

Rav Kook Torah



by Rabbi Chanan Morrison -
www.ravkooktorah.com

The T'shuva of Rosh HaShana

Summary: T'shuva begins with personal repentance and, like the widening shape of a shofar, expands to communal and universal recognition of God's sovereignty.

The major theme of the month of Elul and the High Holiday season is T'shuva – repentance and return to God. Yet if we examine the Rosh HaShana prayers, there is no mention of sin or penitence. We do not recite any confessional prayers, nor do we make any promises to improve. Instead, the Rosh HaShana prayers deal with a completely different theme: the entire world accepting God's sovereignty.

How does this aspiration fit in with the overall seasonal theme of T'shuva?

From My Straits

Before blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShana, we recite the verse from T'hilim:

From my straits I called out to God. He answered me, and set me in a wide expanse. (118:5)

The verse begins with narrow straits

(HAMEITZAR), and concludes with wide expanses (BAMERCHAV). What are these straits? These are our troubled, even suffocating, feelings of failure and disappointment with ourselves. However, with God's help we are able to escape to wide expanses. Our sense of confinement is eased and our emotional distress is alleviated.

This progression from the narrow to the wide is also a good physical description of the principal mitzva-object of Rosh HaShana – the Shofar, which gradually expands from a narrow mouthpiece to a wide opening.

From the Individual to the Community

Rav Kook, however, did not explain this progression from narrow to wide in a psychological vein. Rather, he likened it to the contrast between the P'RAT and the K'LAL, the individual and the collective. There are the narrow, private issues of the individual. And there are the broad, general concerns of the community and the nation.

T'shuva takes place on many levels. We all try to correct our own personal faults and failings. The nation also does T'shuva as it restores itself to its native land, renewing its language, culture, and beliefs. And the entire world advances as it learns to recog-

nize God's moral rule and sovereignty.

The Shofar, with its gradually widening shape, is a metaphor for these ever-expanding circles of repentance and spiritual progress. The order, however, is significant. Our individual T'shuva must precede the universal T'shuva of the K'LAL. During the month of Elul, we are occupied with rectifying our own personal faults and errors. But on Rosh HaShana our outlook broadens. We yearn for the T'shuva of the Jewish people and the ultimate repair of the entire universe. We aspire "to perfect the world under the reign of the Almighty, when all humanity will call out Your Name" (from the Aleinu prayer in Musaf of Rosh HaShana). From the narrow straits of personal limitations, we progress to the wide expanses of universal perfection.

*Silver from the Land of Israel.
Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah, p. 60*