

# THE FOCUS OF ROSH HASHANA

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

Rosh HaShana, the start of the New Year for the coming year 5760, begins at sundown, September 10, 1999. Rosh HaShana marks the beginning of a judgement period, during which G-d judges the entire world. This period concludes with Yom Kippur, on which G-d seals our fate for the coming year.

Understandably, Rosh HaShana is a very serious holiday. G-d is judging us, and our conduct must reflect the gravity of the situation. If we have not repented during Elul, the situation is extremely dire. The Talmud tells us that when the Torah says "Yom Teru'ah yihyeh lachem," "a day of trumpeting (the Shofar) should be for you," it means that it should be a day of speaking in trembled voice. The sounds of the Shofar are meant to sound like the crying and weeping that should be part of our quest for repentance.

R' Mordechai Berkowitz, in *Nof Mordechai*, writes that this explanation of sounding the Shofar does not seem to fit in with the entire holiday of Rosh HaShana. When a person cries to G-d, he is hoping that G-d will answer his prayers, and that he will get what he is requesting. Specifically during this season, people are requesting that they be forgiven and inscribed for a good year. However, we find few prayers for forgiveness during the entire Rosh HaShana services. In fact, we spend the Mussaf service, what we could properly call the high point of the day's services, proclaiming G-d as King, and discussing G-d's memory of and involvement in past events and the significance of the sound of the Shofar. Very little space is devoted to requesting anything from G-d. Apparently, the crying and sobbing the Talmud mentions is not the emphasis here. Therefore, what is the Shofar doing on Rosh HaShana?

The Rambam (Maimonides) writes in *Hilchos Teshuva* (Laws of Repentance) 3:4 that the commandment to sound the Shofar, although based in Tanach, has a reason behind it: to awaken those who have not repented. The Rambam is clearly saying that there is a connection between the Shofar and repentance. This follows with the statement of the Talmud that the Shofar reminds us of weeping.

Rav Berkowitz is troubled with this statement of the Rambam. First, commentators give many reasons why we blow the Shofar on Rosh HaShana. Yet, the Rambam picks only one, and ignores the rest. Why? Furthermore, the Rambam, in his compendium of laws, the *Yad HaChazakah*, usually does not give reasons behind the laws. Those are usually found in his more philosophical writing, the

*Moreh Nevuchim*." Why then does the Rambam give the reason behind blowing the Shofar here? Lastly, if the Rambam did want to give a reason for blowing the Shofar, why does he not give it when he discusses the laws of sounding the Shofar. It seems that would be more appropriate than here, in the laws of repentance.

The answer is that the Rambam is not telling us the reason why we blow the Shofar. The Rambam, while discussing the laws of repentance, points out an important fact. The sound of the Shofar carries with it a vital message regarding repentance. This fact is alluded to in Tanach, and is one we must remember while we are engaged in the repentance process. Consequently, the Rambam mentioned this fact about the Shofar where he did.

The emphasis of Rosh HaShana is clearly on proclaiming the kingship of G-d and his dominion over the entire world. Yes, Rosh HaShana begins the Ten Days of Repentance, and it is true that G-d judges us on Rosh HaShana. However, the first step that we take in this judgement process is proclaiming that we are the subjects of the One who is judging us. We recognize that we are the servants of the King of Kings who are supposed to perform His command faithfully. We sound the Shofar during the Mussaf service as part of the proclamation of G-d's kingship. This Shofar sound, however, most definitely carries with it other significance as well. The sound of the Shofar is the sound to inspire repentance. Proclaiming G-d as King is part of the repentance process. If on Rosh HaShana we truly and sincerely recognize that G-d is our King and that we may not have properly fulfilled our duties as His subjects, we have started down the road of repentance. Rosh HaShana is the day on which our focus is on the Kingship of G-d. The day on which the focus is crying and repentance is Yom Kippur. The sound of the Shofar carries with it much significance. Just as it heralds G-d's rule, so too does it inspire repentance. It is this latter fact that we must remember while we proclaim the former. If we keep these facts in perspective, we will all have achieved our task on Rosh HaShana.