for the start of the Yamin Noraim, the Days of Awe. But I had felt the sounds of the shofar echo through the room, through the cells of my body, and through my soul. And I had felt its power. Something far beyond me occurred in that room, of that I was certain.

I blew the shofar in a number of rooms that day. All were appreciated, and one other felt life-changing: Robert was on his back, laid out by a combination of a serious back problem and an infection, but he was also “laid out” spiritually and emotionally by the combinations of drug side-effects, pain, and being a patient for the first time in his 40-something years. He was struggling through confusion to find his spiritual path, to connect to his own tradition in the midst of a loving family with connections to other religious traditions. There, too, I felt the gut-wrenching power of the shofar.

This was the beginning. But like Rosh HaShanah, it was only the beginning, although neither Rosh HaShanah nor these shofar blasts were actually the beginning. There had been the whole month of Elul, and preparations that even preceded that. There had been all the preparations, getting ready for the start of the New Year.

The week after Rosh HaShanah I saw members of Peter’s family, and then I saw Peter again. Each one of them told me the same story: “I felt the shofar throughout my body. I felt my body for the first time.” Peter told the story to everyone; he spread the word of the power of the shofar to every person he knew.

Robert told me he started to feel reconnected to Judaism. A parable from Rabbi Salanter that I had given him was getting worn out by his re-reading, as he found strength and meaning and hope in those words. The little booklet of psalms was by his bedside and constantly being opened for spiritual sustenance. Robert was getting stronger and more connected to both his own soul and his family.

Shortly after Yom Kippur I saw Peter’s wife in the elevator. “Rabbi, you have to come by Peter’s room this afternoon,” she said, “Our rabbi is picking up the sofer (traditional scribe) from the airport and bringing him here. He is going to write part of the Torah scroll. You have to come!”

Such an invitation could not be resisted. As I was later gratefuly reminded, celebration is part of our work as chaplains. The patient, his rabbi, his wife, his son, and the sofer crowded the
hospital room. The sofer had just arrived from Israel and the rabbi had taken him to a nearby mikveh (ritual bath) so he could engage in a ritual full-body immersion before writing letters in the Torah scroll.

The sofer was quietly preparing. A bedside stand served as his table, a large plastic tray as a writing stand, and a stack of disposable undergarments as a support for the tray. One by one this gentle, soft-spoken man removed treasures from his backpack — the tools of his trade that would enable him to inscribe sacred letters into a sacred scroll in the sacred space of the hospital room. Conversation surrounded his preparations — introductions, explanations of the celebrations that would take place in the community that evening and the next and on Simchat Torah, the day of celebrating the Torah, along with discussion of what the patient would miss, how important he is to their community, and how much his wife had done to make the writing of this new Torah scroll possible.

The sofer spoke words of prayer and then began to write, slowly, skillfully, beautifully: V’lo kam navi od b’yirael k’moshe. (And there has never again arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.) (Deuteronomy: 34.10).

I will never hear or read those words the same way again. Always they will take me back to Peter’s room. I will remember his words: “I don’t feel sorry for myself.” I will remember his determination. I will remember the power of the shofar blasts. I will remember the connection to God that he told me he found during his hospital stay. I will remember how on the day words were written on parchment in his hospital room, he felt the touch of the nurse’s hand for the first time. I will remember the gift and the blessing I received by being present in the room that day. I will remember Peter.

But the holidays were not yet over.

A family meeting took place during the harvest festival Sukkot — not your normal family meeting. The patient had died in the spring. The family’s need to share with the medical staff the ways they felt their beloved husband and father — a man deeply committed to Judaism and Jewish education — and themselves as well, had not been treated properly had only grown in the months since his death. Their emotional pain about the manner of the end of his life had made their grieving even more difficult, and they needed to speak out. Before the meeting began, I set the lulav and etrog, harvest symbols, on the table. There were words that my heart wanted to speak when the meeting began, but I was not sure there would be an opportunity.

Marjorie and her daughters entered the room and sat down, and the meeting started. She didn’t notice the yellow fruit and the three kinds of green leaves of the lulav, the two items we shake in all directions during Sukkot to remind us of God’s presence all around us. She was tense and nervous, and her hands were shaking as she began sharing her pain. Then, suddenly, her eye caught sight of the two ritual objects in front of her. Her demeanor instantly and markedly softened.

“Of course!, she exclaimed. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice them. It is Sukkot. The time we remember the fragility of life.”

Marjorie looked at me with gratitude and understanding in her voice; and it was soon after that the atmosphere in the room began to shift, as the medical staff — many of them directors of departments — heard her words, accepted them, and learned from them how to make things better for the next patients to come through the door. Marjorie and her daughters left that meeting feeling heard. Their voices mattered and had made a difference. Their beloved Samuel was still gone, pain and grief were still present in their hearts, but his memory was being honored in a new and important way.

I saw Robert again after Simchat Torah, back in the hospital, but finally beginning to smile as answers were being found to the questions of what was happening with him, as the medications he was taking began to have an impact, and as he began to recover both his body
and his soul. The words of Rabbi Salanter were still tucked safely into the book of psalms at his bedside. His nascent connection to his Jewish soul marked part of his new beginning.

The cycle of the fall holidays is over for now, but the gifts of those in physical, spiritual, and emotional pain touched my heart and my soul in a way that will never leave me. The sacred beginning of 5771 is with me forever.