

# The Shofar's Experiential Call

There are many meanings behind the shofar's call: the coronation of Hashem; a clarion call and reminder of repentance; reclaiming our *zechut avot*, the merit we received from our forefathers. Still, with a Rosh Hashanah liturgy containing pages and pages of carefully composed prayers and *piyyutim* that address all these aspects, the shofar also serves to give a voice to the unspoken words. The shofar remains a uniquely unformed expression. The question that follows is why? Is it merely symbolism, merely referential to specific moments in our history where the shofar was significant? And if so, why does it retain such prominence in the chag?

At the close of a recent conference held at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, in a room full of over 200 educators from around the world, an unassuming woman from Canada's Northwest Territories stood and asked permission to share her "shrill." In a quiet voice and with grace, she described the Native American custom to share a shrill — a high-pitched whistling tune unleashed in the face of a great personal accomplishment. As others around the room expressed their appreciation for the learning we had done in carefully crafted sentences, anecdotes and emotions, her shrill reminded me of how much we can learn from what is not said! How hidden behind words, within the recesses of our hearts, entangled in our memories and experiences, there are hopes and dreams, fears and facts that words can't always capture.



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The poignancy of this type of moment, this highly personal cry, is reflected in the classic tale of the Baal Shem Tov's embrace of a peasant child who is so moved by the davening on Rosh Hashanah that he calls out nonsensically and disrupts the shofar blasts in the middle of davening. The simpleton's cries, the Baal Shem Tov declared, were in fact the proper response to the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. They represented the *kavanot* (intents) the community needed at the time.

It seems easy to relate to the blasts of the shofar as a wild call of deep yearning — perhaps, *l'havdil*, akin to the Native American shrill. No words, just a call from the depths of our fears and hopes expressing the wish for a future so desperately that we may never have the right words to articulate. How does the Rosh Hashanah liturgy and ritual reflect this value of the shofar as a prayerful call that inspires us in ways beyond what the vast words of our machzor can achieve?

Is there a basis within our traditional texts and values for valuing the wordlessness and unshaped call of the shofar?

While blowing the shofar is mentioned only three times in the Torah in relation to Rosh Hashanah,<sup>1</sup>

the prominence of the shofar blasts in the liturgy cannot be overestimated. The basic understanding from the biblical texts is that *tekiat shofar* requires three blasts of *teruah*, which is based on these verses. The *Beraita* in *Rosh Hashanah* 33b, parses the language and use of the words *v'ha'avarta* and *ta'aviru* to mean that biblically we must have a *tekiat* blast before and after each *teruah*. The Gemarah goes on to describe different traditions regarding the proper sounds for the *teruah* blasts. We follow all of the variations. With differences about exactly when and where the sets of shofar blasts are included, most accept the requirement to hear one hundred blasts in total.<sup>2</sup> The sheer volume of shofar blasts, incorporating multiple traditions so as to be sure we get it right, impresses upon us its significance to Rosh Hashanah. As we call Rosh Hashanah *Yom Teruah*, not *Yom Tefillah*, getting the shofar blasts just right is clearly essential.

Rosh Hashanah is a chag with a complex identity whose aspects are all poignantly expressed in the mitzvah of *tekiat shofar*. On Rosh Hashanah, we have ample reason to celebrate; the creation of the world and the coronation of Hashem as our Sovereign are the primary themes of Rosh Hashanah. Still, the solemnity of the day is ever-present;

## Shem MiShmuel on the Dual Message of the Shofar

ולפי"ז יובן ענין פשוטה לפני' ופשוטה לאחרי',  
דתרועה שמורה על לב נשבר והכנעה וביטול הדעת  
... וממצא הדברים שענין כפופין ופשוטין וענין  
תקיעה ותרועה שניהם מורין על ענין אחד, זו לביטול  
הדעת וזו התרחבות והתפשטות הדעת. ועל דרך זה  
יש לפרש מה דאיתא במדרשים דשני ענינים נכללים  
בשופר, כדי להזכיר עקידת יצחק, ולהזכיר שופרות  
של מ"ת. דענין העקידה היתה ביטול הדעת, שהרי  
ידעו סוד הקרבן וידעו שאין אדם ראוי להקריבו קרבן,  
ומ"מ כפפו אונם וביטלו דעתם לדעת המקום, זהו ענין  
דבכפופין וענין תרועה. אבל ענין מ"ת הי' התרחבות  
והתפשטות הדעת, שידעו והשיגו עד למעלה ראש  
עד שנעתקו מדותיהם ונעקר יצה"ר מלבם, וזהו ענין  
דפשוטין וענין תקיעה שלפני' ושל אחרי':

*Based on this, we can understand the idea of having a simple sound (tekiyah) before [teruah] and after it. Teruah symbolizes a broken heart, humility and subjugating one's thoughts ... We see that the idea of a curved shofar vs. a straight shofar and the idea of tekiyah and teruah speak to one idea: [curved shofar and teruah] represent subjugating one's thoughts and [straight shofar and tekiyah] represent expanding one's thoughts. Following this approach, one can explain the midrashic texts that state that there are two ideas included in [the mitzvah of] shofar: to remember the binding of Isaac and to remember the shofar sounds of the giving of the Torah. The binding of Isaac is related to subjugating one's thoughts. They knew the foundations of sacrifices and knew that a person is not worthy of becoming a sacrifice. Yet they bent their ears and subjugated their thoughts to the idea of the Omnipresent. This is represented by the curved shofar and the teruah. But the giving of the Torah was an event that led to expansion of the mind. They were able to understand Divine concepts to the extent that their character traits were perfected and the evil inclination left their hearts. This is represented by the straight shofar and the tekiyah.*

**Shem MiShmuel, Rosh HaShanah 5679**

Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaDin*, The Day of Judgment, and its celebratory theme is paired with the weightiness of teshuva as Rosh Hashanah inaugurates the Ten Days of Repentance culminating with Yom Kippur. The stark contrast between the celebration and the judgment aspects of Rosh Hashanah is challenging to grasp as we balance the themes of Rosh Hashanah and dance between emotions.

How does the mitzvah of *tekiat shofar* contribute to these dueling identities of Rosh Hashanah?

The Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* 16a, identifies the shofar as the vehicle through which we can fulfill both aspects of Rosh Hashanah. Apparently, both requirements to celebrate Hashem's sovereignty and to remember the deeds of the past (worthy and not worthy) are linked to the shofar:

אמרו לפני בראש השנה מלכיות  
זכרונות ושופרות מלכיות כדי  
שתמליכוני עליכם זכרונות כדי שיעלה  
זכרונכם לפני לטובה ובמה בשופר.  
*Recite before me [verses] of kingship, remembrance and shofar. Kingship so that you can coronate Me, remembrance so that I shall remember you in a positive light, and with what? With a shofar.*

**Rosh Hashanah 16a**

### Shofar as a Celebratory Instrument

Certainly the shofar is recognizable as an instrument used in ceremonies to coronate a king. As we celebrate the

sovereignty of Hashem, the use of a shofar to accomplish this is not surprising at all. In describing the moment of revelation at Har Sinai we have a shofar blast signifying the celebrations and the momentous occasion of accepting the Torah:

וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְהִזְקַף מְאֹד מִשָּׁה  
דְּבַר וְהִצְלִיקִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל.  
*The sound of the shofar was getting continually stronger. Moshe would speak and God would respond with a voice.*

**Shemot 19:19**

Further, the Gemara lists Rosh Hashanah as the date of numerous nationally historic moments each deserving of celebration. As we recognize Hashem's sovereignty over the world, in accepting His Torah and our commitments as His people, we are also recognizing the way in which He has a hand in the design of the events of significant turning points for Klal Yisrael. The shofar was there and brings us back, as a nation, to that moment.

רבי אליעזר אומר בתשרי נברא העולם  
בתשרי נולדו אבות בתשרי מתו אבות  
בפסח נולד יצחק בראש השנה נפקדה  
שרה רחל וחנה בראש השנה יצא יוסף  
מבית האסורין בר"ה בטלה עבודה  
מאבותינו במצרים בניסן נגאלו בתשרי  
עתידין ליגאל.

*R. Eliezer said, The world was created in Tishrei, the forefathers were born in Tishrei and died in Tishrei. Yitzchak was born on Passover. On Rosh Hashanah, Sarah, Rachel and Chana's prayers [for a child] were answered. On Rosh Hashanah, Yosef was freed from prison, on Rosh Hashanah, our forefathers in*

*Egypt stopped performing slave labor. In Nisan we were redeemed, in Tishrei we will be redeemed.*

### **Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a**

Once again, Rosh Hashanah gives us ample reason to celebrate; and the shofar shall be sounded! It is a regal ceremony; a coronation for The King of Kings. In this domain of Rosh Hashanah, the shofar represents grandeur and harkens back to Har Sinai, the foundation of our covenant, our acceptance of a relationship with Hashem in which He would be our guarantor and us His.

### **Shofar as an Instrument of Teshuva**

The clearest depiction of Rosh Hashanah as *Yom HaDin* is the Gemarah's description of Hashem sitting before the open heavenly ledgers, the *sifrei chayim and sifrei meitim* — the books of life and books of death. The actions of each person are inscribed in these books and these actions are being measured and weighed and informing the fate of each person. In this way, on Rosh Hashanah, the scales of justice hang in the balance as the value of our past year is measured against the merit of another chance.

א"ר כרוספדאי א"ר יוחנן שלשה ספרים נפתחין בר"ה אחד של רשעים גמורין ואחד של צדיקים גמורין ואחד של בינוניים צדיקים גמורין נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים רשעים גמורין נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה בינוניים תליין ועומדין מר"ה ועד יוה"כ זכו נכתבין לחיים לא זכו נכתבין למיתה.

*R. Kruspedai said in the name of R. Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous are written*

*and sealed immediately for life. The completely wicked are written and sealed immediately for death. The middle hang in abeyance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are written for life. If they do not merit, they are written for death.*

### **Rosh Hashanah 16b**

Certainly this theme is most prominent in the *Unetaneh Tokef* section of our Rosh Hashanah prayers, which depict a personal moment of judgment as each person files before Hashem as a sheep before its shepherd, totally dependent and totally indebted.

וּנְתַנֶּה תְּקוּף קִדְשֵׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאִים ...  
אָמַת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דִין וּמוֹכִיחַ יוֹדֵעַ וְעוֹד וְכוּתֵב  
וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֶה וְתוֹכֵר כָּל הַנְּשֻׁכָּחוֹת,  
וְתַפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְּכוּרוֹנוֹת. וּמֵאֱלֹי יִקְרָא.  
וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ. וּבְשׁוֹפֵר גְּדוּל יִתְקַע. וְקוּל  
דְּמִקְמָה דְקָה יִשְׁמַע.

*How can the call of our shofar even approximate the same message of this poignant image? Perhaps the blasts of the shofar are hinting at this aspect of our dependence on Hashem, His merciful compassionate and caring shepherd's eye to spare us a harsh judgment.*

### **The Joy and Reverence of the Shofar**

How does the power of the shofar help us to accomplish both the joy and the reverence of Rosh Hashanah?

In the education field, educators search for how to reach their students and engage them fully so that they can reach their best potential. One adage that represents a growing field of experiential education claims: "Give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and if the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally will result." (John Dewey)

The idea is premised on the belief that students learn what they experience; not what they hear. That the deepest form of learning happens when the setting, the activity, and the ideas shared are not just external to the student but also resonate within a person's personal set of experiences.

Rav Soloveitchik describes the power of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah in just those terms. The shofar is to be experienced, not simply heard. It can be the force that forces you to reckon with your reality. In the same way that many mitzvot in the Torah have a level of fulfillment beyond the action required, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *tekiat shofar*, one must not only hear the blasts of the shofar but also experience its force internally. Hearing the shofar should connect us to a part of ourselves that is at our very core. The Rav described this as *hirhur teshuva* — a jarring awakening. In order to help describe what this type of experience was like, the Rav added his own personal anecdote:

*On the seventh day of Pesach, 5727 (1967), I awoke from a fitful sleep. A thunderstorm was raging outside, and the wind and rain blew angrily through the window of my room. Half awake, I quickly jumped to my feet and closed the window. I then thought to myself that my wife was sleeping downstairs in the sunroom next to the parlor, and I remembered that the window was left open there as well. She could catch pneumonia, which in her weakened condition would be devastating. I ran downstairs, rushed into her room, and slammed the window shut. I then turned around to see whether she had awoken from the storm or if she was still sleeping. I found the room empty, the couch where she slept neatly covered. In reality she had passed away the*

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*previous month. The most tragic and frightening experience was the shock I encountered in that half second when I turned from the window to find the room empty. I was certain that a few hours earlier I had been speaking with her, and that at about 10 o'clock she had said goodnight and retired to her room. I could not understand why the room was empty. I thought to myself, "I just spoke to her. I just said goodnight to her. Where is she?"*

**Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe, pp. 8-9.**

This, according to the Rav, is the condition that the shofar provokes. A jarring recognition of our realities that are buried deep within us. This experience must be evoked by an experience that the words of the machzor don't approximate. In the voice of the shofar we are returned to our inner beings and we are thus prepared for teshuva.

This state of being, *hirhur teshuva*, may come about suddenly, as the blasts of the shofar, but it is a prerequisite stage for teshuva. While teshuva must be, according to the Rambam, a thorough process with multiple difficult stages, *hirhurei teshuva* can be so powerful as to catapult a person through teshuva with great force and speed. This can be illustrated in the story of the death of R. Chaninah ben Tradyon. As he was being burned to death, a Roman officer tried to ease his pain:

אמר לו קלצטונירי רבי אם אני מרבה בשלהבת ונוטל ספוגין של צמר מעל לבך

אתה מביאני לחיי העולם הבא אמר לו הן השבע לי נשבע לו מיד הרבה בשלהבת ונטל ספוגין של צמר מעל לבו יצאה נשמותו במהרה אף הוא קפץ ונפל לתוך האור יצאה בת קול ואמרה רבי חנינא בן תרדיון וקלצטונירי מזומנין הן לחיי העולם הבא בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים.

*The officer said, my master, if I fan the flames and remove the wool sponges from your heart, will you bring me to the World to Come. [R. Chanina] responded, yes ... He immediately fanned the flames and removed the wool sponges from his heart and R. Chanina died quickly. [The officer] too jumped and fell into the fire. A heavenly voice called out: R. Chanina ben Tradyon and the officer are invited to the World to Come. Rebbe cried and said, there are those who can acquire their portion in the World to Come in one moment and there are those who acquire it over years.*

#### **Avodah Zarah 18a**

Rav Soloveitchik explains that this example shows how *hirhur teshuva* can even serve as full redemptive teshuva.

The shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah can surely be encountered as thought-provoking symbolic reminders or as poignant markers of the significance of Rosh Hashanah and of our rich *zechut avot*. Alternatively, if we can allow ourselves to experience the power of the shofar blasts, they can help us achieve so much more. The shofar is an instrument that erases the distinctions of each person's current setting, their davening skills, or the markers of their intellectual abilities.

Even the possible judgments that we have of each other can fall away. The shofar blasts can shake each of us equally, and express for us what we cannot say even to ourselves, resurfacing our innermost fallacies. The shofar speaks of what makes us shiver when we face the awesomeness of a Divine being who believes in our capacity. What disappointments have we faced as we peek into the ledger resting before God? What *berachot* of the past year did we choose to embrace and which chances did we ignore? What hopes do we have that make us reach higher, what aspirations do we cling to as we stand on the precipice of a new year? What faith do we have in Hashem's merciful benevolence and love for Am Yisrael and for each of us?

The shofar cries out for us, in ways that words and formulas cannot. Our experiences are awakened, not our intellectual selves, not our emotional selves but an integrated whole being that is the sum of all the experiences that shape who we are. The shofar makes Rosh Hashanah a *Yom Teruah*, a day when we can share a single voice of celebration and hope, of past and future, of blessings and of aspirations. It can unify the voices and dreams of our people — may its call be heard.

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Vayikra 23:24, 25:9, and Bamidbar 29:1.
- 2 See R. Josh Flug, "The Mitzvah of Tekiat Shofar," (2006) available at: [yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/716110/](http://yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/716110/).