

Rosh Hashana – Day 1: The Truth Behind Shofar

Intro: In my mind, living an integrated torah lifestyles means several things:

It means trying to integrate torah into the sociological/cultural/educational/physical/secular world in which we live, but it also means to make the torah lifestyles or Judaic experiences that we have integrated, meaning enriched with intentionality.

- *(see the list of educational programs within the framework of this year's adult education initiative, "An Integrated Torah Lifestyle" in the Adult Education section of the website)*

So here we are on rosh hashana, about to blow shofar. Shofar for many of us is viscerally meaningful, but enigmatically inexplicable at the same time.

On Shabbos we presented the idea that shofar is the catalyst for transforming the day from abject trepidation to a day triumphant coronation.

1. How does the shofar do that? How does blow air into a horn that goes [dooooo!] accomplish that incredible spiritual transition! Simply put, or if you weren't there on Shabbos – Why do we blow shofar?

Is it magic!

2. Secondly, even if we blow shofar – why do we pray shofar?

-We'll daven *Musaf* in a few minutes and include, as always, the 3 main sections of RH:

Malchiyot, Zechronot, and Shofrot

I understand davening about Hashem being our King.

I understand davening about Hashem knowing and remembering everything and asking him to remember the covenant and history of our relationship with Him.

But why daven about shofar? What are we saying? I'm a shofar? *Can I please be the ba'al tokei'a next year?* What is the shofar section of our davening today?!

We'll have 1 more question later on, so stay tuned.

Let's start from question 1:

-Gemara R"H/Rambam – There is no reason for shofar “ein shofar taam kol ikar”: “Rachmana amar tik'u”

-R' Bentzion Firer, mid-20th century Rabbi who made Aliyah from Europe, part of defining Israel as the center of the world's torah learning in the first generation of post-WWII, explains that the essential nature of the mitzvah of shofar is that it has no reason. As the verse from tehillim that we recite in the repetition of musaf– ki *Chok* l'yisrael hu – it is a *Chok* for Israel.

What is a *Chok*?

A *Chok* is a mitzvah whose nature is reality - - rather than a mitzvah whose nature is discovery. It is a mitzvah we do not “understand” and therefore must accept as reality. The parah adumah is necessary for ritual purification. Reality. When we hear the shofar and get that feeling, we don't know why, but we know we feel it. Reality. There is no value in trying to analyze it.

Mishpat by contrast is not only a mitzvah that we can understand the essential nature of, but also a mitzvah that has the quality of justice and discernment, where a judge or “shofet” can determine how to adjudicate and decide on the implementation of the mitzvah.

Mishpat begs us to act and *Chok* begs us to heed.

But the verse in tehillim concludes *Mishpat* l'Elokei Yaakov. So shofar is fundamentally a *Chok*, but there is a rationale in the development of that idea – how can it both?!

As we will see, every aspect of the mitzvah of shofar reflects this nature of shofar on rosh hashana as the quintessential symbol of *Chok*, and it is by *Mishpat*, by analyzing the laws of shofar that we will be able to show and understand the nature of shofar as a *Chok*

1. First we have the experience of the mitzvah. One accomplishes the mitzvah by **hearing** the shofar, not by blowing the shofar. Despite being required to blow the shofar, the halacha is clear that the bracha is *l'shmo'a* kol shofar – to hear, not blow the shofar and the only reason for the obligation to blow the shofar is so that it can be heard.

The mitzvah is meant to engage our capacity to listen to Hashem – it's a huge avodah, challenge, especially for those of us living an integrated torah lifestyle...

With an isolated torah lifestyle, anything perceived as dissonant with torah is discarded immediately. We, on the other hand don't only live in the world, work in the world, play in the world – we imbibe much of the cultural mores of the world. We are deeply impacted by 21st century American culture and values.

Throughout the year we grapple with parts of Judaism we don't understand, statements in the torah that give us pause, and live with a tremendous amount of secular influence. And our usual approach is *Mishpat*. We grapple and struggle - at our strongest, and are apathetic and cynical - at our weakest.

We are experts at *Mishpat*, at analyzing and scrutinizing ourselves and other. We are far less proficient at accepting, taking a deep breath and accepting ourselves, others, reality.

On rosh hashana, Hashem gives us the mitzvah of shofar and compels us to listen. Just listen. Accept Hashem as the epitome of truth. Don't demand evidence, don't be apathetic or cynical, don't even struggle or grapple. Just truth – Hashem Echad, Ushmo Echad.

2. It is for this reason – or rather lack of reason – that we use a ram's horn invoking the akeidah, when Avraham accepted the tremendous test, going against every positive cultural impulse, without a word of *Mishpat*, without the court case he presents when he argues with Hashem on behalf of Sedom. Avraham accepts, goes through with the Binding of Isaac and comes out with a shofar. As the symbol of the resolution and reassurance that when we do that, when we listen, blindly, things will be ok.

3. That's (perhaps) why we take this instrument from the side of the animals head, next to the ear almost like a physical manifestation of listening.

4. That's why, the gemara in rosh hashana says that we use a bent horn and not a straight one, because it is us who bend our will to Hashem's.

5. That's we don't use a cracked shofar, because in this moment our will to listen to heed is whole and unhindered.

6. That's why we can only use one shofar, you can't use multiple shofars, even that'll be louder or prettier – because there is only One to whom we heed.

7. That's why there's a section of tefilla called shofrot – **the perfect time to pray, the perfect perspective from which to pray as we stand in judgment is from the perspective of a shofar observing Jew** – a Jew who says, I don't understand, I don't know if I deserve, I just want to do what You want from me – **I want to be a better listener. Help me listen. As You judge me, know that I want to listen.**

Our third and final quandary goes back to our initial vision of an integrated torah lifestyle and supposes that an integrated torah lifestyle alludes as well to integrity - intellectual and spiritual integrity.

And here we have a big problem...

The yamim noraim seem backwards. If you were going to make a holiday of repentance and holiday of coronation – wouldn't it go the other way?

The gemara (RH 16b) says that we are judged on rosh hashana by our behavior on rosh hashana – not the whole previous year, but just today.

If the trial on rosh hashana and the sentencing on yom kippur – so why are we not saying vidui right now – it should be all teshuva tefilla tzedakah and no malchiyot zechronot and shofrot?!

Is it a farce? Perhaps it's hard to feel the gravity and dread of the days of awe, because it's actually a farce – we all know we're going to be fine. We're only judged for how we are today!

וא"ר יצחק אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר

As we read this morning in the leining

בראשית כא, יז) כי שמע אלהים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם)

We haven't even repented yet and we're having the coronation celebration – so we don't get judged on what we did during the year, only on the timbre of our performance in the court room?!

If we want to be genuine in our repentance and coronation, should we put the fast-day first and the celebration second? And shouldn't we be judged not just based on how we behave in the court room?!

The answer goes back to what shofar is at it's core. The quintessential *Chok*.

Shofar represents authentic desire to listen to Hashem and that desire can overpower...

Except for one thing... the gemara does give a reason for shofar. Right before making that outlandish statement about getting judged only based on rosh hashana the gemara says that we blow shofar "*kdei l'arbeiv et haSatan*" because it mixes up the Satan.

It's so peculiar, the gemara doesn't say the shofar confuses the Satan when we blow it before going to war, to commence the yovel, or even at sinai – why on rosh hashana does the same shofar blast all of a sudden confuse the satan? Because the act of blowing the shofar - listening to the shofar - hearing the shofar - so poignantly symbolizes devotion, reflects devotion, even creates devotion, that it locks the doors to the court room – the prosecuting Satan is barred entry, how can he make a case if the devotion is so palpable that it inherently uproots and disqualifies his argument.

With this, we finally understand the gemara's statement that we are judged based on our performance in the court room on rosh hashana. When the shofar becomes a symbol of our genuinely desired devotion to Hashem, our openness to the reality that is God, and our

willingness to heed His Will... It transforms us into a truer, deeper version of ourselves – one that is devoted to Hashem, in line and aligned with the Will of Hashem. Just like that – there is no more trial – there is only openness, only our desire to serve Hashem, to be who He wants us to be because He’s our Father, our Creator.

Rosh Hashana comes before Yom Kippur because it’s a plea bargain, symbolized by the shofar. This devotion makes trial and judgment unnecessary.

As the navi yechezkel 33 says, trial and judgment are not desired by Hashem – Hashem wants us to just come, be close, to accept His reality, His Presence, His word. That’s Hashem’s priority – that’s His goal.

If you walk away from this drasha it’s one thing: **The shofar is the lynchpin of Rosh Hashana, the shofar has the power to end the trial. If we are open; if we hear the shofar and want with every fiber of our being to accept and be who Hashem wants us to be, the trial ends immediately.**

It is through this inspired understanding that we embody the verse recited by the *baal tokei’a - ashrei ha’am yode’a terua* –becoming the joyous nation who know the truth of the shofar.

Those who understand the meaning behind shofar, who understand that shofar is about *not needing a reason when it comes to Hashem* – it is we who can be elated in knowing, in feeling, in experiencing the transformation of shofar and pray that Hashem too accepts this plea deal.

Let’s be *yod’ei terua* – let’s be open, let’s accept the Will and word of the Almighty, through the sound of the shofar and may our trial be turned into a coronation celebration.