We usher in this new year with beautiful music; special melodies that we only hear during this season, layers of harmony that our choir has artfully prepared, the works of composers of many centuries, and tunes that have been passed down marked only “traditional.” And we hear another voice: not a human one, but a unique voice that marks the season more than any other – the call of the shofar.

Indeed, throughout our history, it has been the voice of the shofar that has awakened us from our spiritual slumber, and given us hints to the fleeting nature of time. The shofar is traditionally sounded throughout the month of Elul, the month leading up to this day, and its special sound is intended to wake us up to the work of the season – of cheshbon hanefesh – examining our souls: reviewing the past, looking honestly at where we are now, and believing that change is possible. The mitzvah connected to the shofar is simply to listen, to hear the sounds. But the shofar is more than just a horn, and when we hear it, if we listen differently than when we listen to music, what could we hear?

We are all familiar with the three sections to the ritual for the sounding of the shofar, which we will hear tomorrow morning. In his essay in the Reconstructionist movement’s prayerbook for the Days of Awe, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld writes the following:

The three major themes of the Rosh Hashanah (shofar service) are most frequently spoken of as reflecting three important aspects of God
and theology. The first, *Malhuyot* – sovereignty – proclaims God’s sovereignty over the world and humanity. The second, *Zihronot* – remembrance – tells us that God cares about the world and remembers all our deeds, both the good and the bad. The third, *Shofarot*, reminds us of the revelation of God at Sinai and of the final redemption still to come. Together they “describe” a god who is omniscient and omnipotent and who is actively involved in this world on a continuing basis.

These three aspects are also part of our lives, for we are created *betzelem elohim* – in the image of God. We are to reflect in our lives aspects of the Divine, or as the rabbinic principle states: You should be merciful as God is merciful, you should be just, etc. Looking at these three themes in this manner gives us a different perspective. *Malhuyot* focuses on control – control over others and over ourselves. *Zihronot* has to do with memory and thought. Remembering is what the covenant is based on, for we are to remember what God did for us in Egypt and elsewhere. Remembering, too, is what all human relationships are based on, for without memory of past events and feelings, there is no way to deepen emotional attachments; each meeting becomes the first; whether for love or hate, no one has any more meaning to you than anyone else. *Shofarot*, the third, has to do with sound and thus with communication and speech.

…Self control, thinking/remembering, and speech are what make us human. To realize our full potential, we must strive with each of these aspects of our humanity, which in themselves are only reflections of the Divine.

These three categories of being and behaving – control and self-control, thinking and remembering, and speech and communication – are all aspects of our public and private lives that determine who we are and how we are judged: by those around us and ultimately by God.
Since this time last year, many voices have been heard, crying out and speaking out, many voicing the phrase “Me too.” After months or years of silence, women have spoken those words to indicate that they - no, WE - have been the object of sexual harassment or sexual assault. What began as a reaction to big names in Hollywood being exposed for their exploitative behavior, has mushroomed into a movement of women in all walks of life who have said, “Time’s up.” We have had enough, and we will no longer tolerate the conspiracy of silence and complicity. My guess is that many, if not most of the women, and some of the men, sitting here today, have also said, “Me too.” Almost every woman I know is a member of this club that we never asked to join. We have been harassed: by co-workers, superiors, classmates, family members, or just some guy walking down the street. And if we have not been assaulted, the fear is always there.

My colleague, Rabbi Lisa Berney, told a story of her freshman seminar in college, when a teacher asked the men in the classroom: “What steps do you take, on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?” At first, there was an awkward silence. Some of the guys looked around, confused, as if the teacher had just asked a trick question. Finally, someone said: “Nothing. I don’t think I have ever thought about it.”

The teacher then asked the women in the classroom the same question: “What steps do you take on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?” Immediately, a sea of hands shot up in the air: “I don’t park between two large trucks or SUVs. I always carry a cell phone in my hand. I don’t go running at night. I take self-defense classes. I close all the windows when I go to sleep. I never rent an apartment on the first floor. I carry pepper spray. I watch what I wear. I only go out in groups. I meet men on first dates in public places. I don’t drink too much. I don’t make eye
contact with men on the street. I try not to smile at men at the gym or coffee shops because I don’t want to send them the wrong message.”

Later, (Rabbi Berney continued) many of the women in the class realized that our precautions were instinctual. We had become so used to living in a culture in which violence against women is commonplace that we learned to incorporate these behaviors in an attempt to protect ourselves. We had internalized that this is just how the world is—the possibility of sexual assault is our accepted reality—and it was our responsibility to ward off potential threats.

Our Jewish community is not immune from these sins. Many of you are aware that last year, prior to the #MeToo phenomenon, the Central Conference of American Rabbis established a Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate, and I was honored to be invited to be its chair. We are dealing with everything from gender-based bias in hiring and placement to #MeToo, and as you can imagine, it is a major project. Some people are shocked that rabbis would face sexual harassment or even assault, and I truly wish I could tell you that it doesn’t happen. Many are surprised that after more than 45 years of women in the Reform rabbinate there is still discrimination and pay inequity. Our Task Force has the goal of trying to change the culture that still considers women to be less authoritative than men; that when asked to think of a rabbi, still pictures a man with a beard; that values men’s opinions over women’s; that discusses a female rabbi’s appearance more than her learning; and I could go on and on. We have much work to do.

And we have work to do in our own community. While Rabbi Harari and I have enjoyed the openness of this congregation to women’s leadership, even
here there are still vestiges of the old ways. I will not speak for my successor, but I have experienced and witnessed inappropriate comments over the years, jokes that weren’t really funny, and moments that made me cringe. My colleague Rabbi Mary Zamore, the Executive Director of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, has composed “A #MeToo/#GamAni Confession for the High Holy Days.”

Al cheit shechatanu…
For the sin we have committed before You . . .
by not believing the victims
by being silent while women were bullied, harassed or undermined
by claiming to be ready to listen when we were not
by claiming equality exists for all
by not supporting victims
by not providing sexual harassment prevention training
by accepting the sexist comments made every day
by blaming the victims
by claiming our workplaces, synagogues, and organizations were safe
By contributing to an environment that allowed harassment
by explaining away harassment
by believing the victims but not acting to make change
by worrying about our community’s reputation instead of the victims’ needs
by not reflecting on the past and present behavior within our community
by denying that gender harassment has many faces
by allowing victims to suffer retribution
by not noticing when women simply walked away from our community or institution
by making the reporting of harassment difficult and hard to engage
by promising change and not fulfilling this promise
Al cheit shechatanu…
For the sin we have committed before You, we ask forgiveness.

Like all the sins listed in all our confessions on these Holy Days, we are not all guilty of all of them. I offer this list to you as food for thought, as a way into the topic, as a way to realize that our community is not immune, that
this subject is not just for Hollywood moguls, or talk show hosts, or comedians, or disgraced politicians. (I will not mention their names because they do not deserve any more publicity.) Rabbi Strassfeld teaches us that the shofar reminds us of our humanness, at the same time as it emphasizes our complex, multi-faceted relationship with God. He emphasizes three categories of being and behaving – control and self-control, thinking and remembering, and speech and communication. Perhaps we can use each of these as a way to think about the issues of our interpersonal behavior.

I learned another interpretation of the sound of the shofar from my friend and colleague, Rabbi Laura Geller, the rabbi emerita of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills. She taught:

The Biblical verse in Numbers 29 (that section that we will read tomorrow morning from the second torah as the *maftir*) instructs us about Rosh Hashanah: “*Yom teruah yihyeh lachem* - It should be a day of sounding the *teruah.*" The Talmud asks what the teruah sounds like, and gives an astonishing answer based on the Aramaic translation for the word teruah: *yevavah*, a word which it links to the verse in the Book of Judges about the mother of Sisera who worries when her son does not arrive home. We read: "the mother of Sisera stood at the window *vateyavev* - and she “*yavev,*” she made the sound of *yevavah*. So the Talmud asks: what is *yevavah*? One opinion is that *yevavah* means that she sighed and sighed, and therefore the teruah should sound like a gasping sound (*shevarim*), and one opinion is that she cried and cried and therefore the sound of the teruah should
be constantly broken like uncontrollable crying. (B.T. Rosh Hashanah 33b)

Because there were two different sounds – sighing and crying, the ancient rabbis compromised and included both sounds both during Elul and on Rosh Hashanah: the first, shevarim, three gasping sounds, and the second, teru’ah, nine staccato sounds, like crying. But the point is that both of these sounds emerge from the anguish of the mother of Sisera. Amazing, isn’t it? That two of the sounds we are supposed to hear in our shofar represent the sound of Sisera’s mother crying? Do you remember who Sisera was? Sisera was a Canaanite general who oppressed Israel. Deborah, the prophet, gathers an army to oppose him; he is defeated, runs away and is killed by the woman, Yael. Sisera is our enemy… and yet we are asked to listen to the cry of his mother. There is no question that the Rabbis are proud of Deborah's victory; she acted to save Israel and did what was required in that hour. And yet, this connection suggests that we are to feel not only the pride of victory but also the pain that victory caused the mother of our enemy even when we fought in a righteous cause.

There is another tradition that links the sound of the shofar to a different mother. The midrash in Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer imagines that when Sarah mistakenly heard that her husband Abraham had sacrificed her beloved only son, “Sarah began to cry and moan the sound of three wails, which correspond to the three blasts of the shofar, and her soul burst forth from her and she died.” Two different mothers: one the mother of our enemy, the other, the mother of our own ancestor, Isaac. The tears of both Sarah and the unnamed mother of Sisera are in the sound of the shofar.
This year, the voice of the shofar is also the voice of MeToo. It is the voice of those who have been silent too long, and have found the strength to speak out. The shofar also calls to all of us to listen carefully and change our behavior accordingly.

*Malchuyot* reminds us of control over our actions. We need to move beyond excusing inappropriate behavior with old falsehoods like “boys will be boys” or “She must have done something to invite that.”

*Zichronot* reminds us to remember the feelings of others and consider the emotional attachments of our relationships. Hurting or demeaning another is not a way of showing love.

And *Shofarot* reminds us that our speech really matters. How we communicate, and what we say, and how we use our God-given voices makes a difference in our lives and the lives of those around us.

The shofar is our wake-up call. May we all listen and hear its voice.