

THE SHOFAR OF THE JUBILEE YEAR: POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behar

The Shofar of the Jubilee Year: Positive Peer Pressure

In this week's parsha, we learn of the mitzvos of Shmitah [Sabbatical Year] and Yovel [Jubilee Year]. Every seventh year, the Torah commands that the land in Eretz Yisroel [Israel] must lie fallow. After every seven Shmitah cycles the Jubilee year begins, in which the land lies fallow and all servants go free. The Torah commands "You shall sound the Shofar throughout the land" [Vayikra 25:9], a mitzvah performed on Yom Kippur of the Yovel year -- the point in time at which time all slaves went free.

The Sefer HaChinuch (by Rav Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona -- 13th century Spain) analyzes the significance of the blowing of the Shofar. The Chinuch points out that the Commandment of sending away one's servants was very difficult for a slave-owner to carry out.

In general, owning slaves was a financial bonanza. For anyone who has a business, just imagine what it would be like not to have to pay workers. There was no salary, no social security, no taxes, no pension, no Blue Cross, nothing. It was almost like having free labor (other than the cost of food and basic care).

Now, they suddenly had to wave good-bye to the slaves. Slave owners incurred major financial losses. The Chinuch says that in order to give the people the strength and the encouragement to fulfill this very difficult commandment, the Torah required the sounding of the Shofar throughout Eretz Yisroel, to give everyone the sense that they are not alone in making this sacrifice: It is a phenomenon that is transpiring throughout the land.

When the Shofar sounded throughout Eretz Yisroel, the slave owner recognized "I am not the only one taking a financial killing; everyone is taking a financial bath. Everybody has to send out their slaves today."

The Chinuch emphasizes that nothing strengthens the spirit of mankind like universal public action. The fact that "everybody is doing it" is the greatest source of encouragement. That, according to the Chinuch, is why the Shofar was blown. If everyone else has to do it, it is easier for me to do it too.

This is a tremendous insight. Nonetheless, we still might ask, "So what if everybody is doing it -- I will

still to take a beating!" Why does this help?

All we have to do to answer this question is to read the newspaper or listen to the radio. The whole country is bombarded with the slogan "Just Say No to Drugs." Thank G-d that in our society, for the most part, the vast majority are insulated from this, but it is a plague that is smiting the entire country (makas medinah)! It is destroying all of society. There is not a kid in all of America that does not know that drugs are bad for him. So are they all idiots? They know it is going to hook them, they know it is going to kill them, and yet they all start? The answer is "Everybody is doing it." Peer pressure, social pressure is such that it can make a person do something that he does not want to do.

One can know something is bad for him, but as the Chinuch says, there is no greater encouragement to human activity than the fact that everyone is doing it.

That is why, even though I know I need to send away my slave and it will cost me a fortune, I am strengthened by the fact that I know everyone else is doing it as well. That is human nature. We are tremendously influenced by our peer and social pressure... to the extent that we will do something that is inherently bad for us, but we will still be able to do it because everyone else is doing it.

The lesson to be learned from this is the importance of community. A person needs to understand that not only is one's spouse and immediate family a tremendous influence, but the type of community that one chooses to live in is as well. If everyone does something in one way, a person will feel obliged to conform -- for good or for bad. A person will act better than he would usually act, because of community standards, and on the other hand a person will act worse than he would otherwise act, because "listen, this is what everyone is doing".

We do not outgrow this. When we were teenagers, there was peer pressure, but even as adults, there is peer / social pressure. Therefore, it is imperative, no matter how old a person is, that he find a community that wants the right things out of life. He must put himself in such a community and put his children in such a community.

Children will not be able to withstand the forces of peer pressure. They are human beings and whatever their peers do, they will do. One should not fool himself. We are all influenced, especially children and teenagers, who are so dependent on what their friends say. This is what the Torah is reminding us through the blowing of the Shofar.

The Martyrdom of Giving Up One's Money

The Beis Av, Rav Schlesinger, picks up at this point on the words of the Sefer HaChinuch. Rav Schlesinger says that the words of the Chinuch are correct, but they do not solve the whole problem.

The Talmud relates [Rosh HaShannah 34b] that the Yom Kippur blowing on Yovel actually consisted of the exact same sequence of sounds with the exact same prayer ritual as performed ten days earlier on Rosh HaShannah [every year].

The Beis Av argues: if the whole purpose of Shofar blowing on Yovel was to remind each slave owner that "everyone was doing it," there would be no need for the specific blowing of "Malchiyus, Zichronos, and Shofaros" [Kingship, Remembrance, and Shofar blowing] as on Rosh HaShanah. There would be no need for an exact Tekiah-Teruah-Tekiah. There would be no need for the whole ritual of Rosh HaShannah all over again.

Why did the Yovel ritual replicate Rosh HaShannah? Rav Schlesinger offers the following answer: One of the main factors of Shofar blowing on Rosh HaShannah is that we should remember Akeidas Yitzchak [binding of Isaac]. When we hear the ram's horn on the New Year, we remind ourselves of the dedication and self-sacrifice of our Patriarchs and we mentally decide that we are also ready to sacrifice for G-d's sake. We accept the Yoke of Heaven and we tell ourselves that even though it will require martyrdom, we are ready to do it. This is what we think about when we hear the Shofar blowing on Rosh HaShannah and remember Akeidas Yitzchak.

On Yovel, we are also asked to exhibit Mesiras Nefesh ["giving (or dedication) of the soul"]. On Yovel, we also need to think about the Binding of Yitzchak. We also need to think about willingness to sacrifice. But what type of sacrifice? On Rosh HaShannah, the sacrifice was "With all your heart and with all your soul" (bechol levavcha u'vchol nafshecha) On Yom Kippur, the sacrifice of Yovel is "With all your wealth" (bechol me'odecha -- from the first chapter of Shema).

Let's not kid ourselves -- we love our money. We are attached to it. It is difficult to give away our money. When the Torah tells us to give away our slaves, it is telling us that we need to exhibit mesiras nefesh with our money. This requires almost as much mesiras nefesh as giving away one's life. Therefore, it becomes necessary to once again conjure up in our minds the image of the Binding of Yitzchak. We need to picture what it means to be a Jew. Being a Jew is not only serving G-d with our very lives, but even with our money.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin [74a] says that there are certain people for whom parting with their money is a greater sacrifice than parting with their lives. Who is this oddball who loves his money more than his life? We ask ourselves incredulously, "Do such people really exist?"

The answer is absolutely yes. This is why people work 14, 16, or 18 hours a day. Why do people have coronaries as a result of their businesses?

I know of a man who, during the race riots that occurred in Baltimore 40 years ago, went down to his liquor store in West Baltimore with his shotgun to fend off the rioters. We say, "Gee, he's crazy!" But in truth, he is just a little crazier than many of us. We also give our sweat and our tears and our energy and the best years of our life to financial gain.

This "person whose money is dearer to him..." is not the "one in a million" case. Therefore, the Torah asks us to exhibit mesiras nefesh by sending away our slaves on the year of Yovel and asks us to "kiss our money good-bye." This is exceedingly difficult for a human being.

We need to experience Rosh HaShannah all over again. We need to hear Kingship! We need to hear Remembrances! We need to hear Shofar Sounds! We need to remember the Binding of Yitzchak. We need this because we are asked to give up something that is extremely precious to us (bechol me'odecha, "with all your wealth"), which is nothing less than mesiras nefesh.

Rav Pam, shlita, once said that the trial of the generation which preceded us and lived through the Holocaust was the trial of "with all your hearts and with all your souls". They had to pay the price of being a Jew with their own lives. Our trial, the nissayon [test] of our generation of Jews in America is "with all your wealth". Give your money. Give your money to Yeshivas, and give your money to the Mikveh. Give your money. It is hard; it is mesiras nefesh; but that is what we must do. It is the trial of our generation.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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