

THE SOUNDS OF THE SHOFAR

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

When the Shofar is blown on Rosh HaShana, three different types of noises are sounded. The first is a "teki'ah." This sound is one long continuous burst. The second sound is called a "shevarim." It consists of three shorter blasts. The third sound is the "teruah." The teruah is a set of nine short bursts of sound, a staccato blast. The Gemora in Rosh HaShana tells us that these later two sounds are meant to sound like crying: "... drawing a long sigh. . . uttering short piercing cries." The Ben Ish Chai writes that these sounds are meant to contrast with the tekiah. The tekiah, he explains, is a sound of triumph and joy, while the shevarim and teruah are sounds of pain and suffering. Because of the opposing feelings they represent, when one blows the shofar, he is not to connect the tekiah with the others, by blowing the sounds with the same breath.

Why do we have both sounds of joy and sounds of sorrow emitted from the Shofar? The Ben Ish Chai explains by means of a story. A man had a ring specially made for him. Upon this ring, he had engraved the words "This, too, will pass." If he were troubled and in pain, he would look at his ring and remember that the suffering would eventually end. This thought comforted him. During times of happiness and comfort, he would gaze at the ring as well. He would realize that his wealth and good fortune could change for the worst in an instant. Good times are not forever. He would recognize that there was no reason to become conceited and haughty over circumstances which were beyond his control and could turn adverse without any warning. This ring reminded the man that all in his life had to be put in perspective, and that one should live his life neither complacent nor despondent.

The tekiah, the first sound, is a sound of joy and happiness. Immediately after we hear the long exultant blast, we hear the shevarim and teruah. These are both sounds of sadness, pain and suffering. The stark contrast between these sounds is intentional. We are supposed to remember while listening to the shofar that we cannot forget G-d during times of contentment, and we cannot let our egos swell from our achievements. Success can quickly turn into failure. Only with G-d's help did we prosper, and only with G-d's help will we continue to do so. However, upon hearing the sorrowful sound of the Shofar, we should not think that in times of suffering G-d has forsaken us. We should not become depressed and despondent. Right after these blasts, we sound a tekiah again, to signify that G-d is there, and in His mercy will help us return to a state of jubilation again.