

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

On the first day of the seventh month there shall be a holy convocation for you. You shall do no laborious work. It shall be a day of shofar-sounding for you.

Meshech Chochmah: An earlier reference^[2] adds a detail about the sounding of the *shofar*, calling Rosh Hashanah a time of *remembrance* of the *shofar*. Halachically, this alludes^[3] to our practice of suspending the sounding of the *shofar* when Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbos. In such years, we have to suffice with a remembrance of the *shofar* of previous years.

Moving to a more conceptual approach, we can explain the “remembrance” of the *shofar* quite differently. We can discern two kinds of self-examination that can be part of the *teshuvah* process: “seeing” and “remembering.” The most obvious form of repentance begins with a person taking a good look at himself. He inventories himself, and finds himself in possession of things – whether objects or behaviors – of which he must quickly purge himself. So he rids his possessions of what he is not fully entitled to keep, and distances himself from *aveiros* that he routinely commits.

Admirable enough! But there is another dimension to *teshuvah* that is more subtle. “Looking” at himself and his observable behavior, he will not find anything in himself that is so troubling, at least after doing a good job with the first form of repentance. We know, however, that sin leaves its mark. It impacts upon the inner person, even when the external one remains visibly unmoved. The change requires a much deeper kind of self-examination. The sinner must “remember” every aspect of his former self, and see how sin has subtly changed his leanings, preferences and character. When he does, he realizes his vulnerability – how the person ravished and changed by sin stands ready to fail when confronted with challenges that have still not arrived.

These two forms of the *teshuvah* process find a parallel in the way Hashem acts towards us in an exculpatory manner. Sometimes He “sees,” meaning that He reacts towards some unfavorable decree against us, towards some untoward consequence poised to strike, by removing the threat. He “sees” our change in behavior, or some evidence of contrition. At other times, however, His reaction is more subtle and discerning. He doesn’t “see” the observable, but “remembers” some special merit, or some argument that puts a person in a better light. His protective reaction then is more comprehensive. He places the person out of harm’s way, including that of fully natural factors and catastrophic events that might arise in the course of time. (The citizens of Ninveh repented – but only “from the robbery in their hands.”^[4] Because their repentance was relatively superficial –

Chazal^[5] go so far as to call it deceptive – the *pasuk* says that “Hashem saw...and regretted the evil that He had said He would do.” Noting an observable change in their behavior sufficed only to call back an immediate threat to them.)

Chazal^[6] reject the presence of gold on a *shofar*, likening its sounding to *avodah* in the inner precincts of the *beis hamikdosh*, where the *kohen gadol* had to leave behind his golden garments in favor of plain white ones. They don't mean that *shofar* is unusually important, just as the inner *avodah* on Yom Kippur is dear and exalted because it is so rare. Rather, they mean to point to the inward focus of the sound of the *shofar*.

Some *aveiros* remain functionally invisible to their owners. Practices that are extremely common do not strike people as sinful, even if objectively they are. People take refuge in the argument that there is no need to be more pious than everyone else. Sometimes people act on the authority of an erring *beis din*. Those who relied on the decision of a legitimate *beis din* certainly see themselves as blameless. Indeed, they are not obligated to bring a *korban chatas* for such a transgression.

The conventional *chatas* is an outer *korban*, whose *avodah* is restricted to the courtyard area. As we move to the inner parts of the *mikdosh*, however, we suddenly find that atonement is offered for *aveiros* that people dismiss as irrelevant because they see themselves as beyond reproach. When a faulty halachic decision affects the entire nation, there is a *korban* – and it involves the inner altar and the *paroches*! In other words, in the external part of the *mikdosh* there is no recognition of guilt for this kind of sin, but the inner parts are sensitive to the impact of what seems like a blameless act. As we move to the innermost part of the *mikdosh*, the sensitivity increases even more. In the Holy of Holies a *korban* is offered for those who entered the *mikdosh* without knowing that they had become *tamei*! Such a person is conscious only of his attempt to do a mitzvah through coming to the *mikdosh*; he has no idea at all of his *tumah*. Conceivably, he acted with all the mitigating factors that could apply: i.e., with the permission of a court ruling, and in the company of a great many other people. Nonetheless, in the holiest, innermost part of the *mikdosh*, even such a *chet* registers – and must be dealt with. In the space that is “closest” to the *Shechinah*, the effects of the smallest, seemingly invisible, *chet* are more critical.

Chazal mean something similar when they say that the sounding of the *shofar* is like an *avodah* of the interior parts of the *mikdosh*. Here, too, they mean that the *avodah* of the *shofar* reaches inward to the unseen and unobservable, not to the external and superficial. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah, a person's *teshuvah* must be one of “remembering,” not just “seeing” the obvious flaws. He must inventory all his activities, bar none. Even activities that are perfectly permissible and even those that are objectively mitzvos. All need to be scrutinized to detect even the slightest unwanted admixture of something that can leave a lasting negative impression, even if it not experienced as an overt *chet*.

Several times in the course of the day of Rosh Hashanah, we reach to a *pasuk* in Tehillim:^[7] “Sound

the *shofar* at the moon's renewal, at the *keseh* for our festive day." *Keseh* is usually translated as "the appointed time." It also conjures up something covered up and hidden. It is a day to remove all that intervenes between ourselves and HKBH. Even the small sub-threshold sins should be uncovered and addressed.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bamidbar 29:1
2. Vayikra 23:24
3. Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 4:1
4. Yonah 3:8
5. Yerushalmi Taanis 2:1
6. Rosh Hashanah 26A
7. Tehillim 81:4