

BLOWING SHOFAR

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Haazinu

Blowing Shofar 'At The Time of Hiding'

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the former Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, wrote an autobiography, which in Hebrew is called "Al Tishlach Yadcha el ha'Naar" ("Do Not Raise A Hand Against the Boy" based on the pasuk in the incident of the Akeida [Bereishis 22:12]). In English, the autobiography is entitled "Out of the Depths". It tells the very compelling story of his life.

Yisrael Meir Lau was liberated from Buchenwald when he was 5 years old. His brother saved him. It is a fascinating story. He writes that after he became the Chief Rabbi of Israel he went back to his father's shul in the Polish town of Piotrkow Trybunalski. His father had been Chief Rabbi of this town before the war. Both of his parents were killed in the Holocaust and now he came back as Chief Rabbi of Israel on the Shabbos before Tisha B'Av - Shabbos Chazon.

He records in his autobiography the sermon he delivered in that shul on Shabbos Chazon. He quoted the Medrash in Eicha that when the Master of the World destroyed the Beis HaMikdash, the prophet Yirmiyahu went to the Me'aras haMachpelah and "woke up" the Patriarchs that they should petition the Almighty on behalf of their children who suffered this tragedy.

Yirmiyahu woke up Avraham Avinu and washed Avraham's hands. Avraham came to the Ribono shel Olam and asked "Why is this happening to my children?" The Ribono shel Olam responded, "It is because your children have sinned and I will summon forth the 22 letters of the Aleph-Beis to testify against them."

The Aleph got up to testify and Avraham Avinu said to the Aleph, "Shame on you! How can you testify against Klal Yisrael? The Asseres HaDibros [Ten Commandments] begin with the letter Aleph (Anochi Hashem Elokecha). Wasit not the Jewish people who unquestioningly accepted G-d's Torah on Sinai and said 'We will do and we will listen' (Na'aseh v'Nishma)?" The Medrash states that the Aleph became silent and walked away.

The letter Beis was then summoned to testify. Again Avraham asked, "Are you not ashamed to testify against the Jewish people? Does the Torah not begin with the letter Beis (Bereishis barah Elokim)?"

When G-d took the Torah and offered it to all the nations of the world, no nation was willing to accept it. They all wanted to know what was written in it. When they heard the contents of the Torah they each refused it. However, Klal Yisrael did not ask any questions. They said Na'aseh v'Nishma and accepted it." The Medrash says that the Beis kept quiet and could not testify against Klal Yisrael.

The Medrash continues that this is what happened with all the letters of the Aleph-Beis.

Rabbi Lau then quoted a thought in the name of his father-in-law, Rav Yitzchak Yedidiah Frankel who was the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. Rav Frankel suggested a novel insight into a pasuk in Parshas Vayelech, interpreting it slightly differently than the normal interpretation: "And it will be at the end of days... and the Torah will be a witness for it will not be forgotten from the mouths of its offspring...." [Devarim 31:21] The simple reading of the pasuk is that the Torah will not be forgotten. However, Rav Yitzchak Yedidiah Frankel said that Moshe is promising something else:

"I see with my spiritual eyes a picture that is different from the one that Avraham saw (in the aforementioned Medrash). Avraham asked the letters of the Torah to retract their testimony. I (Moshe Rabbeinu speaking) on the other hand, am begging the Torah to bear witness. This "Song", the song of our life will testify before the Ribono shel Olam bearing witness that it will not be forgotten by the nation's children. The Torah itself will testify that the Children of Israel did not forget it."

The Torah will tell how during the Holocaust, Jews ran to the forest to blow the Shofar, so as not to miss the mitzvah on Rosh HaShanah. Jews willingly gave up slices of bread for extended periods so that they could exchange them for potatoes for Pesach. They saved bits of margarine and rendered them into oil using a steaming tin of tea. They then poured the oil into the buttons of their striped uniforms to kindle the Chanukah candles, pulling threads from their sleeves for wicks. Since they were willing to do all of this, did Avraham really need to ask the Torah to refrain from speaking? Rather, "Let this Song (itself) serve as a witness that the Torah would not be forgotten from the mouths of the nation's children even in the most trying of times and most excruciating of circumstances!"

I would like to give an example of this dedication to Torah under trying circumstances by sharing a story from the introduction to a Sefer called Shaylos U'Teshuvos Mekadshei HaShem (Responsa to those Who Sanctified G-d's Name) by Rav Tzvi Hirsch Meislish, who spent his later years in Chicago but who spent the war years in a number of Concentration Camps. He was known as the Weitzener Rav.

Rav Meislish tells about one Rosh HaShanah in Auschwitz. There were a bunch of young former Yeshiva students who were about to be cremated alive. They found out that Rabbi Meislish had smuggled in a shofar. It was the first day of Rosh HaShanah, toward the end of the day. They bitterly begged that Rav Meislish come into their cellblock and blow for them the 100 shofar blasts so that they might fulfill this mitzvah one last time. Rabbi Meislish writes that he was deeply troubled. He did

not know what to do, as such an act of defiance would certainly jeopardize his life if he were caught by the Nazis. To compound the dilemma, his young son Zalman Leib was begging him to please NOT risk his life by doing this, begging that he not be left an orphan because of his father's foolhardy action.

Rav Meislish writes that he made a decision that he was not going to listen to his own son and was going to blow shofar for the Yeshiva students, come what may. He writes that if truth be told, his action was not in accordance with halachic principles (which would forbid even possible martyrdom for the sake of performing a positive commandment such as Tekias Shofar). Rav Meislish states that he only took this action because he in any case did not expect to live long in Auschwitz and felt that under those circumstances perhaps normative Halacha prohibiting martyrdom in such a case did not fully apply. He decided to go into the block and blow shofar for them. He was about to blow shofar and they begged, "Rebbi, Rebbi have mercy. Please say words of spiritual arousal for us before you blow shofar." Let us imagine this! These are young boys who are about to die in a matter of hours and they insisted on hearing a "shmooze" before Shofar Blowing in Auschwitz!

Rabbi Meislish expounded for them the pasuk "Blow shofar on the new month, at the 'time of hiding' on the day of our holiday" [Tehillim 81:4]. The simple interpretation of the phrase 'time of hiding' (b'keseh) refers to the fact that the moon is hidden at the start of the month. But he homiletically interpreted that they were in a time when G-d's Providence was hidden from them. They could not figure out why all this was happening to them. Nevertheless, he told them, "we need to have faith".

He gave them this "shmooze" and then he blew shofar. He writes that he recorded the story because he wanted the world to know forever the great mesiras nefesh [sacrifice for mitzvos] these young men demonstrated. Right before they were taken out to the crematorium, just as Rabbi Meislish was about to leave the cellblock, one of the young men stood up and addressed his comrades: "The Rebbe gave us strength and he told us that we should never give up hope and we should always hope for the best; but we must also be prepared for the worst. For G-d's sake, dear brothers, let us not become confused and forget to cry out with great devotion and intensity at the last moment of our lives: Shma Yisrael!" They then all called out with great devotion and intensity "Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad". Then another student got up and said "Let us all acknowledge the great self- sacrifice of the Rebbe for coming here to blow shofar for us. Let us all give him a blessing that in the merit of this action he be spared, make it out of here and go on to have a long and good and healthy life." Everyone shouted out at the top of their lungs "Amen v'Amen".

This is only part of the story. But this is what Rav Yedidya Frankel meant when he interpreted the pasuk in Parshas Vayelech "V'Haysa haShira haZos l'Ed" to mean that the Torah itself will bear witness to the fact that it was not forgotten from the mouths of the nations' children. Even in the worst of times, Klal Yisrael did not forget the Torah.

These stories describe mind-boggling levels of mesiras nefesh of great heroes of our people who

lived not long ago. Let the mesiras nefesh of so many members of our people over all the generations be a source of merit for us all. When G-d remembers Akeidas Yitzchak on Rosh HaShanah, may He remember not only the mesiras nefesh of the Patriarchs but also of righteous anonymous young boys throughout the generations who are typified by the story recorded by the Weitzener Rav.

In such merit, may the Almighty bless us with a good year, a Kesivah v'Chasimah Tova. May we have peace and tranquility, and pride from our children. May He bring us the redeemer and final redemption, without having to endure any further suffering of 'Chevlei Moshiach' [birthpangs of the Messiah].

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