

# SOUND OF THE UNHEARD SHOFAR

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

One of the anomalies pointed out by the commentators regarding Rosh Hashana is that nowhere in the Torah is Rosh Hashana ever mentioned in connection with Yom Ha-din/A Day of Judgement; Scripture speaks only of a Yom Teruah/Day of Blowing the Shofar. It is only through the oral tradition of our Sages that we know that on the Universe's anniversary, its Creator takes stock and makes His allocations and allotments for the coming year. Why does the Torah seemingly go out of its way to conceal the concept of Judgement? And why is it specifically the theme of the Shofar that receives the overwhelming focus in the Torah's description of this day, when in fact the sounding of the Shofar is but a small, if very important, ingredient in the overall scheme of Rosh Hashana?

In the book of Nehemiah (8) we find a description of an ancient Rosh Hashana:

Then all the people gathered together as one man at the plaza before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the Torah scroll of Moshe, which Hashem had commanded Israel. So Ezra the Kohen brought the Torah before the congregation... on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it... from first light until midday, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Torah scroll. They read in the scroll, in G-d's Torah, clearly, appreciating the wisdom; they helped the people understand the reading. Then Nechemia, Ezra the scribe, and the Levi'im who were helping the people understand, said to all the people - who were weeping as they heard the words of the Torah - "Today is sacred to Hashem, your G-d; do not mourn and do not weep. Go eat rich foods, and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have not prepared - for today is sacred to our Lord. Do not be sad - Hashem's pleasure is your strength!"

When the people listened to the Hashem's word being read to them, they were overwhelmed by feelings of remorse and inadequacy, and began to weep. At first glance, this would seem to be most appropriate and praiseworthy - something we might all strive for on the most serious and introspective of days. Yet they are rebuffed. Rather, they are told to go eat lavish meals, because "Hashem's pleasure is their strength." We are left wondering what indeed is Hashem's pleasure - from which they are to derive strength - if not their sincere reaction to hearing the Torah?

The Tur (Orach Chaim 581) describes a Jew's preparation for the Day of Judgement:

Normally, a person who knows he is to be judged, dons black clothing, lets his beard grow unkempt,

and doesn't cut his nails. [He does so because he is overcome with anxiety] over not knowing the outcome of his judgement. Yet [before Rosh Hashana] we don't do so. We don white clothing, trim our hair, and cut our nails. On Rosh Hashana, we eat, drink, and are happy, for we know that the Almighty will perform miracles with us...

Why shouldn't we stand in trepidation before the mighty Yom Ha-din - instead of running around getting haircuts and preparing luxurious meals? What is the source of our assuredness that we will merit a good verdict - all the more so if we approach the Day of Judgement with such seeming nonchalance?

The holy Zohar (see Tikkunei Zohar 22a regarding Yom Kippur) criticizes those who cry out on the Days of Judgement, pleading for their needs. "Give! Give!" they cry, "like a dog begging for food." What is so wrong if, recognizing the seriousness and imminence of the day's judgement, we plead for our needs?

Perhaps we can understand the correct approach to Rosh Hashana with a parable:

A great and mighty king let it be known that on a given day, he would be passing through a certain city. During his stay, he would grace the inhabitants with an audience, during which he would deliver a royal address. He would then entertain requests and supplications from his subjects. Those who wished were to prepare their requests on the highest quality parchment, upon which they should write what it is they were asking of the king, and why they felt the magnanimous king should grant their wishes. They could ask for up to three things.

The city's inhabitants busily went about preparing a royal welcome. Of course there was also much excitement about the prospect of a private audience, and the possibility of one's most-longed-for dreams being granted by the king himself. The king arrived amidst much pomp and circumstance, and was duly impressed by the extravagant preparations made on his behalf. After delivering his royal address, a huge line formed in front of him. Each person held in his hand a carefully written parchment to present to the king, with the hope that his dreams would be granted.

The king was indeed magnanimous, and graced his subjects by granting any and all reasonable requests. One by one the people had their turn and made leave of the king's presence, all with the satisfied looks of one whose dreams have come true.

The entire time, the king had been observing that one lone maidservant stood at the back of the palace, modestly observing the goings-on, yet never approaching the line. Even now as the line was already empty, she still did not approach. Intrigued, the king had her called before him.

"Tell me," he said, "why is it that you stand there quietly, while all your townsmen come and go, each of them having their wishes granted in a most generous manner? Do you not trust that I have the ability to grant your desires?"

"Oh no," she said sharply to the king. "It's just that - well - I simply didn't have the time to prepare a parchment with my requests. You see, when I heard the king would be visiting, I immediately became preoccupied with making sure everything would be ready to receive the king. Draperies needed to be sewn, rugs weaved, floors cleaned, swept, and polished... There was so much to do to make sure the city was ready for the king's arrival, and I so busy, that I simply never got around to preparing my wish-list. Today, as I stood before the king, I realized it was already too late. Instead, I chose to spend my time in the presence of your highness, as he graciously dealt with his subjects."

The king's face now glowed with a radiance that awed the simple maidservant. "My dearest maiden," the king said, "if there is anyone who is truly deserving of having their wishes granted, it must surely be you, who have put my honour before all else. I will not trouble you to ask, for in your modesty your requests would likely be simple ones. Rather, I will grant you the blessings of my hand - the royal hand. I have no doubt they will satisfy you beyond your wildest dreams."

In the weeks and days before Rosh Hashana, Jews are busy cleaning up (teshuva cleanses sins), and preparing ourselves to receive the King of Kings. Although of course Hashem is our King all year long, on Rosh Hashana His dominion is underscored by the fact that it is then that He sits upon the Throne of Judgement and judges the world. It is on Rosh Hashana that Hashem says, "Call out before Me with the blast of the Shofar - to demonstrate your acceptance of Me as your King (Mishna Rosh Hashana 4:5)," like the king who enters the palace amidst trumpet blasts.

The Torah stresses the theme of Rosh Hashana as being a day of Shofar blasts, and down-plays the aspect of judgement, in order to keep us focused. The nature of a man being judged is to become self-absorbed; his mind is consumed with thoughts of what he can do to assure himself a favourable verdict. Or, if he feels there is no hope, he falls into self-pity and stops caring. Either way, all he's thinking about is himself, and that misses the whole point of the day. Our focus on Rosh Hashana should not be on "what's in it for us" and "how's this going to turn out for me" but rather on accepting Hashem as our King, and being the best servants we can.

That's why, when the people began mourning and crying, they were told to stop. It's good that they were aroused by the reading of the Torah, but the Navi (Prophet) guided them to take that arousal and use it to celebrate the day that Hashem brought the world into being, thereby becoming its King, and on which He renews its lease each year.

With what will they merit a good judgement? Why are we so self-assured that we will be judged

favourably that we get dressed up in our finest clothing, and, as the Zohar suggests, we spend the day celebrating rather than grovelling before Hashem to forgive our sins and grant our wishes? It's not because we arrogantly believe we deserve it, but because of what we're doing instead. As Hashem sits upon His throne to judge the world, He finds us in the synagogues, listening to the Shofar and reciting the prayers whose focus is that we accept Hashem as our King, and pray that one day the entire world will also recognize His dominion. We're too "busy" to even take the time to contemplate where we fit in the picture, and what Hashem has in store for us.

Seeing this, Hashem's countenance glows, and no doubt He inscribes all His faithful servants in the Book of Life and the Righteous, that they may indeed merit another year of health and prosperity. And He bestows upon them blessings far more numerous and generous than they ever could have thought to ask for.

*Wishing all our readers a Kesiva ve'Chasima Tova be-sifran shel tzaddikim.*

\*\*\*\*\* For the merit of a refuah sheleima for Naftuli Tzvi ben Blima Rachel, Devora bas Sara and Ben Zion Eliyahu ben Liba Leah, among the infirm of Israel. \*\*\*\*\* Text Copyright © 2004 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **Torah.org**