



## HEARING OUR OWN AUTHENTIC VOICE

In the month of Elul, the conclusion of our prayers have a different atmosphere. Throughout the year, the sounds of the end of weekday prayers can be characterized as a mixture of people davening at various volumes and the clanking of tefillin boxes as people rush off to work. In Elul, the conclusion of our prayers is pierced by the regal tones of the shofar, jolting us into a mode of existential contemplation. Embedded within our Shachris tefilah, the shofar initiates each day of Elul with a sense of mission and purpose for our personal and religious growth. Galvanizing our spiritual momentum, the daily blasts carry us to Rosh HaShana, which is depicted in the Torah as the Yom Teruah — the day of shofar blasts — and then ultimately the climactic moments of Neilah on Yom Kippur. As we stand in silent

contemplation and listen to the shofar, there are a number of halachos that define the scope of this experience.

The mishnah in Rosh Hashana writes:

התוקע לתוך הבור או לתוך הדות או לתוך הפיטס אם קול שופר שמע יצא ואם קול הברה שמע לא יצא.

*If one blows into a pit, or a cellar or a barrel, if he heard the sound of the shofar, he has fulfilled the mitzvah. If he heard the sound of the echo, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah.*

**Rosh HaShana 27b**

The Gemarah proceeds to distinguish between those standing outside the pit, who potentially hear the echo coming out of the pit, and those standing within the pit itself, who are hearing the direct sound of the shofar.

The Meiri, commenting on this Gemarah, reveals that this case refers

to a situation that would occasionally unfold in particular eras of Jewish history:

משנה זו נשנית בשעת השמד שהיו מתחבאים בקיום המצות ופלי בגמ' בבור ודות שהעומדים בבור עם התוקע שומעין קול שופר שאין הקול מתבלבל עד שהוא עולה לאויר הבור ... אבל לעומדים בחוץ או על שפת הבור הוא שאנו צריכים להבחין בין שמעו קול שופר לשמעו קול הברה.

*This mishna was taught during a time of persecution when they had to hide their observance of mitzvos. The Gemarah explains that those who are standing in the pit with the blower hear the sound of the shofar because the sound does not get distorted until it reaches the airspace above the pit ... It is for those who are standing outside the pit that we have to distinguish between those who heard the voice of the shofar and those who heard the echo.*

Why should it matter? If the mitzvah is to hear the voice of the shofar, why should we care whether we heard it directly or indirectly? The cries and wails that the shofar represents are not diminished by the echoes of the pit. Indeed, the echo is, in some ways, an enhanced, reverberating manifestation of the shofar's sound. Why is it so critical to hear the original sound?

The answer to this question is rooted in a deeper understanding of our Rosh HaShana experience. On Rosh HaShana we read the story of Chana. Chana was a woman with an exceptional dream to bring a child into this world. She was determined that this child would be devoted to G-d and serve the Jewish people. She appeals to her husband, as well as to the leader of the generation, Eli. However, as the pesukim describe, the ultimate turning point is not through appeals to her husband and the prophet Eli. Ultimately, it is not until she turns inward and confronts the deep recesses of her own "self" that her tefilos are answered:

וְהִיא מָרַת נַפְשָׁהּ וְתַפְלַל עַל ה' וּבְכָה תְּבַכֶּה.  
וְתִדְרֹךְ נְדָר וְתֹאמַר ה' צָב-אֹת אִם רָאָה תִּרְאֶה  
בְּעֵינַי אֲמַתְךָ וּזְכַרְתִּי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֲמַתְךָ  
וְנִתְתָּה לְאִמְתְּךָ יָרַע אֲנֹשִׁים וְנִתְתִּיו לָהּ כֹּל יָמַי  
חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָהּ לֹא יִעָלֶה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ.

*In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: "O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for*

*all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head."*

**Shmuel I 1:9-10**

In contemporary life, there are many voices that surround us. Societal and communal expectations condition us to patterns of personal and religious behavior that is reflective of the world around us. Our ambitions and our actions become an echo of who we are, but do not truly manifest our personal and authentic sense of self.

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Rav Soloveitchik explains that the shofar is an expression of our inner soul (see *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified* pp. 18-29). In the creation of man, the Torah describes the life force that is infused into man:

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה  
וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.  
*The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the*

*breath of life, and man became a living being.*

**Bereishis 2:7**

It is that very primal breath that is exhaled and blown into the shofar to produce the sound that defines Yom Teruah. That voice emanates from the authentic depths of our personality and soul. It represents our true yearning to reach our potential in every facet of our lives. Rosh HaShana is a moment to step back from the myriad of echoes that constantly surround us and listen to ourselves. It is a day to hear — not the replication of our personal shofar, but the shofar itself. It is a day to step away from the cynicism that is sometimes associated with spiritual growth and embrace our true selves, which yearn to draw close to G-d and his people.

Tefilah is the primary way to reach this goal during Elul and the Yamim Noraim. Prayer is often experienced as a ritual echo. Sitting in shul, hearing the same words, observing the same actions, we feel like we are plugging into a program of prescribed observances. This issue of *The Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go®* focuses on the many dimensions of tefilah that can build our sense of connection to G-d through prayer. Indeed, one of the foundations of this most central experience to Jewish life is rooted in our capacity to connect to ourselves. We can shape the environment that allows us to hear that original sound of the shofar, becoming inspired to move forward in our quest for religious and spiritual growth in our connection with Hashem.



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