

Rosh Hashanah: Tekiat Shofar

Introduction and Inspiration

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I want to start off by telling you a story. When I was growing up there a girl in our shul, a couple years older than me, who got engaged to a really great guy, a frum boy, a real *ben Torah*, who had an interesting journey, an interesting story of how he had gotten there. He had grown up in a *frum* home, had enlisted in the Israeli army, and when he was done with his Tzahal service he decided, like many of his friends, to spend some time in Mumbai, India. He wanted to recover from the intensity of war before moving on with the rest of his life. Sadly, it was only a matter of months before he had entirely abandoned religion - there was no more Shabbat, *kashrut*. He was living with his girlfriend and he would spend most of his days and nights partying in Mumbai.

One night he is out with his girlfriend and they are sitting in an outdoor bar. He hears a sound. At first, he does not recognize that sound and then it hits him - that's the sound of a shofar. He looks around and he sees on the street corner in downtown Mumbai a Chabad rabbi blowing a shofar. He thinks to himself, "Oh my gosh, today must be Rosh Hashanah." He runs up to the rabbi and he asks, "Is today Rosh Hashanah?" and the rabbi confirms that yes, in fact, it is. He looks at the sky, sees the sun setting and realizes the entire day went by and he did not even know.

He is shaken up. He runs back to his room, packs up his bags and he returns to Israel. He enrolls in yeshiva in Israel, spends many years learning there, and is now a very serious *ben Torah* and a really *frum* person.

When I first heard that story I was just in awe of the power of the shofar. We always say that the shofar is a wakeup call to us and sometimes we do not see it, but in this story, so clearly it awakened this Jewish *neshama*. But I have to be honest that it is also a little disheartening because when I hear this story I also think, "Will I ever be able to tap into the sound of the shofar the way he did? When we hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, does it ignite passion within us? Does it inspire us to make those kinds of changes? What I'm hoping to do in the little time that we have together is explore a piece from the *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, which, hopefully at the end we will be able to say, yes, it can inspire us, it can change us, it can motivate us to make drastic changes in our own lives. So, let's begin.

Rav Hutner explains that the reason the shofar speaks to the heart and soul of a Jew is not because of its beautiful sound or its melodious tune, but because it reminds us of who we are and where we come from.

How does that work - how does the shofar remind us of that? When we blow the shofar, we remember a blow that happened on Rosh Hashanah, but thousands of years ago. According to the Midrash, Rosh Hashanah is not celebrating the first day of creation, but rather the sixth day of creation, the day when man was created. If we think about it, it actually makes a lot of sense, because, G-d creates this world and in the first five days, as beautiful as breathtaking and majestic as it is, it serves no purpose. But then on Day Six, when man comes along

everything changes. Now the world has meaning and purpose, because the world is the stage or the backdrop on which man can really get close to G-d.

So, if it's true that Rosh Hashanah celebrates the sixth day of creation, the day on which man was created, let's describe what happened on that day. We know that G-d mixes together some dirt, some water, makes some kind of amazing dough, forms it into a human being - shapes it arms, legs, a nose, a face - and then finally, at the culmination, *ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים*, *He blows into man a breath of life*. For this I like to imagine blowing up a balloon. If I take a deep breath and blow up a balloon, and now I look at that balloon. That air that's in that balloon, a few seconds ago, was in me. Meaning a piece of me, so to speak, is in the balloon. We can use this imagery to understand the Zohar's description of the creation – he explains that when G-d blew into us He blew part of Himself into us, *מאן דנפח מתוכו נפח*, when a person blows, he blows from within. Essentially, when G-d breathed life into Adam, He was infusing man with a piece of Godliness; G-d's breath, so to speak, was what gave man life.

And that, explains Rav Hutner, is why the words *neschama* (נשמה) a soul, and *neschima*, נשימה, a breath are so similar. Our *neschama* came into being through a *neschima*, a breath of G-d. It is interesting that the word in English, 'inspiration,' also comes from the day in Gan Eden when G-d inspired breath into man. It is the same idea.

On that Rosh Hashanah thousands of years ago in Gan Eden, someone was blowing, but that time it wasn't man blowing a shofar, it was G-d blowing life into man. Now, every year on Rosh Hashanah when we blow the shofar, we remember that first blowing, we remember *ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים*. And we cry out to Hashem and say Hashem, remember us! We are *חלק אלוקה ממעל*, we are a part of You and You are a part of

us! Some of You is in each of us. But in truth, we are not just reminding Hashem, we are reminding ourselves as well; we are using the shofar as an opportunity to really remember that there is Godliness in each of us, and because of that, we are capable of greatness. We can accomplish so, so much.

Based on all this, it is really not surprising that the day Rosh Hashanah is referred to in the Torah as *יום תרועה*, *a day of blowing*, because it is the blowing itself that is so significant. However, that being said, we also know that we are instructed to use a shofar - we can't just blow, we use a shofar to blow. If you think about it, what the shofar does is it takes that breath that we blow and it turns it into beautiful sounds, moving, powerful sounds. Breath without a shofar produces no sound just like a *neschama* without a body cannot really accomplish anything.

Let's go a little deeper about where this shofar comes from. We cannot just take any horn. It specifically has to be a horn from a ram. We all know that the reason for that is because that is what Avraham used at *עקידת יצחק*. He is about to sacrifice his only child and then something catches his eye: *וישא אברהם את-עיניו וירא והנה-איל*. *אחר נאחז בסבך בקרניו*. There is a ram caught in the thicket, and he can use this ram instead of Yitzchak; this is his golden ticket. The Midrash describes that this was not just any ram. This specific ram had been created during *ששת ימי בראשית*, *during the six days of creation*, with three very specific purposes:

- The first, it would be used at *Akeidat Yitzchak*.
- The second, one of its horns would be used at *Matan Torah*.
- And the third, the other horn would be used to announce the coming of *Mashiach*.

Then the *midrash* continues to describe that this ram, this designated ram, just kept getting stuck over and over. Avraham sees it in the thicket but that was not the first time it had gotten stuck. It was a little bit of a clumsy ram and it would get stuck and then it would get unstuck, and then it would get stuck again, and every time it would extract itself it, it would find itself in a another bush, another tree, stuck again. This ram had a very clear purpose in life. It was created during Creation and designated for greatness. All it wanted to do was accomplish its goal. But so much would get stuck in its way, and just when it would get itself untangled it would get stuck again. Hashem says so beautifully to Avraham in this midrash, כך עתידין בנחל להסתבך, *so too your children are going to get stuck over and over again*. We are no different than that clumsy ram. We are given a *neschama*, we are put here for a purpose, and all we really want to do is push ourselves toward that goal; to follow our dreams, our passions and make it to the finish line. We desire to follow our *neschama* and guidelines within each of us. But sometimes we get stuck. We get lost. We get distracted. There are lots of external influences out there, many things are pulling us in different directions, and sometimes we lose sight of who we really are and we forget that there's a piece of Godliness within us.

So, on Rosh Hashanah, when we blow the shofar, we remind ourselves, not just Hashem, of who we really are. We remember that blow of years ago when G-d breathed life into each of us, and in doing so, infused us with a piece of Godliness.

I want to end with a quick story, it's one of my husband's favorite stories. He often repeats it to our children at the Shabbat table. The story is told of Rabbi Yaakov Galinsky who was living in a labor camp in Siberia. At the time, he noticed that there was another inmate there who would wake up every single night in the middle of the night, and he would go under his bed, take out

his suitcase, take out a general's uniform, put this uniform on, march a few steps, salute himself in the mirror, march a few steps back to his bed, take off his uniform, put it back under his bed and put on his prisoner garb. This would happen night after night and finally one day, Rav Yaakov went up to him and he said, "I need to ask you, what is going on, what are you doing?" And the man said, "I don't know what you are talking about." And he said, "Don't lie to me, I see you every night, getting up, getting dressed in this uniform - what are you doing?" And the man finally said, "I am a high ranking Lithuanian general. I am not a prisoner who peels potatoes, cleans toilets and scrubs the floor. So every night I get dressed in uniform to remind myself of who I really am. So even if I spend the days cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, at the end of the day I remember that I am a high ranking official." Like the Lithuanian general, we sometimes also need to remind ourselves who we really are. We are not a clumsy ram, or a man lost in Mumbai wandering the streets for the next party. We are not prisoners scrubbing toilets. We are חלק ממעל אלוהים. There is a piece of G-d within each of us, a piece of G-d that dates back to that very first Rosh Hashanah when G-d breathed life into man, when he inspired Godliness into each of us.

My hope is that this year on Rosh Hashanah (and this year we only get one chance because the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat and we will only blow the shofar once) when we do blow the shofar that we can remember that blow, the purity of that day in Gan Eden, the potential of that day, and remember who we really are and let this be the year that we do not forget who we are.