



The Sound of My Thoughts

BY DAVID OLIVESTONE

I often hear people talk about the awakening power of the sound of the shofar—how awesome a moment, how inspiring an experience it is for them.

From the perspective of one who blows the shofar, the *ba'al tekiyah*, it is even more than that. No other mitzvah resembles it in the way it is carried out. No other mitzvah entails such high drama. And, at least for me, no other mitzvah renders quite the same sense of achievement and fulfillment. Blowing the shofar in shul on Rosh Hashanah is the high point of my year.

Being a *ba'al tekiyah* is at the same time a very public and an intensely personal experience. As I stand on the bimah, it is as if I am quite alone, concentrating intently on what I have to do; yet I am also highly conscious of being surrounded by hundreds of people who are relying on my ability to enable them to fulfill the central mitzvah of the day.

This tension echoes the two aspects that are involved in a congregation's choice of a *ba'al tekiyah*. On the one hand, he must be technically proficient; on the other, the congregation must have confidence in him as an individual who is suited to shoulder the task.* The *Shulchan Aruch* offers no

guidelines as to what character traits one should look for in a *ba'al tekiyah*. But the *Mishnah Berurah* (*Orach Chaim* 585:1:2) notes that while he should be a fitting person, it is far more important that the choice should not create any conflict.

It is only this insistence of the *Mishnah Berurah* that the choice be made without rancor that allows someone like me to presume that I might be suitable. And so I have told the rabbi of each shul where I have blown the shofar that I do so solely because I am technically very proficient, and I hope that that will be enough for the shul to place its confidence in me.

Stories abound about rabbis and *rebbe*s interviewing potential *ba'alei tekiyah*. In one, many righteous members of the community pass before Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, each one assuring him of his expertise in the *kavanot* (the mystical meanings of the shofar's significance, on which the *ba'al tekiyah* is supposed to concentrate as he blows). One simple Jew, however, tells the rabbi that such secrets are beyond him. But, he has four daughters of marriageable age, and while blowing the shofar, he would be begging God to send *shidduchim* for them. He got the job.

Certainly, as the *ba'al tekiyah* says the *berachot*, he must be actively thinking of the fact that what he is doing is carrying out the mitzvah of *tekiat shofar*, both for himself and for all those who are listening; without this awareness, no one is *yotzei* (fulfills the mitzvah). But as I start to blow, all my thoughts evaporate and I am left just hoping that, despite my nerves, the notes will come

out as perfectly as they did when I practiced throughout the month of Elul.

Yet there comes a point—for me it's usually during the set of notes following *Malchuyot* (the first section of the Mussaf Amidah)—when, if things are going well, the shofar seems almost to blow itself. This is a phenomenon that other *ba'alei tekiyah* have told me that they, too, experience. My colleague at the Orthodox Union, Andrew Goldsmith (director of Financial Resource Development), for example, tells me that sometimes he has to ask his wife after shul how his *tekiot* sounded, because he simply doesn't "hear" them himself.

Being in control of the shofar's power is an extraordinary privilege and responsibility. Sometimes I think that the next *tekiyah* or *shevarim* could be the one that carries the congregation's *tefillot* soaring to the heavens. Sometimes I pray that this wordless animal sound that I am producing will have the ability to take the place of the unspoken prayers, those that words are inadequate to express.

I will not deny that I enjoy the *yasher ko'achs* (congratulations) and handshakes that are offered to me as I come down from the bimah after the last *tekiyah gedolah*. And what am I thinking at this point, when it's all over? That in just one year, with God's help, I will get to do it again. **IA**

* I refer to the *ba'al tekiyah* here as a male, because it is men who blow the shofar in shul. However, women may blow shofar for themselves. See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 589:6.

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