

Trumpets... what's that about?

By Bob Mendelsohn
Given at Bondi Junction
Rosh Hashanah 5769 (2008)

I love holidays. Maybe you do, also. And tonight is the beginning of a seriously long holiday season. I'm not talking about wandering through David Jones and seeing how much holiday cheer is already up. The green and red of Christmas abounds ...and if I remember right, it's only September. So for the merchants of Bondi Junction, this is a seriously long holiday season. At least they hope so. And maybe for them, that makes their holidays worthwhile and bright.

No, when I mention holidays, and tonight's beginning, I'm talking about the season of The High Holidays. It begins with Tishri. This Hebrew month is filled with strange and unusual holiday celebrations and includes tonight, 3 days from now, 10 days from now, fifteen days from now and then lasting 8 or 9 more days. There are seven holidays all up in the biblical record of Leviticus 23, and seven is the number of completion.

The holidays have odd names, too. Feast of Trumpets, Fast of Gedaliah, Day of Atonement, Festival of Tabernacles, Eighth day of assembly, The great hosanna, and Rejoicing in Torah. Nothing as clear as Anzac Day is it?

And tonight is the beginning. The name of the holiday on your Hallmark calendar is New Year, a translation of Rosh Hashanah. Now I know, some of you know that in the Bible, in Leviticus 23, we read of this day as a day of blowing of Trumpets and that it occurs in the 7th month. So there might be confusion. Fair enough.

I don't want to belabor this, but God changed the calendar about 3,500 years ago, as he wanted us to remember our Exodus from Egypt as well as Creation. Tonight is still the new year reminding us of the anniversary of Creation, some 6,000 years ago. And the first month was changed in Exodus chapter 12 to Nisan, 6 months from now. We shouldn't be surprised by this change. This Sunday morning in Australia we will change our clocks an hour. Now, you know, time doesn't change, but our measurement of it does. And that's all that God was doing in this 6-month biblical adjustment.

So let's think about trumpets.

Trumpets? What's that about? Next weekend in Manly is the jazz festival, so is there a biblical festival also for drums or guitars? Is there some festival for trombones or tubas? Why trumpets after all?

Let me tell you some thoughts.

Before there was email, before there was 24-hour TV news coverage, before there were mobile phones, there was the trumpet. Listen to these texts and my quick comments:

Joel 2.1: Blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain. Here the trumpet is used as an alarm, a strong signal to remind the Jewish people that trouble is ahead.

Matthew 6.2: "When you give charity, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues." I suppose we could highlight the seating in synagogues even tonight, as people who have given larger sums are seated closer to the bimah. Trumpeting then is a way of showing off, of making sure people know how charitable one is. Sort of like the man who announced on national television that he was going to be teaching a course, "Humility and how I attained it."

Leviticus 23.24: "In the 7th month, on the first of the month, you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing of trumpets." This trumpet was the reminder, sort of like getting a beep from your mobile or the buzz of an alarm clock, to help you remember the rest, and the purpose of the rest.

Numbers 10.2: "Make trumpets... and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for having the camps set out." Two different trumpet calls were employed here. One for calling the people together and the other as an exit notification.

Other texts of note indicate that trumpets were used for a king taking a throne (1 Kings 34.39), starting a Jubilee year (Lev. 25.9), even the announcement of the messiah's coming (Zechariah 9.14). This is not an exhaustive list. As you can see, the Bible is full of reasons and purposes of trumpet calling.

My favourite however is the use of trumpets in the Bible book of Joshua, recorded in chapter 6. It's one of the strangest stories in the Bible, and that's saying a lot.

In this story, 7 priests carry 7 shofrot. The word 'shofar' is used for the first time in the Bible in this text. We are instructed as a people outside the walled city of Jericho what God wants us to do. Militarily, we are outnumbered. By military training we are outclassed. In strategy of defense in war, the walls are insurmountable. This is sure defeat for the people of Israel.

Even so, God opens the chapter with these words, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors." God must know what he is doing and saying, but please. Jericho? Maybe God could choose something easier for our first battle in the Promised Land? How about a clubhouse run by some Ammonites?

But like so many at the MCG last Saturday, there were many people who believed Hawthorn would take down the heavily-favored Mighty Cats. And that faith was well-founded and produced a fairly easy victory in the Grand Final of the AFL to the Hawks.

I suppose there is something similar and yet much more significant in the battle of Jericho. God was telling the Jewish people not to worry about the apparent strengths of the Jericho people. Don't worry about being the underdog. He was saying, "Israel, you will win. I have given you the territory."

Let me ask you, has God told you to go in and take the land? Has God told you or asked you to do something impossible? Friends, nothing is impossible with God. What about overcoming our sins? Today we enter the 10 days, the Aseret y'mei t'shuva. These 10 days we are scheduled to consider our sins and consider God's love and hope for forgiveness. By every natural means, we would be disheartened. None of us deserves forgiveness. Did you hear the words of King David and his humility in Psalm 51? But it's not up to us or our righteousness.

Look at the method of conquest at Jericho. The Bible says the Jewish people were to march around the city 6 times, that is, once per day for most of a week. Then on the 7th day, to march around 7 times. A total of 13 trips. Each time the priests, the 7 priests were to blast the trumpets with a t'kiah. And finally on the 7th day, during the 7 loops, the 7 priests were to blast a long blast, which launched the peoples' shouting. And it was the shout and the trump and the faith in the God who told us to do all that which eventuated in the collapse of the strong walls of Jericho and the subsequent conquest of the city.

The victory at Jericho was not about trumpets, but about the God who instructed us to blow them. And in these days we blow trumpets to remind us of that same God. Don't get distracted with the stuff which is religion. Real life is not about the prayer shawl or about the menorah or even the Bible. Real life is in the God of the Bible, the God who instructed us about the tallit or the menorah or the trumpet.

I've seen so many believers get caught up in the trappings of religion. The trumpets are reminders. They remind us to trust God, to listen to God, to learn from God. The trumpets are not there, or here, to be a talisman or amulet like a Kabbalah wristband. Listen to the trumpet and be driven to the Almighty!

And wait, there's a trumpet yet to blast. Not only here tonight, and I thank Brian and Helen for blowing the shofrot for us tonight. But the words about the shofar blast which is yet to come is recorded for us in the Newer Testament.

Paul the rabbi turned Jesus-follower taught about the last days. He said (1 Thessalonians 4) when Y'shua returns that the angels will shout and the trumpet of God will blast. The dead in Messiah will rise first, and that resurrection will herald the consummation of all things.

When the final trumpet is blasted from heaven, believers in Y'shua will gather to meet him. And we'll be there. That trumpet will herald a new era in eternity. And a new era for humanity. And for you and for me. And all those who trust in Y'shua as our Saviour and Lord.

Salvation comes from him. He is the Messiah who died for our sins and rose from the dead. He died that we might be forgiven and have life and have it eternally and abundantly.

You heard the story tonight of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, a story from the Book of Genesis, traditionally read on Rosh Hashanah. And you probably heard the parallels in that story with the story of the Crucifixion of Y'shua. His death... his sacrifice... is our salvation.

May the seven priests with seven shofrot send a signal to you of God's completing his work. It is finished...all done, God has done it all in Y'shua his son.

As we conclude tonight, I hope your holiday, actually your holiday season, is full of divine joy. May you know the Lord of the Trumpets and celebrate the fullness of God's pleasure in knowing Y'shua, in rejoicing in the one who forgives us our sins. He tabernacled with us and will come again to bring us forever. Thanks be to God. And my wish for each of you is a serious and full-of-joy shana tovah.