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To begin, I'd like to share a poem from the scene of the binding of Isaac and focus on the ram's horn, our shofar calling. God has told Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, and Abraham follows God's instructions. He brings Isaac up a mountain, Mount Moriah, and Abraham binds Isaac to the altar. Just before Abraham strikes and kills his son, an angel tells him that a ram caught in a thicket should be sacrificed instead.

### **On Being Caught in the Thicket**

*By Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld*

The ram's horn is silent at first  
As is the ram.  
Caught in the thicket,  
Waiting for Abraham to lift his head and see,  
It appears at the last minute,  
Out of nowhere,  
When it's almost too late.

Of course, it was there all along.  
Since twilight  
On the eve of the first Shabbat, we are told.  
It was there before darkness fell.  
(We barely knew what darkness was then.)

It was there all along.  
Waiting for us to open our eyes.  
Waiting for us to see another way.  
It's not just our stubbornness that blinds us.  
Sometimes it's the commanding voice of faith.  
Sometimes it's the commanding voice of despair.

And sometimes it's the thicket itself.  
The thorny, tangled overgrowth of our lives.

It's not that we're blind,  
We're just busy.  
Schlepping the wood,  
Tending the fire,  
Building the altar,  
Trying to quiet the children—  
Trying to answer their questions—  
Even though God knows  
We can't answer our own.

Up until the angel calls out, and Abraham looks up, up until the ram suddenly appears,  
caught in the thicket, the trajectory of the story—the tragic momentum of the story—seems  
irresistible, irreversible, inevitable. The sacrifice has to be offered. The child will have to  
die.

This is the power of the ram's horn. It beckons us back to this moment in the story. No  
longer silent, it calls us back to the ram from which it came and asks us: Think about the  
thicket of your own life. What possibilities have you not seen? Think about a story you  
are telling yourself—whose outcome you think you already know. What alternatives have  
you not noticed? And think about the path we are all on together. The altars at the end of  
the road. The children we love but seem prepared to sacrifice.

Look up. Listen.  
Incline your heart, your ear  
To the hollow, bent ram's horn  
Through which human breath becomes a summons and a blast.  
What might we hear? How might we respond?

On the first source sheet I received in my first lesson, or shi'ur, at Hebrew College, two years ago, the president of the college, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, read this poem which she had written. We were beginning to study and reflect in preparation for the High Holidays.

As you might guess from the fact that I started with her poem, this recollection, that lesson, it stuck with me. And I wanted to use the sources we talked about then, two very long years ago, now.

My question is this: How do we understand a shofar's call?

In Judaism, of course, there are many sources, many connections, and many ways to see this important and central symbol. But in that lesson with Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld, we discussed one important way to listen to the shofar's call, specifically, as the call of a mother's grieving, the sound of her cries. In one telling, these are Sarah's cries, as she hears about Isaac's ordeal.

In Pirkei de Eliezer, in a telling of this midrash, it explains: Samael was angry that he hadn't been able to fulfill his heart's desire and prevent Abraham from confronting the test of the Akeidah. What did he do? He went and said to Sarah, "Hey Sarah! Have you heard what's been happening in the world?" She says, "No." He says, "Your old man, your old husband, has taken the young boy, Isaac, and offered him up for a sacrifice. And the boy was crying and sobbing because he couldn't be saved." Immediately, she began to cry and to sob. She cried three cries, corresponding to the three tekot of the shofar, three sobs corresponding to the three short sobbing sounds, and her soul flew away and she died. Abraham came and found that she had died, as it is written, "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to cry for her." From where did he come? From Mount Moriah.

Interestingly, this connection between a mother grieving her child is not limited to Sarah grieving the loss (or in other midrashim, the potential loss) of her son. In the Talmud, in the tractate discussing Rosh HaShanah, describing how we measure the length of a shofar's call, the Gemara compares a ter'uah call to the cries of the mother of Sisera, a Canaanite military

commander who is killed in the beginning of Judges. Sisera is a villain in this story, an enemy of the Israelite nation. All the same, Sisera's mother waits at her window for news of her son, a soldier and commander, and sobs as she learns of his death.

What do I take from this? There is a unity in the experience of grief. In the beautiful book on sorrow and grief in the world, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Francis Weller writes: "The one emotion that has touched everyone is grief." More than that, as I hear the shofar's call, I am called to reflect on grief, my own and the grief I may have caused.

This year, I am caught in the thicket, specifically, the thicket of grief. In the shofar, I hear a mother weeping, and I think of my own mother, who died in July, and the tears I've wept for her.

This year, I am caught in the thicket, the thicket of grief. I'm grieving the deaths of those in our country, the distance I must take, the masks I must wear. I'm grieving for this pandemic and for the horror I see in our nation and in our world.

There is something familiar about the rising and falling of loss, how it takes us below the surface of our lives and works on us in some alchemical way. We are remade in times of grief, broken apart and reassembled. It is hard, painful, unbidden work. No one goes in search of loss, rather, it finds us and reminds us of the temporary gift we have been given, these few sweet breaths called life.

—Francis Weller

We continue to struggle, continue to grieve, continue to lose. I know I thought perhaps things might be in person this year, like this service. I thought maybe I could go back to school without wearing a mask, that maybe I could eat inside, that perhaps, I could relax, be a little less vigilant, feel safe.

I feel my own broken heart, like the broken heart of the world, with cracks running through it.

I am caught in the thicket.

So how can I move on from this?

What possibilities have I not seen? Where might I be like Abraham, causing harm but blinded by faith? Where might I be like Sarah, whose own pain and protectiveness of her son and position lead her to cast out Hagar? Where might I need to be with my pain to see it? And like Sisera's mother, who waits by a window for her son to come home, what am I waiting for?

The next piyyut, which I will lead, is called Achat Ketana, or Little Sister. As a younger sister who is a daughter and granddaughter of younger sisters, I love it dearly. This piyyut calls and wails about the curses of the previous year to beg that they will end, and eventually asks for the blessings of this new year to begin.

We can look backward, and then, we can look forward. We can honor our grief, remember it, and know that grief comes from our deep love of each other and of the world. Or as Terry Tempest Williams says, "Grief dares us to love once more." Whether that is loving life amid the chaos, loving ourselves amidst our struggles, or loving each other despite loss, I hope we all choose love and choose life again for this new year. For even as the shofar reminds us of loss, it reminds us of hope and revelation, the ram's horn sounded at Mount Sinai. Joy and light are here with us in this world, if we can dare ourselves to love again.

Shanah Tovah.