

Secret Mission at the Western Wall

Adi Werner and Efrat Bazak

I was a boy who lived among courtyards and stone houses in a small neighborhood of Jerusalem. But our courtyard was the most special and secret. It was surrounded by houses, fragrant herbs grew around it, and clotheslines with clean laundry were stretched across it from corner to corner. In this courtyard we would meet and plan secret missions disguised as children's games. In this courtyard, I was even declared a hero. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

In our Jerusalem neighborhood you could hear Hebrew, Arabic, Ladino, and Yiddish all at once. The most excited voices could be heard during the month of Elul, when the sound of the *shofar* came from every direction – the hoarse cry of a small *shofar* and the deep call of the long, looping one – *tekia, shevarim, terua*... sounds that pierce your heart...

Dad had a special role during the prayers on Rosh Hashana. He was the *ba'al tokea* – the one who blew the *shofar*. The sounds of the shofar would shake the walls of the small synagogue, *Sukkat Shalom*, in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Nachlaot. Every year before the High Holidays, my father would let me practice on the *shofar*, like he was preparing me for something serious.

Those days the British Mandate soldiers were on every corner. We used a code name for them – “anemones [*kalaniot*],” because their red berets looked like the red flowers. But they seemed more like a bed of thorns. At first there was a good British governor, Sir Herbert Samuel, who promised that they would help us build a “Jewish national home” – meaning they would help us make a state here. But sadly, a few years later he went back to England. After him were other governors, and not only did they not keep his promise, they made our lives much harder. They just wanted quiet and no fighting between us and the Arab residents who live here. Meanwhile, in the land of Israel and especially in Jerusalem, the Jewish communities continued to grow, and with them the desire for independence and freedom.

Their rules at the Western Wall were especially hard for us. When the Arabs claimed that Jewish prayer offended them, the British Mandate officials quickly made all sorts of rules that really limited us. Although they let us pray at the Western Wall, they didn't let us bring in any Torah scrolls, sit on benches or chairs, or even bring lamps into the small plaza. And worst of all, they didn't let us bring in a *shofar*.

The month of *Tishrei* came, bringing a sense of new beginnings in the air. It was the year of my *bar mitzva*. I loved adventures, and I would often imagine how I would bring honor back to my people. I

imagined myself bringing national pride to the Jewish people in their land. Now, I felt mature and responsible, and I waited for a chance to prove it.

We met in our secret courtyard, behind a line of white laundry, my friends and I from the youth movement. We talked quietly about the new restrictions and felt insulted and humiliated. We felt ashamed that we couldn't act freely by the remnant of our holy Temple, the Western Wall.

Suddenly the youth group leader asked us, "Who knows how to blow the *shofar*?"

I raised my hand and said, "I do."

I felt that this was the moment I'd been waiting for.

Yom Kippur arrived. The day of atonement and forgiveness. I didn't tell anyone in my family about the mission I had accepted. In my heart I asked forgiveness from my parents for the pain they might experience if I were caught and thrown into the "Kishle," the British prison. Toward the end of the holiday prayers, I came to the Western Wall, leaping along rooftops and slipping through courtyards. I hid in the mass of people who had come to pray, crowded together, covered in prayer shawls, singing and pleading their prayers. I sneaked the *shofar* in with the help of a girl I didn't know, who agreed to hide it under her clothes. To keep the British soldiers from catching us, we agreed that I would bend down and pretend to tie my shoe, and she would secretly pass me the *shofar*, under my prayer shawl.

The *shofar* was in my hands. I pressed it close to my body with a shaking hand. I felt tense and tried to pass off my worried face as an expression of deep focus on my prayer. The crowd cried out to heaven, "Open a gate for us at the time the gates are locked!" from the *Ne'ila* prayer said at the end of Yom Kippur. The moment had arrived. I was afraid. I took a deep breath and remembered my friends: Sika, Aharoni, Shteinberg...those brave boys who had stood here and sounded the *shofar*, as I was about to do. I closed my eyes and thought: I am continuing the tradition of sounding the *shofar*, in the holy place, at the end of the holy day.

I stood up straight, held my head high, and blew the *shofar* with a clear, pure sound – a long *tekia*.

In moments, disguised British soldiers jumped on me from all directions. They caught me and dragged me after them, away from my friends, as I faced the Western Wall. My vision became blurry – I was still fasting and felt like I was about to faint. I heard the crowd following us, singing "*HaTikva*," the national anthem, and I felt stronger. In my imagination the Western Wall stones became pictures in a huge album, without an end – pictures of my great-grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, grandparents from many generations back, from every corner of the world, blowing the *shofar* and reciting the prayer: "*Leshana haba'a biYerushalayim habenuya* – next year in Jerusalem rebuilt!"

Afterword

Avraham Elkayam blew the *shofar* at the conclusion of Yom Kippur in 1947, the year before the State of Israel was established. At that time Jerusalem was under British rule. He was the last one to sound the *shofar* at the Western Wall before the Old City of Jerusalem fell during the War of Independence. Before him, thirteen other young men sounded the *shofar* in the name of tradition and national pride.

During the Six-Day War, on the day the Western Wall was liberated, Elkayam traveled to the site with Rav Goren, the chief rabbi of the IDF, and asked to blow the *shofar* there. "An older man came up to me and asked me, 'What's your connection to blowing the *shofar* at the Western Wall?' I told him, 'I was the last one who blew the *shofar* here, in 1947.' Then he said to me, 'I'm Moshe Segal, I was the first one to sound the *shofar* here.'"