

The Sound of My Prayers

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

“It Shall Be a Day of Sounding the Shofar for You.” (Bemidbar 29:1)

Most of us fulfill the mitzvah of *tekiat shofar* by passively listening to the *ba'al tekiyah*. But is listening to the shofar really as passive as it seems? During this sacred, spiritual experience, as we stand there listening attentively, the shofar sounds are meant to elicit certain inner responses from us. I would like to suggest three different ideas one should contemplate during shofar blowing to help make the experience more spiritually meaningful.

A discussion in the Talmud concerns whether or not *mitzvot tzerichot kavanah*, *mitzvot* require intention. I translate *kavanah* as “intention” rather than “concentration” or “attention,” because this particular Talmudic discussion centers on to what degree one must *intend* to fulfill a Divine commandment. (The halachic conclusion is that *kavanah* is required for a mitzvah that is Biblical—as opposed to rabbinic—in origin.) Thus, an essential component of fulfilling the mitzvah of hearing the shofar is to have in mind, just prior to hearing the sounds, that one is about to fulfill a Biblical commandment. Some people actually recite words to that

effect. While verbal expression of intent is not necessary, one should have the mental awareness that he or she is about to fulfill a *mitzvah*.


Rambam provides us with a second means for making listening to the shofar a spiritually elevating experience. In *Hilchot Teshuvah*, he writes: “Even though *tekiat shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a Biblical decree [whose full meaning

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is not revealed], its meaning is hinted at, as if to say, ‘Wake up, you who slumber, from your slumber, and you who sleep, wake up from your sleep. And search your deeds, and return in repentance, and remember your Creator. Those of you who are forgetful of the truth because of the distractions of the times and who are preoccupied all of your lives with vanity and emptiness, which accomplish nothing and do not bring deliverance, introspect and improve your ways and your deeds....’” One

should therefore try to envision the sounds of the shofar as a wakeup call, which should prod one into serious introspection and repentance.

Finally, many rabbinic authorities have viewed the piercing sounds of the shofar as a kind of nonverbal prayer. The wailing shofar sounds give expression to ideas and thoughts that cannot be expressed through ordinary speech. The nonverbal components of prayer—the prayers of the inner being—which are deeper than language and cannot be contained by words, are exemplified through the sounds of the shofar. Therefore, to enhance the spiritual intensity of the experience, one should try to relate the sounds emanating from the shofar with one’s private, inexpressible nonverbal prayers.

Indeed the *berachah*, the blessing of *shofarot*, which is a vital component of the Mussaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah, ends with the expression, “Blessed are You, O God, who listens to the sound of the *teruah* of His people, Israel, with mercy.” Shofar, then, is a form of prayer, and this attitude of prayerfulness should characterize the experience of listening to the shofar. 

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