

*(Blow shofar)* Have I gotten your attention? That’s how the ancient prophets called attention to what they were saying—they blew a shofar, often translated in the Bible as “trumpet.” The instrument was usually made from a ram’s horn, and although it didn’t have valves like our modern-day trumpets, varying one’s mouth shape and the speed of one’s breath could create various pitches. They blew the shofar to draw attention to something important, such as the beginning of a festival or worship service.

The Bible first mentions a shofar in Exodus 19 when the people had gathered around Mt. Sinai. The people washed up and prepared themselves for a sacred ceremony, and then Moses blessed them as God’s special people, as priests to the nations. The sound of the shofar signified something important was happening, and then after the ceremony, Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, teachings that would guide the people in getting along with one another while serving as a faithful example to everyone they encountered.

Seven hundred years later, when the prophet Isaiah felt inspired by God to lift up his own voice like a shofar, it meant the people needed to listen up! Pay attention! They had forgotten how they had been called to serve as examples to the world, guided by an ethic of caring for those in need. God said:

Tell my people what’s wrong with their lives,  
face my family Jacob with their sins!  
They’re busy, busy, busy at worship,  
and love studying all about me.  
To all appearances they’re a nation of right-living  
people—  
law-abiding, God-honoring. (*Message Bible*)

The people replied, “Well, what are we supposed to do? We fast from eating, but it doesn’t seem to do much good.”

God replied, “While you fast, you still oppress your employees. You bicker and fight amongst yourselves and hit one another, and then you pretend to be religious. That’s not how to reflect my light to the world. Here’s what you need to do: get rid of exploitation, free the oppressed, share your food with the hungry, clothe those who are cold, welcome the homeless. Then your light will shine in the world.”

It's tempting to ignore this passage from Isaiah, thinking it's about a people long ago, but I wonder how these words might still connect to us today? Ever seen any bickering and fighting? Any exploitation? Anyone hungry? When has our worship become more of our focus than our concern for those who struggle with life?

Might these words from Isaiah connect to us after all?

Yes, but exploitation? Certainly, you and I don't participate in such an activity, do we?

In Congo, citizens face exploitation each day as they go to work mining cobalt, the largest source of this metal in the world. In the recent book *Cobalt Red* by Siddharth Kara, he reported how

“People are working in subhuman, grinding, degrading conditions. They use pickaxes, shovels, stretches of rebar to hack and scrounge at the earth in trenches and pits and tunnels to gather cobalt...”

Millions of trees have been cut down, the air around mines is hazy with dust and grit, and the water has been contaminated with toxic effluents from the mining processing. “Cobalt is toxic to touch and breathe — and there are hundreds of

thousands of poor Congolese people touching and breathing it day in and day out. Young mothers with babies strapped to their backs, all breathing in this toxic cobalt dust...”

And then the worst of all is what happens in tunnel digging. There are probably 10,000 to 15,000 tunnels that are dug by hand... None of them have supports, ventilation shafts, rock bolts, anything like that. And these tunnels collapse all the time, burying alive everyone who is down there, including children.

One might suggest that people just stop working there and find something safer to do, but the problem is, they have no other options. Kara explains the problem:

Imagine an entire population of people who cannot survive without scrounging in hazardous conditions for a dollar or two a day. There is no alternative there. The mines have taken over everything. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced because their villages were just bulldozed over to make place for large mining concessions. So you have people with no alternative, no other source of income, no livelihood.<sup>1</sup>

Cobalt-based blue pigments have been used since ancient days for its blueish color for jewelry and paints. If that was the extent of its usage, we might find it easy to give up our use of cobalt. But I imagine every one here uses cobalt every day, and if you had to give it up, you

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would find your life drastically changed. Anything with a lithium rechargeable battery uses cobalt: laptop computers, tablets, electric vehicles, and our cell phones. Every time we make a cell phone call, we participate in exploitation, the kind of activity that the prophet Isaiah spoke out against 2500 years ago. Someone earned a dollar or two in a day for us to make a phone call. It's likely that someone became ill or died so we can carry a phone around in our pockets.

So what do we do? I don't know. I began reading the book that tells of the author's investigation of this exploitation, but I don't yet know if he has suggestions. One small step might make a difference, such as rather than getting a new cell phone each time the newest model appears on the market, maybe

we could continue to use the one we have that still works, reducing a small demand for more cobalt.

Maybe we can raise our voices to ask for humane working conditions for those who mine cobalt.

Maybe everytime we make a phone call, we offer a prayer to God, asking for better conditions for the workers, praying for a change of heart of the businesses that oversee the mines.

I wish I had an easy answer, but along with Isaiah, I blow the shofar, echoing what he said,

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly. (NRSV)

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Gross, "How 'modern-day slavery' in the Congo powers the rechargeable battery economy," 2/1/23, [www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/02/01/1152893248/red-cobalt-congo-drc-mining-siddharth-kara](http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/02/01/1152893248/red-cobalt-congo-drc-mining-siddharth-kara)