

Parashat Ki Tetze 5783, 2023:

The Shofar Versus the Yetzer Hara

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the major shul-based practices of the month of Elul is listening to the clarion call of the shofar following the recitation of Psalm 27, “*L’David Hashem ori v’yeshi*—A psalm of David, The L-rd is my light and my salvation.” The Rambam (1135-1204) notes a number of actions that the sounding of the shofar should ideally engender:

Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year and devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer HaMada, Hilchot Teshuvah* III:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In sum, the shofar’s blast is multidimensional and capable of evoking a variety thoughts and deeds. Then, too, it challenges us to remember the eternal truths of the Torah and eschew “vanity and emptiness which will neither benefit nor save.” The Rambam wrote in the 12th century, and decried those “who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year...” If this was a common problem during his historical period, it is exponentially the case in our pleasure-seeking, digitally focused culture that caters to a public with an unquenchable thirst for that which is scandalous, obscene, and demeaning. What accounts for this endless attraction to the ugliest side

of the human condition? I believe our *prasha* provides us with a strong foundation for answering this question.

The first phrase in our Torah portion, “*Ki tetze l’milchamah al oivecha*—When you go to war against your enemy,” precedes the words: “the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him [your enemy] into your hands, and you [will] take his captives.” (*Sefer Devarim* 21:10, translation, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The Chasidic masters universally understand the expression, “your enemy,” as referring to the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination). Not too surprisingly, the first rebbe to suggest this interpretation was none other than the founder of *Chasidut*, the holy Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (1698-1760), known to the world as “the Baal Shem Tov.”

The Baal Shem Tov notes that even though the verse is speaking about going to war, which necessitates a massive public undertaking, it is nonetheless written in the singular construct (*lashon yachid*). He opines that this is the case, since “every member of the Jewish people has no greater enemy than the evil inclination.” (This, and the following quotations, Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, *Itturei Torah*, volume VI, page 129; translations my own). The Baal Shem Tov continues his analysis and states, “If you go to war against him [that is, the *yetzer hara*],” then the Torah promises, that “the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands.” Perhaps most powerfully, he interprets the expression, “and you take his captives,” as a further assurance that “even the powers of the evil inclination will be able to be harnessed in the service of Hashem.”

Without a doubt, the *yetzer hara* is the most cunning and corrupting influence in our lives. It intuitively knows “what buttons to push” to lead us away from the Torah and Hashem and coerce us into doing its bidding. Clearly, we must wage an unceasing war against it, for as the Baal Shem

Tov said, we have “no greater enemy...” Fortunately, the Mishnaic sage Ben Zoma taught us that it is possible to be a spiritual hero and overcome even our strongest *yetzer hara*-suffused desires:

Who is strong? One who overpowers his [evil] inclination. As is it is stated: “One who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man, and one who rules over his spirit [is better] than one who conquers a city.” (*Pirkei Avot* IV:1, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus)

With the Almighty’s help, may we hearken to the shofar’s call and do our best to reject the nearly ceaseless negative influences of our time. In this way, may we harness “even the powers of the *yetzer hara*...in the service of Hashem.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)