

ROSH HASHANA AND THE KISS OF LIFE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

The Torah calls the day of Rosh Hashana "a day of blowing" which signifies the pivotal importance of the shofar to the Day of Judgment. The shofar is the seminal mitzvah around which everything else evolves. This is somewhat baffling. Against the awesomeness of the Day of Judgment, the shofar would seem to be a minor ritual. Why then the special status and fanfare attached to it?

The commentaries tell us that the shofar calls to mind the story of the akeida in which our patriarch Avraham, after attempting to fulfill Hashem's request to offer up his beloved Isaac as a sacrifice, found an alternate way to give expression to his overflowing love of his Creator.

Avraham noticed a ram caught in the bushes and offered it up as a sacrifice in place of Yitzchok. [Far from being a 'chance' occurrence, the ram had been placed in that very spot by Hashem. One of its horns will one day be used to announce the arrival of Moshiach, our sages tell us.] With the blowing of a ram's horn on Rosh Hashana, we recall the historic event of the akeida in which Avraham rose to unparalleled spiritual heights.

Yet, the precise connection between the mitzvah of shofar-blowing on Rosh Hashana and the gripping story about Abraham's devotion and self-sacrifice remains elusive. What does this story have to do with the awesome Day of Judgment?

The Torah tells us that G-d created mortal physical man from earth and dust collected from four corners of the earth, and invested within him a living spirit by blowing into his nostrils "a breath of life" (Genesis 2). As a result of the blend of the physical and spiritual components of his makeup, man is a hybrid; part physical matter and part G-dly.

We struggle with the innate conflict of our bodily desires and yearnings with our spiritual strivings throughout our earthly sojourn. Each person must decide for himself which force he will make the predominant one in his own life. Are we material creatures seeking to better our physical standard of living, climbing the ladder of financial success, and ensuring that we have more glitter than our neighbors? Or, is our primary drive focused on giving expression to the neshama within us, the vibrations of our conscience that direct us heavenwards towards an eternal bond with our Creator?

Our neshama yearns to connect to its creator while assigning the body to a secondary role in our time here in this world. On Rosh Hashana, as we commit ourselves to a new year, we reinforce our determination to allow the needs of our neshama to take center stage. We reconnect our soul-implanted in man with the 'breath of life' from the Creator-with its heavenly source.

How can one translate these spiritual impulses into a medium that speaks to the concrete and physical part of our existence? How can we "kiss" the Divine, so to speak, and find Him in both the oppressive monotony and the churning maelstrom of day-to-day existence?

The shofar is the ideal expression of the soaring impulses that overtake us on the Day of Judgment. Avraham was willing to sacrifice his closest and most beloved son with unflinching devotion. When he was restrained from doing so, he expressed his love with the sacrifice of the ram. Part of that ram—the symbol of fierce love of G-d—remains with us: the horn we blow each Rosh Hashana. The shofar is the conduit through which we lovingly demonstrate our willingness to transform the breath of life with which Hashem animated us—our souls—into our predominant life force, while the body assumes an accessory role.

The shofar is thus the perfect instrument through which we can "pour back" our essence to its heavenly source. Like our forefather Avraham, we use this instrument to demonstrate that for the coming years, our goals and ideals will align with spiritual imperatives, rather than physical ones.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos and a happy & healthy New Year

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