

# Rosh Hashanah: The Call of the Shofar

Rabbi Shmuel Hain

Rosh Beit Midrash, GPATS

Rabbi, Young Israel Ohab Zedek of North Riverdale, NY

The characterization of *Rosh Hashanah* as both the start of the Ten Days of Repentance and as a day of introspection and judgment in its own right is ubiquitous in rabbinic literature and ingrained in our collective consciousness. However, the precise nature and form of this *teshuva* remains a mystery. Remarkably, the *tefilot* of *Rosh Hashana*, in sharp contrast to *Yom Kippur*, do not contain *vidui* or *selichot*, or many of the other traditional prayers devoted to the themes of confession and supplication. How, then, does *teshuva* manifest itself on this day? The Rambam gives us a clue:

*Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Divine decree, there is an allusion contained in it, saying: Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator.*

**Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva 3:4)**

אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב, רמז יש בו: כלומר עורו עורו ישנים משינתכם, והקיצו נרדמים מתרדמתכם; וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה, וזכרו בוראכם.  
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ג:ד

According to the Rambam, the primary *mitzvah* and symbol of the day - the *shofar*- embodies the special quality of *teshuva* on *Rosh Hashanah*. A closer analysis of this *mitzvah*, then, should provide greater understanding of the unique nature of this *teshuva*.

The central halakhic question regarding *shofar* revolves around whether one fulfills the *mitzvah* through the act of **sounding** the *shofar* (**tekiah**) or via **hearing** the sounds emanating from the *shofar* (**shemiah**).<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, affects numerous issues, including: the formulation of the *bracha* for the *mitzvah*,<sup>16</sup> the requirement of *kavannah* (intent) for *shofar*,<sup>17</sup> *shome'ah ke'oneh* and

<sup>15</sup> See VaYikra 23:24, BaMidbar 29:1, Mishnah RH 3:7-8, Sefer Mitzvot of RaSaG Aseh 54, SeMaG Aseh 42, Rambam Sefer Mitzvot Aseh 170 and Laws of Shofar 1:1. See also Sha'agat Aryeh No. 6 and Harerei Kedem Vol. 1 No. 13 for a fuller discussion of the issue including the view that both elements are critical. Also see the commentary of R'i M'Lunel Rosh HaShana 34a who indicates that either sounding or hearing suffices due to the ambiguity of the biblical phrase "Yom Teruah".

<sup>16</sup> See SeMag, ad loc., Rambam Laws of Shofar 3:10, *Teshuvot HaRambam* 51 (*Pe'er HaDor*), *Rosh Rosh Hashana* 4:10. See also the siddur of Rashi Siman 183 for a possible hybrid blessing invoking both Tekiah and Shemiah.

<sup>17</sup> See Rambam ad loc. 2:4-5 and Harerei Kedem ad loc.

those eligible to sound the *shofar* for others,<sup>18</sup> multiple *Ba'alei Tekiah*/interruptions (*hefsek*) between blasts,<sup>19</sup> and the disqualification of a stolen *shofar*.

The issue of the stolen *shofar* in particular is subject to much debate and a careful examination of it yields much insight into the message of the *shofar*. According to a number of *Rishonim* the definitional question of *shemiah* or *tekiah* determines whether or not one may fulfill one's obligation with a stolen *shofar*. For instance, the Ran (*Rosh Hashanah* 28a) maintains that since the essence of the *mitzvah* consists of the act of sounding the *shofar*, a stolen *shofar* is disqualified. Because the *shofar* functions as the *mitzvah* object, the illegal means of acquisition adversely affects the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* (מצוה הבאה בעבירה). Conversely, the Rambam (Laws of *Shofar* 1:3) rules that one may fulfill their obligation with a stolen *shofar* because, "the *mitzvah* is hearing the sound of the *shofar*... and one cannot steal sound."

Despite the compelling logic to connect these two issues, some *Rishonim* deny the link in both directions. The Ritva (*Rosh Hashanah* 28a), while agreeing with the Rambam that hearing the sound of the *shofar* constitutes the essence of the *mitzvah*, nevertheless rules that a stolen *shofar* becomes disqualified because of מצוה הבאה בעבירה. Conversely, the Ra'avad (Laws of *Shofar* 1:3, based on the Yerushalmi *Sukkah* 3:1), claims that one may fulfill the *mitzvah* of *shofar* with a stolen *shofar*, even if sound were an object that could be stolen or if the essence of the *mitzvah* is the *tekiah*, based on the *drasha*: "יום תרועה יהיה לכם-מכל מקום". Why, according to the Ritva, can a stolen *shofar* not be used if it does not constitute the *mitzvah* object but just the generator of the sound, and why, according to the Ra'avad, can one use a stolen *shofar* even if sound could in fact be stolen?

The Ritva himself explains his exceptional position by exclaiming, "במה יתרצה זה אל אדוניו ביום הדין". Since the *shofar*, like a sacrifice, is an instrument of *ritzui* (appeasement) it is inconceivable that one would fulfill this *mitzvah* with a stolen *shofar*, even though it functions merely as a preparatory object in the performance of the *mitzvah*. Just like a *Korban* is susceptible to disqualification due to the existence of even a minor blemish, so, too, the *mitzvah* of *shofar* on the Day of Judgment cannot be tainted in any way.

From this perspective, the standards for *shofar* and, in turn, for *teshuva* on *Rosh Hashanah*, are extremely ambitious and daunting. We must approach God with a comprehensive spiritual agenda that does not allow for any flaws or chinks in our religious armor, much like the symbol of the day, the *shofar*, cannot contain any imperfections.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the numerous themes of *Rosh*

<sup>18</sup> See Meiri *Rosh Hashana* 29a and R'I M'Lunel as well.

<sup>19</sup> See Rambam and Maggid *Mishneh Laws of Shofar* 3:11.

<sup>20</sup> In a lecture several years ago, *Mori VRabi* Rabbi Michael Rosensweig suggested that the element of *ritzui* may also explain the rationale behind the Rabbinic Decree of Rabbah prohibiting the sounding of the *shofar* outside of *Beit Din* when *Rosh HaShana* falls out on Shabbat (see *Rosh HaShana* 29b), as it does this year. Even a seemingly "far-fetched" concern of carrying the *shofar* is enough to threaten the pristine quality of the *shofar* and justifies the decree that strips the day of its primary *mitzvah* and symbol. By not sounding the *shofar* on Shabbat we testify to and underscore *shofar's* core essence that does not allow for any blemishes or transgressions. Moreover, according to the Yerushalmi (RH 4:1) there is a Biblical source for silencing the *shofar* on Shabbat ("*Zichron Teruah*" which is the phrase used to describe *Rosh HaShana* in the **primary** *Parshat HaMo'adim-Vayikra* 23:24). From the

*Hashana*- fear (*Yirat HaDin*) and joy (*Simchat Yom Tov*), universalistic and particularistic judgment, *Malchuyot*, *Zichronot* and *Shofarot*- as well as the different sounds and motifs of the *shofar* itself highlight the complexity and demanding nature of the day.

A seemingly opposite perspective emerges from the position of the Ra'avad. His view ignores the fact that the *shofar* was stolen even though it comprises the critical component of the mitzvah of sounding the *shofar*. Why is the *shofar*, as opposed to all other mitzvah objects, not vulnerable to the problem of מצוה הבאה בעבירה? What is the logic behind the *drasha* of "מכל מקום" that allows the *shofar* to be a rule-breaker among *mitzvah* objects?

As noted previously, the *shofar* serves as the wake-up call to repent: "Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator." Psychologically, perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome when embarking on the path of spiritual growth is one's own past. During this initial stage, our minds are flooded with memories of past failings and iniquities casting self-doubt on our very capacity to change. Only by overlooking our flaws and previous sins during this precarious stage in the process of repentance can we succeed in improving our ways.

We can now understand the rationale for the Ra'avad's position. When we fulfill the commandment of *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*, signaling the start of the period of repentance, we must be excited by the prospects of a new year and not overwhelmed by our past transgressions. Perhaps that explains why the liturgy of *Rosh Hashanah* is bereft of *vidui*, *selichot*, etc. The *Machzor* discourages the confession and enumeration of sins, as well as the beseeching for forgiveness for those transgressions on *Rosh Hashanah*, because that would be self-defeating at this critical, initial stage of *teshuva*. Dwelling on past transgressions at the moment of inspiration to forge a new path can be demoralizing. The position of the Ra'avad that permits the use of a stolen *shofar* personifies this attitude. As the instrument for inspiring thoughts of *teshuva* on *Rosh Hashanah*, the *shofar* can not be disqualified based upon previous indiscretions. Unlike all other *mitzvah* objects, the *shofar* must be immune to the problem of מצוה הבאה בעבירה because disqualification based on a previous misdeed would undermine the forward-looking message of the *shofar* and the very essence of the day itself.

On the surface, the approach of the Ra'avad, promoting a form of *hirhur* (sparks or thoughts) *teshuva*, and that of the Ritva, advocating a flawless transformative type of *teshuva*, appear contradictory. Indeed, on a practical level, they rule in opposite directions regarding the stolen *shofar*. Yet, conceptually, the two views of *shofar* complement each other, as the Ritva himself indicates (see Ritva *Rosh Hashana* 34a where he invokes both the concept of *ritzui* and the notion of the wake-up call). In order to properly initiate the comprehensive spiritual agenda of *ritzui* projected by the Ritva, we must avoid dwelling on past mistakes and transgressions, as the

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Yerushalmi it would appear that by NOT sounding the *shofar* we are highlighting this element of *ritzui* and thereby fulfilling the Biblical mandate of *Zichron Teruah*. Indeed the phrase *Zichron Teruah* is also the source for the special requirements of intention vis-à-vis *shofar* (See *Rosh Hashana* 28a-b) suggesting that *shofar's* true fulfillment transcends the question of *Ma'aseh Mitzvah*-sounding or hearing- and entails appreciating the multi-faceted messages of the mitzvah. The entire subject of *shofar* on Shabbat requires further elaboration

position of the Ra'avad highlights. The dialectical call of the *shofar* challenges us to begin the process of creating a more perfect religious identity by deliberately ignoring, albeit temporarily, the imperfections of our previous self.

Thus, by eschewing the conventional confession-centered repentance that takes inventory of specific transgressions, the unique *teshuva* of *Rosh Hashanah* liberates us to focus on a much more ambitious program whose ultimate goal is the refashioning of our entire self-image and spiritual persona.<sup>21</sup> With this lofty goal in mind we can channel all of our emotions into integrating the various themes of the *shofar* and of this singular holiday; the day that sets the tone both for the concentrated ten-day period of introspection and for an entire year dedicated to spiritual striving.

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<sup>21</sup> This focus applies to inter-personal relationships as well. On Rosh HaShana we should perhaps strive to create healthy and close relationships with our loved ones without detailing all of the slights we have committed or been on the receiving end of during the year. Over the course of the Ten Days of Repentance and culminating in Yom Kippur, we should then proceed with the work of repairing the relationships.

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