

# New Year and Shofar: Vital Lessons

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What is the significance of the *Shofar*? Its primary focus is its blasts blown during our prayers on Rosh Hashana. We also have the custom to blow it each morning during the month of Elul. This month precedes the month of Tishrei, the first day of which is Rosh Hashana.

During this month of Elul, the *Shofar* is to act as a wake-up call; “Uru Yesheinim Mei Shinaschem; awaken you slumberers from your sleep.” At this crucial time when we are soon to be judged for life, prosperity, and health, the *Shofar* alerts us to our impending judgment.

We are to arouse ourselves, waking up from our routine activities and backsliding during this past year. We are to examine ourselves, search out our flaws, and respond with a renewed strengthening of Torah values and actions. But why use a *Shofar*? What is its significance?

## **Purpose of the Blasts**

We learn that the blasts of the *Shofar* are meant to resemble the weeping and sobbing of Sisra’s mother. This is why we have long and short blasts, as weeping takes on different types of cries.

Sisra’s mother awaited her son’s return from battle.(Judges 5). Sisra delayed in returning. Sisra’s mother assumed he was dividing great booty, so this must have taken time. But later, her assumption of good slowly turned towards reality, and she realized he must have perished at war. Her sobbing was a response to recognizing reality. The *Shofar* blasts are to make us associate to Sisra’s mother’s sobbings: her return to reality.

We too must return to reality, that is, returning to a life of Torah. This is enforced by Rosh Hashana, a day when we direct our attention to God’s exclusive role as King, Who knows all our thoughts and actions and Who rules the entire world.

During our last prayer on Yom Kippur—*Neila*—we say, “so that we may disengage from the oppression of our hands.” Our daily activities of work, family and other pursuits distract us from what our true focus must be: the study and application of God’s Torah system.

Talmud Rosh Hashana 26b teaches that a *Shofar* used for Rosh Hashanna must be bent, not straight. This is to resemble man’s “bent” state of mind: he is bent over in humility. This presents a contrast: God is King, but we are His Creations. Our undistorted recognition of God’s role as our Creator and King, results in our sense of humility.

## **The *Shofar* at Mount Sinai**

We find the *Shofar* associated with many events. The *Shofar* waxed increasingly louder at Sinai when God gave us His Torah: "And it was that the sound of the *Shofar* went and grew increasingly loud... (Exod. 19:19)." Why was *Shofar* integral to Sinai? Sinai was also much earlier than Sibra. Does Sinai's *Shofar* convey a different idea than sobbing? It would seem sobbing is unrelated to Sinai. What does Sinai's *Shofar* teach us?

Rashi states that it is the custom of man that when he blows for a long period, the sound gets increasingly weaker and more faint. But at Sinai, the sound grew increasingly louder. Rashi clearly indicates the lesson of *Shofar* is to teach that man did not orchestrate this event. *Shofar* at Sinai reflects the Creator's presence. Why was this lesson required at Sinai?

Perhaps the very act of accepting the Torah is synonymous with our recognition that this Torah is God's ideas. Only such an appreciation will drive our studies towards answers, which resonate with absolute truth.

God's knowledge is the only absolute truth. Truth is the purpose of Torah study. Torah was therefore given with the sound of the *Shofar*, embodying this idea. Rashi also mentioned that the sound of the *Shofar* on Sinai "breaks the ears." This means it carries great impact. Why was this quality of "sound" necessary? The miracles alone proved God's existence!

There is one difference between a sound and a visual: sound is perceived unavoidably. You cannot "hide" your ears. Turning away from a vista removes it from view, but this is inapplicable to sound, certainly a loud sound.

It would appear that besides the grand spectacle of Sinai ablaze, when receiving the Torah, the Jews required uninterrupted attention. The *Shofar* blast kept them attentive to the divine nature of this event.

## **Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac**

Talmud Rosh Hashana 16a: "Rabbi Abahu said, 'God says blow before Me with a ram's horn, so that I may recall for you the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham, and I will consider it upon you as if you bound yourselves before Me.'" Since the ram is what Abraham offered in place of Isaac, our blasts of the ram's horn are to recall this event before God.

It is clear from this Talmudic statement that Rosh Hashana demands a complete devotion to God: we must render ourselves as if bound on the altar, like Isaac. We accomplish this via our *Shofar* blasts.

This act attests to our commitment to Abraham's sacrifice. We gain life in God's eyes by confirming Abraham's perfection. We follow his ways. This merit grants us life. The lesson of Abraham is not to end when Rosh Hashana ends. This holiday's purpose is to redirect our focus from the mundane, to a lasting cognizance of God's presence and role as Creator. He is to occupy our thoughts throughout the year: "*Bechol Deracheha, Daeihu, VeHu Yiyasheir Orchosecha*; In all your ways, know Him, and he will make straight your paths (Proverbs, 3:6)."

Why is the binding of Isaac central to the theme of Rosh Hashana? There were many instances where great people sacrificed themselves in the name of God? Let us take a closer look at that event.

When Abraham was instructed to sacrifice his son Isaac, and was subsequently commanded not to do so, he found a ram caught in the bushes:

*"And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and behold, he saw a ram, after it was caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a completely burned sacrifice in place of his son" (Gen. 22:13).*

Why did Abraham feel he was to offer the ram "in place" of Isaac; this was not requested of him?

Sforno suggests that Abraham understood the presence of the ram as an indication that it was to be sacrificed: a replacement for Isaac. It appears from Sforno, that God wished Abraham to "replace" his initial sacrifice of Isaac.

It also appears from Sforno that Abraham wished to fulfill the perfect act of sacrifice, although subsequently he had been instructed not to kill Isaac. Yet, Abraham wished to express the perfection of adherence to God's command. Therefore, God prepared this ram.

Ethics of the Fathers 5:6 teaches that this ram was one of the ten miracles created at sunset on the sixth day of Creation. This clearly teaches that God intended this ram to be offered. Why was it so essential that Abraham offer this ram?

A close friend suggested the following insightful answer:

Abraham was not "relieved" when subsequently, he was commanded not to slaughter his precious Isaac. The sacrifice of the ram displays a subtle, yet important lesson about Abraham. Abraham did not remove his attention from God, once he had his son back. Only someone on a lesser level of perfection would suddenly be overcome with joy that his son would remain alive with him, and then indulge that emotion with no attention to anything else.

But Abraham's perfection didn't allow such a diversion from the entire purpose of the binding

of Isaac. Although commanded not to kill Isaac, Abraham's attention and love was still completely bound up with God.

This is where Abraham's energies were before the sacrifice, and afterwards, when his only son was spared. Offering the ram teaches us that Abraham never removed his thoughts from God, even at such a moment when others would certainly indulge in such joy.

Abraham did not rejoice in Isaac's life, more than he rejoiced in obeying God. The ram teaches us this. Abraham remained steadfast with God. Abraham's perfection was twofold: 1) he was not reluctant to obey God, at any cost, and 2) nothing surpassed his attachment to God.

### **Maimonides on the Binding of Isaac**

Maimonides discusses the significance of Abraham's binding of Isaac. I will record his first principle:

*The account of Abraham our father binding his son, includes two great ideas or principles of our faith. First, it shows us the extent and limit of the fear of God. Abraham is commanded to perform a certain act, which is not equaled by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses everything that can be done, and belongs to the class of actions, which are believed to be contrary to human feelings.*

*He had been without child, and had been longing for a child; he had great riches, and was expecting that a nation should spring from his seed. After all hope of a son had already been given up, a son was born unto him. How great must have been his delight in the child! How intensely must he have loved him!*

*And yet, because he feared God, and loved to do what God commanded, he thought little of that beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and consented to kill him after a journey of three days.*

*If the act by which he showed his readiness to kill his son had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the Divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of God.*

*There is no necessity to look for the presence of any other idea or of anything that might have affected his emotions. For Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God might slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is*

*man's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment. We have repeatedly explained this.*

*The angel, therefore, says to him, "For now I know," etc. that is, from this action, for which you deserve to be truly called a God-fearing man, all people shall learn how far we must go in the fear of God. This idea is confirmed in Scripture. It is distinctly stated that one sole thing, fear of God, is the object of the whole Law with its affirmative and negative precepts, its promises and its historical examples, for it is said,*

*"If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, the Lord thy God," etc. (Deut. Xxviii. 58).*

*This is one of the two purposes of the 'Akedah' (sacrifice or binding of Isaac).*

Maimonides teaches that the binding of Isaac, represented by the ram's horn, displays man's height of perfection, where he sacrifices what he loves most, his only son, for the command of God. *Shofar*, the ram's horn, thereby conveys the idea of the most devoted relationship to God.

We now understand why Rosh Hashanna focuses on the *Shofar* as a central command. It is on Rosh Hashanna that we focus not on God's miracles, salvation or laws. Rather, we focus on God alone. This means, a true recognition of His place in our minds, as King. He is our Creator, Who gave us existence, the greatest gift.

Abraham's sacrifice is the ultimate expression of man apprehending the idea of God, and loving God. Not the idea of God Who saves, heals, or performs miracles, but more primary, as Creator.

## **Shofar and the Jubilee**

Another area requires *Shofar*, the Jubilee year. This is the 50th year in the Hebrew calendar. After the *Shofar* is blown, all slaves are set free, and all lands returns to their original inheritors apportioned by Joshua upon his initial conquest of Israel. What is the role of *Shofar* in the Jubilee?

Additionally, the *Shofar* on Rosh Hashanna is derived from the Jubilee *Shofar*. We are to use the same *Shofar* on Rosh Hashanna as we use on the Jubilee. It would seem counter intuitive. Doesn't the day of Rosh Hashanna have more significance than a day, which occurs only once every 50 years? Why is the *Shofar* of Rosh Hashanna derived from some area, which on the surface seems less significant?

Maimonides states that once the *Shofar* is blown, there is a pause until ten days later, Yom

Kippur. Although free, slaves remain in the domain of their masters on those 10 days. Why do they not go free immediately upon the conclusion of the *Shofar* blast?

The Jubilee year teaches us yet another facet in recognizing God as Creator: man's "ownership" (slaves and land) is a mere fabrication. In truth, God owns everything. He created everything. Our ownership during our stay here is not absolute. We learn from the release of slaves and return of the land, that ownership follows God's guidelines. It is a means by which we again come to the realization of God's role as our Master.

Perhaps Rosh Hashana is derived from the Jubilee for good reason. The Jubilee attests to a more primary concept: God as Creator. Rosh Hashana teaches us that God judges man, but this is based on the primary concept that God is Creator. Our recognition of God's judgment must be preceded by our knowledge of His role as Creator. Therefore, Rosh Hashanah's *Shofar* is derived from the Jubilee's *Shofar*.

Why don't slaves go free immediately after the sounding of the *Shofar* blast? If slaves would be freed, their freedom during the entire ten-day period would eclipse their repentance. The law is perfect: masters cannot work these slaves anymore for fear of their preoccupation with ownership, and slaves cannot leave their masters homes, for fear that they would be self-absorbed in their new found freedom. Both, master and slave must focus on God's role as King during these ten Days of Repentance.

## **Summary**

In all our cases, we learn that *Shofar* has one common theme: the recognition of God as our Creator. This recognition was essential for the Jews' acceptance of Torah, for our acceptance of God as the true Judge, and for us to view God as the absolute "Owner."

Abraham expressed the zenith of man's love of God, so this event of the binding of Isaac is remembered, and reenacted via our *Shofar* blasts. As a Rabbi once said, God created everything, so there must be great knowledge in all we see. I refer to our command of *Shofar*.