Rosh Hashanah: The Call of the Shofar

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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)

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).15 This, in turn, affects numerous issues, including: the formulation of the bracha for the mitzvah,16 the requirement of kavannah (intent) for shofar,17 shome‘ah ke’oneh and

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15 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”.

16 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.

17 See Rambam ad loc. 2:4-5 and Harerei Kedem ad loc.
those eligible to sound the shofar for others,\(^\text{18}\) multiple Ba’alei Tekiah/interruptions (hefsek) between blasts,\(^\text{19}\) 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. 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 בעבירה הבאה מצוה. 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: "וימ הוונא יודו עב-סכר לומא". 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, "בכום הרוצה זה אל ארוגיני ריב מי". 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.\(^\text{20}\) Indeed, the numerous themes of Rosh\[\text{\footnotesize 18 See Meiri Rosh Hashana 29a and R'I M'Lunel as well.}\n\[\text{\footnotesize 19 See Rambam and Maggid Mishneh Laws of Shofar 3:11.}\n\[\text{\footnotesize 20 In a lecture several years ago, Mori V'Rabi Rabbi Michael Rosensweig suggested that the element of ritzui may also explain the rationale behind the Rabbinic Decree of Rabbah prohibiting the sounding of the shofar outside of Beit Din when Rosh HaShana falls out on Shabbat (see Rosh HaShana 29b), as it does this year. Even a seemingly "far-fetched" concern of carrying the shofar is enough to threaten the pristine quality of the shofar and justifies the decree that strips the day of its primary mitzvah and symbol. By not sounding the shofar on Shabbat we testify to and underscore shofar's core essence that does not allow for any blemishes or transgressions. Moreover, according to the Yerushalmi (RH 4:1) there is a Biblical source for silencing the shofar on Shabbat ("Zichron Teruah" which is the phrase used to describe Rosh HaShana in the primary Parshat HaMoadim- Vayikra 23:24). From the}\]
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 הבעבירהמצוה בה בא? What is the logic behind the drasha of "מקום מכל" 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 permits the use of a stolen shofar to personify 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 הבעבירה מצוה 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

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.21 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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21 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.
Erev Yom Kippur Leil Iyun
Motzei Shabbat, September 26, 2009

9:30pm - Rabbi Dr. Jacob J Schacter
Senior Scholar, Center for the Jewish Future

Optimism, Hope, & Human Greatness:
A Different Perspective on Yom Kippur

10:30pm - Rabbi Aaron Kahn
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

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