

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



ROSH HASHANA

Blast from the Past?

The New Year is coming! The New Year is coming! Jewish holidays tend to have a tense period of preparation. Think Pesach cleaning, or the incremental mourning preceding Tish'a b'Av, which isn't even from the Torah. But there's a certain flair to the run up to Rosh HaShana. First, we try to wake you up to its approach by blowing Shofar every morning for a month, and then (at least for Ashkenazim) we sleep-deprive you with Slichot at 'unGodly' hours the week or so before the event.

But it's the Shofar blowing I find most fascinating, because, to a certain extent, that's the central observance of the day. I mean, we avoid eating Matza for a month before Pesach (some of us are very strict and avoid it all year, JK). Why with the Shofar is it fine and, even, customary, to allow its appearance before the holiday? As a Shofar blower for over half a century, I did appreciate the practice, but that's not the intent.

I think that the Shofar is such a complex symbol that we are supposed to begin thinking about it before the actual performance of the

Mitzva on Rosh HaShana. Those 'simple' notes carry a lot of meaning and nuance, and our Sages, I believe, want us thinking about its message for a while before we fulfill the obligation. So, let's take a look at some of the possible messages in the Shofar blasts.

There is way too much material on this topic for any one article, but I'm going to approach this matter from one very specific vantage point to fathom at least part of the Shofar's significance, and that starting point is a verse from Psalm 81, the Psalm for Thursdays and, according to the Vilna Gaon, the Psalm for Rosh HaShana:

Blow the Shofar at the time of newness; on the covered date is our festival (T'hilim 81:4).

There's a lot to unpack in the six (Hebrew) words of our verse. To avoid a lot of controversy (and some beautiful homiletics), we're going on the working assumption that our verse is exclusively discussing Rosh HaShana, the only Jewish holiday to coincide with Rosh Chodesh when the moon is KESSA (covered) and, therefore 'new' (CHODESH). So, on the P'SHAT (literal meaning) level, we're accepting that our verse is demanding that we blow Shofar on the one holiday which coincides with Rosh Chodesh, namely Rosh HaShana.

When we blow the Shofar we may feel like we are connecting with our glorious past as Shofarot blasted while we heard the Ten Commandments or as the walls of Yericho came 'atumbalin' down. However, the Ba'al Shem Tov explains that the BA'CHODESH in the verse doesn't refer to the moon and its phases, but to us. It implies that it is the person who must be 'new', or as he puts it: For a person must fulfill the Mitzva with love, and to experience it anew each and every time.

The Kedushat Levi is, I believe, building on this theme, when he declares: The more we serve Him, the more we will realize that we are just beginning to understand the immensity of God, Who called into existence the entire universe and keeps in constant touch with all His creatures... We see in the command to blow SHOFAR on Rosh HaShana, an 'invitation' to spiritually improve ourselves, the word SHOFAR comes from the root SHEFER (improve), personifying the concept of improving oneself... The fact that it is performed symbolically on New Year's points to the effect it has in renewing our commitment to God. The very idea that we need periodically to renew this commitment, suggests that we are still at the beginning of our spiritual ascent.

The S'fat Emet, I believe, was building on his Chasidic predecessors when he

visited our verse in 1873. He explained in the name of his grandfather (the Chidushei Ha'Rim, who raised him) that our verse is teaching a remarkable idea. The most fascinating idea in our verse is that a 'covered time' (Rosh Chodesh, when the moon is 'covered' , i.e. not visible) can also be a CHAG or festival. This goes against our norm! Most holidays and 'happy times' are on the fifteenth of the Hebrew month, when the moon is full. That extra light makes the night less scary.

The list is impressive: Sukkot, Pesach, Tu BiShvat, Purim, Tu b'Av, Pesach Sheni. Basically, half of the middle days in our Hebrew months are happy celebrations. But Rosh HaShana, the only Rosh Chodesh which can be called a YOM TOV, is the odd man out. It occurs at the Dark of the Moon.

So, what are we celebrating on this darkened night? That God (as per our Psalmist) could call a Yom Din (Day of Judgment, like every Rosh Chodesh, concerning which we say in the Rosh Chodesh Musaf: A day of KAPARA for all generations) CHAGEINU! If it's a YOM TOV it has SIMCHA (joy), and that SIMCHA comes from our confidence that God will forgive us, God's Children. This SIMCHA is new and happening now.

But I believe (at least this Rosh HaShana) that the best approach to

our verse was put forward by Rav Yehuda Amital, in the name of Rav Kook. Rav Amital points out that according to our Prophets, the Shofar will be heard at the time of the future redemption (May it speedily arrive! - Yishayahu 27:13). But in the UNTANEH TOKEF prayer we say that the Great Shofar blasts every year as part of the Great Judgment. The Shofar is neither the past nor the future: It is the NOW!

Rav Amital goes on to explain that the very purpose of Rosh HaShana is to return to the simplicity of the simple cry and wail of the Shofar, 'the cry of an infant', rather than the complicated wailing notes (SH'VARIM and T'RU'A).

RAv Amital points out the unusual order of the sources of the p'sukim in the three central brachot of the Musaf Amida of Rosh HaShana. The first set of p'sukim are from Torah. The second set are from K'tuvim, and the third set are from Nevi'im. That's not the order of TANACH. But if we look at the T'KI'OT (a.k.a P'SUTOT) that precede each broken sound, as coming from G-d, the switch in the order makes sense. Torah and Nevi'im are G-d's Words. K'tuvim are from the mouths (and pens) of people - corresponding to the broken sounds of human crying and wailing.

And in a kind of homage to Michaelangelo he declares: God

responds to us to the extent that we reach out to Him. If we hold out our finger towards Him, He will hold out His 'finger' towards us. But if we extend a whole hand, He will stretch out His whole 'hand' towards us.

Let's use this Rosh HaShana to reach out to God and cry as an infant. We might as well, because none of us know what's going on in the world anyway. Let's have a SHANA TOVA, full of peace and a return to 'normalcy'. Please, we need a Blast for our situation NOW! 🙏