

WHAT IS THE SOUND OF THE SHOFAR REALLY ABOUT?

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The sounding of the shofar is the central ritual of Rosh Hashana and the principal symbol of the entire period of the High Holy Days, from the month of Elul through to the climax of Yom Kippur at the very conclusion of the *Ne'ilah* service.

The shofar is something that Jews look forward to every year. I can recall what it was like for us as children in our Reform synagogue in the States. The congregation collectively held its breath as the *Baal-tekiyah* raised the shofar to his lips. (For some reason, it was always a man who sounded the shofar.) When the first long *tekiyah* emerged from the shofar, there was a great outpouring of relief. Then, people settled down for the series of calls: *tekiyaah; shevariim; tru'aah; tekiyah gedolaaaah!* They stood suspended on that final *tekiyah gedolah*, as though time had stopped. When it eventually ended and the Master of the shofar lowered the instrument from his lips, a huge smile broke out on people's faces right across the sanctuary. I guess we knew that all was right with the world, creation was sheltered for another year and life would now continue refreshed and renewed.

From my reminiscence, we can surmise that one of the reasons we hear the shofar is to bring us comfort and peace. When we listen to it, we leave ordinary time and for an endless instant we enter eternity. To use today's New Age terminology, it's a moment of mindfulness when the sounds take over our being and there's nothing else in our heads – or our hearts, for that matter. And that's a comforting, calming experience. It's also unbidden. We don't have to work for it, apply any effort or listen especially intensely to get it. It simply happens. And at the end of it, we feel refreshed and renewed because we've "come home." This year's shofar sound is like last year's and the year before, back to my parents and grandparents' time. It seems that

the sense of sameness, of at-home-ness, brings us comfort and peace.

But there's a paradox here, or a disconnect. At the same time as we feel this calm and peace from hearing the shofar, we also feel anxiety and tension. The sounds comfort us and perform their magic. But they also worry us, they disturb our serenity; as Maimonides puts it, they "wake us up from our slumber." They call us to a world that is filled with distress and insecurity. Our lives have changed so much over the past year, so much has happened to overturn our sense of serenity and peace, and the shofar through its magic awakens us to that. There's the impact of the COVID crisis on our lives, the effects of successive lockdowns, the radical uncertainty of climate-related events around the world and in our own country, the trauma of seeing them represented night after night on the media, the horrific scenes in Afghanistan and our hyper-awareness that terrible things are happening to innocent people there. Given all these upsetting experiences and more, what can the shofar say to us that will mitigate them or calm our anxieties over them? Our doubt threatens the efficacy of the shofar and maybe even leads some of us to stop listening altogether for fear we'll feel totally abandoned by our religion, which is worse than if we take the first step and abandon our religion before it abandons us.

The tension we experience over the shofar is the same tension that imbues the religious life in every aspect of it. On the one hand, we enter into Jewish ritual in order to bring us comfort, a sense of belonging and of serenity, a connectedness with the past and a hope for the future. We have a spiritual need to allow those moments of eternity, what the social philosopher Peter Berger called "signals

of transcendence," to enter our lives. Jewish rituals – observing Shabbat, performing mitzvot to mend the world, carrying out life cycle ceremonies such as brit-milah and bar/bat-mitzvah – enable us to participate in eternity in this way. The sounding of the shofar is a prime example of how this works.

But, at the same time, Jewish practice subverts our sense of complacency and security in the world. Judaism challenges us to take seriously the brokenness of the world, its suffering and pain, its radical uncertainty and transitoriness, to engage with it and respond to it. Our doubts about the shofar are the same as our doubts about life itself, about everything around us: is it still working as it should, can it be trusted, will the changes around us overwhelm our sense of serenity and security, can we ever find our way home again? Has too much changed for us ever again to feel the comfort we once enjoyed and rested in?

This is how the shofar works, and how Judaism works. They face us with the dilemma that is really, ultimately, inside of ourselves as human/spiritual beings. On the one hand, Judaism offers us comfort and security; on the other, Judaism discomfits us by calling upon us to address the brokenness we see in the world around us.

In reality, the dilemma is only apparent. There are times to seek comfort and calm, and there are times to pursue justice and shake things out of their stupor. The challenge is to know when to seek comfort, and when to pull up our sleeves to begin repairing the brokenness of the world. Back to the shofar: the challenge is to feel the calm in shul, in the moment of eternity; and with it, to dedicate ourselves to respond to the clarion call as soon as we step back outside into the world.