

Becoming Fluent in Shofar-ese, 5763

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One of the unique ritual practices that separate the month of Elul from the other months of the Jewish calendar is the regular sounding of the Shofar each morning after Shacharit. A full set of notes --- Tekiah (one long, unmodulated sound), Shevarim (three wails), Teruah (nine sobs), finally followed by another Tekiah --- run the gamut of possibilities that we have been commanded to either sound, or at least listen to, on Rosh HaShana proper.

Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapt. 46, is cited by most Halachic decisors as the earliest source for this practice. This Midrash notes that when Moshe was summoned to climb Mt. Sinai yet again in order to receive the replacement Tablets for those that he broke when confronted with the people's idolatrous worship of the golden calf, it was Rosh Chodesh Ellul. "God said to Moshe, 'Ascend to Me, to the mountain, and cause the Shofar to be sounded throughout the encampment indicating that you are upon the mountain, so that they will not sin again by engaging in idolatry.' And simultaneous with the blasts of that Shofar, God's Presence manifested Itself upon the mountain, as it is said (Tehillim 47:6) 'God is Gone Up with a Teruah, the Lord with the sound of the Shofar.'"

The Midrash suggests two different associations that should come to mind when we hear the blasts of the Shofar, whether during Ellul, on Rosh HaShana or even at the end of Yom HaKippurim.

On the one hand, the Shofar reminds us not to ever assume that we have been completely abandoned, either by our leaders or even by God Himself. It was out of a sense of insecurity and desperation that the Jews turned to making a Golden Calf; his failure to descend from the mountain at the end of their erroneous counting of forty days led the Jews to jump to the conclusion that Moshe was never returning to them, and that they would now have to fend for themselves. This feeling of panic in turn caused them to forget the newly learned lessons of the Ten Commandments regarding the centrality of monotheism, and to revert back to the idolatrous beliefs and practices with which they were familiar from their Egyptian experience. Due to the spiritual immaturity of the Jewish people, coupled with the negative influence exerted by the Mixed Multitude, they were unable to maintain their spiritual link with, their memories of Moshe, during his physical absence from them. Sounding the Shofar was intended to jar their memories and keep in mind lessons learned. We too can find ourselves in a similar state of mind to that of the Jews standing at the foot of Sinai, bereft of their leader and guide. Our parents, our teachers, our role models will not be with us forever in their physical form. We have them for varying finite amounts of time, during which we are expected to gain as much as we can from them practically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. But the time will usually come, sooner or later, when they will be with us only in spirit and memory. Just as the Shofar blasts during Ellul reminded the people then that Moshe and his teachings must remain very much with them, regardless of his physical presence and availability, similar sentiments should be experienced by us when we hear the Shofar blown today.

But the Midrash does not confine the association of the Shofar blasts to thoughts about Moshe; the verse in Tehillim cited above focuses on God's Presence and Ascendancy, and therefore insists that when we hear the Shofar, God must be very much on our minds. VaYikra Rabba 29:3 presents an evocative counterpoint between contrasting schema linking God and Shofar. "Yehuda beRabbi Nachman would open up his discourse by invoking the verse 'God --- Elokim --- is Gone Up with a Teruah, the Lord --- HaShem --- with the sound of the Shofar.' While Elokim (the Name for God associated with judgement) is associated with Teruah, the wailing, sobbing sounds made by the Shofar, signifying God's Being Seated on the throne of judgment, nevertheless when Jews pick up their Shofrot and they sound the Tekiah before the Divine, He (Elokim) Rises from the throne of judgment and Repositions Himself (HaShem) on the throne of mercy, Becomes Filled with compassion for them and Replaces the Attribute of Justice with the Attribute of Mercy. When does all of this take place? During the seventh month, i.e., Tishrei." When the symbolic focus

is placed upon God in terms of Shofar blasts, the different sounds are associated with different lenses through which our actions, behaviors and entire lives are evaluated. An ebb-and-flow relationship is indicated, Tekiah --- Compassion --- both preceding and following Teruah --- Judgement. While we might have to stand judgment, we fervently believe that ultimately, compassion and mercy will prevail.

Thoughts and associations can certainly be experienced on Rosh HaShana; however ChaZaL by legislating that the Shofar is to be blown throughout the month of Ellul, felt it important that we be given the opportunity to contemplate how we are not alone and God's Compassion for us an entire month prior to the Day of Judgement itself.

Come to Shacharit, listen to the Shofar and be inspired.

Shana Tova!