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The Meaning of the Shofar

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The shofar is universally recognized as the symbol of Rosh Hashanah. Its piercing blasts reach the essence of our beings and bestir our souls to thoughts of *teshuvah* (returning to Hashem). In a well-known passage in the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) presented the inherent rationale of the *kol shofar* (sound of the shofar):

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree [of the Torah], it contains an allusion. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying: "Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds; repent, and remember your Creator." Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year devote their energies to vanity and emptiness, which will not benefit or save: [What, then, should they do instead?] "Look to your souls, improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts." (*Sefer Maada, Hilchot Teshuvah* III: 4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations to enhance clarity)

The Rambam wrote these words in the 12th century, yet they are as relevant today as they were when he first composed them. Unfortunately, year after year, we have a tendency to "forget the truth in the vanities of time" and "devote [our] energies to vanity and emptiness, which will not benefit or save." Therefore, Maimonides teaches us that the shofar is a "wake-up call" that announces: "Look to your souls, improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts." This "wake-up call" motif is first found in the Torah proper (*Sefer Shemot* 19:16), and is prominently

repeated in the *Shofrot* section of the Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah: “It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered.” (This, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The sound of Hashem’s shofar, accompanied by voices and torches, and a smoking Mount Sinai, was so incredibly intense that we not only heard the sounds, we actually **saw** them: “And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar.” (*Sefer Shemot* 20:15) Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* (1934-1983) noted in his work, *The Living Torah*, that seeing sounds is a psychological phenomenon known as “synesthesia,” wherein the stimulation of one sense simultaneously triggers the response of another. While the coinage of this term is of relatively new vintage, Rav Kaplan notes that the unusual stimulus-response behavior found in our verse was already described in this manner by the *Midrash Mechilta* (circa 130 CE), Rashi (1040-1105), Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), and the Rambam (*Moreh HaNevuchim* I:46). It seems that the Sinaitic revelation was so powerful that one sense alone was incapable of processing its content; instead, we needed to employ multiple senses in an attempt to apprehend the meaning of this never-to-be repeated moment. In sum, it was a gift from Hashem, as if He said to us: “Hear, see, and palpably feel My presence in your midst, for I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt.”

The sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, while initially appearing to herald G-d's presence amongst us as the Judge on the Day of Judgment, is, in reality, representative of Hashem's beneficent and merciful kindness. *David Hamelech* (King David) gave voice to this concept in *Sefer Tehillim* 47:6: "G-d (*Elokim*) shall be exalted with the trumpet blast; the L-rd (*Hashem*), with the sound of the shofar." Herein, trumpets depict the manifestation of G-d (*Elokim*) among us, similar to the sound of these instruments announcing the arrival of an earthly king. Yet, when the Creator searches for and relates directly to the Jewish people, we find that He appears in the guise of Hashem, the *ba'al harachamim*, the ultimate master of compassion and mercy. King David recapitulated and reinforced this concept in a later verse in *Sefer Tehillim* 98:1: "With trumpets and the sound of a shofar, raise your voices before the King (*Melech*), the L-rd (*Hashem*)." A careful reading of this verse reveals that there is a direct one-to-one correspondence that obtains between "trumpets" and "the King," and "the sound of the shofar" and "the L-rd" (*Hashem*), that is, they form a parallel pair. Once again, the shofar is inextricably tied to the *middat harachamim* (quality of mercy), i.e. *Hashem*.

Our encounter with the *pasukim* (verses) from *Navi* (the Prophets), within the *Shofrot* section of the Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah, while simultaneously underscoring the theme of Hashem's mercy, introduces us to a new theme, namely, the fulfillment of Judaism's eschatological vision. The onset of this time is described by the prophet Yeshiyahu (18:3) in these terms: "All inhabitants of the world and dwellers of the earth, when a standard of the mountains is raised you shall see, and when a shofar is sounded you shall hear." In a later verse, he proclaims that the "great shofar" will sound on that day, and once again, the *middat harachamim* is front and center:

And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great shofar shall be sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and those exiled in the land of Egypt shall come and they shall prostrate themselves before the L-rd (*Hashem*) on the holy mount in Jerusalem. (27:13)

Let us now briefly summarize the essential concepts we have explored on our journey to understand the meaning of the shofar and the *Shofrot* section of Mussaf Rosh Hashanah:

- The shofar is a wake-up call to engage in *teshuvah*
- The shofar at Mount Sinai was both heard and seen
- The shofar is ultimately the representation of Hashem's merciful kindness
- The shofar heralds the fulfillment of Judaism's Messianic vision for all mankind

With Hashem's help, may this be the year "when a shofar is sounded and we shall all hear," and see the realization of Hashem's kingdom on earth. As Zechariah the prophet declared so long ago: "And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one." (14:9) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shanah tovah u'metukah

Tizku l'shanim rabot

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