

SHOFAR: SHOCK TREATMENT

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

There is the obligation to hear the blasts of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, customarily blown from the horn of a ram.

The Rambam famously writes that the sound of the shofar beckons to sinners to awaken from their 'spiritual' slumber and their engagement of empty pursuits, to embark upon true repentance (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4)

The shofar differs remarkably from the typical musical instrument. Its sounds are neither soothing, calming or melodious. Instead, they are rough, even uncouth.

There is no denying that there is something very unnerving about the raw, piercing sound of the shofar.

It is, in the description of the Rambam, a "shock" to our system. One of the ten reasons for the shofar, as delineated by Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, is that it inspires charadah, "trembling" in the hearts of the listener. In the words of the prophet, "*Can the shofar be blown in the city and the people not tremble?*" (Amos 3:6).

Why should the shofar evoke feelings of terror? What is the cause of this trembling? How does the shofar act as "shock treatment"?

It is usual for contemporary man to regularly go about his business, no questions asked. He often becomes so caught up in his personal affairs and hectic lifestyle that he rarely finds the time or opportunity to question or focus upon what life is really all about.

That is, until he is disturbingly forced to confront it.

It is when man is at a crossroads to his life, when things go wrong, when tragedy strikes, or when man comes face-to-face with his mortality; then, he uncomfortably experiences "shock treatment".

What may have originally been considered important suddenly becomes insignificant, almost trivial. All the principles and values that he had hitherto considered sacred are swept by the wayside. His earlier foundations are deemed shaky. He is, quite understandably, shaken to the core. He trembles as his very existence is under threat.

A tightrope walker on a thin wire hanging between two cliffs has all of his senses unified. He will not

have anything less than 100% concentration. How to maintain his balance is essential - for his life depends on it. All other concerns - his business pursuits, investments, his dying car, what color wallpaper to chose for the lounge etc - fall away. His 'one-track mind' is locked on his existence. His life is on the line. Were he to lose his focus, even momentarily, the outcome could be fatal.

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. It is the day of the universe's formation (in the creation of mankind). It is the day where the individual is put under the spotlight. It is the day where every individual's fate hangs in the balance - "who will live and who will die".

It is the shofar that brings man to the state of charadah. The word "charad" (from where the title "chareidi" is derived) refers to an abject terror such that all man's senses are harmonized to confront the imminent danger that calls for his fullest, undivided attention. This is the ideal state where a Jew goes through life in the trembling realization that one wrong turn may herald his spiritual downfall (see Yeshayah 66:5).

It is the realization that -where man is in a spiritual slumber - he requires the raw sounds of the shofar to jerk him to his senses.

It is the shofar's piercing "shock treatment" that has the power to spiritually awaken each of us to consider what are our highest priorities for ourselves, for our children and for the Jewish people. It often means that our value system have to shift or be reappraised as to where our lives are heading and be in touch with what is really important in life.

Rosh Hashanah is when the Jew proclaims G-d as his King at the beginning of a new year. Experiencing the shock therapy is the groundwork for a person to embark upon a new lease of life trembling before G-d and conducting his life to serve Him.

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life! The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.