

THE SHOFAR'S MESSAGE:

History, Destiny, Eternity

Moshe Ch. Sosevsky

Rabbi Sosevsky is *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivat Ohr Yerushalayim, located near Yerushalayim, and edits *Jewish Thought*. This essay appeared in *Jewish Action* (Rosh HaShanah 5755) under the title "Echoes of Majesty."

1. INTRODUCTION

Revealing the Essence

At four intervals the world is judged: ...On Rosh HaShanah, all mankind pass before Him in single file like sheep.

(Mish. Rosh HaShanah 1:2)

The meaning of each holiday is reflected in its *mitzvot*. Eating *matzah* and bitter herbs on Pesach speaks to us of enslavement and freedom; fasting on Yom Kippur attests to the atonement granted that day; the *sukkah* symbolizes our reliance on G-d's protection. But what does blowing the *shofar* tell us about Rosh HaShanah? Though the sound of the *shofar* stirs us all, how does it reveal the essence of the day?

...and recite before Me on Rosh HaShanah [verses of] Kingship, Remembrance, and *Shofar*. Kingship — that you may declare Me King over you. Remembrance — that your remembrances may come before Me for good. And with what? With the *shofar*.

(Rosh HaShanah 16a)

The Talmud implies that — contrary to popular perception — Kingship, Remembrance, and *shofar* are not three distinct Rosh HaShanah themes. Instead, Kingship and Remembrance are the messages of the day, and the *shofar* merely transmits them. How does the *shofar* convey these motifs?

Implicit Judgment

Perhaps even more perplexing is what is blatantly missing from the day's agenda. Rosh HaShanah, arguably more than Yom Kippur, is when man is judged. Nevertheless, whereas the theme of sin and atonement reverberate on Yom Kippur, on Rosh HaShanah (with the exception of some Gaonic additions to our liturgy) these topics are absent.

Why is there no confession, no beating our chest in remorse over our misdeeds? When are we to repent on this judgment day? Why does no Rosh HaShanah Temple service parallel that of Yom Kippur, when the high priest confesses Yisra'el's sins and seeks national expiation? Does Rosh HaShanah itself atone for our transgressions, so we need not acknowledge them? Our rabbis consider such a notion regarding Yom Kippur, not Rosh HaShanah.¹ Why, then, is Rosh Hashanah's judgmental element not more apparent?

The Absence of Hallel

Chazal were troubled by yet another glaring omission in the Rosh HaShanah service — the lack of Hallel. The prophets of Yisra'el decreed that we say Hallel on festivals.² If these praises are recited regularly throughout the year, should we not express them on the holiday that marks the transition from one year to the next?

Said R. Abbahu: "The ministering angels said before the Holy One Blessed Be He: 'Master of the universe, why does Yisra'el not say praise before You on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur?' He said to them: 'Is it fitting that the King sits on the throne of judgment and the books of the living and the books of the dead are open before Him, and Yisra'el says praise?'"

(ibid. 32b)

Chazal's explanation concerning the absence of Hallel strengthens our questions. If awesome judgment so pervades Rosh HaShanah that we cannot allow ourselves joyous expressions of Hallel, why is this overwhelming gravity only implicit — via liturgical restraint — not explicit? Furthermore, if life and death hand in the balance on this day, the Aggadah cited above should mention "the books of life and death," not "the books of the living and the books of the dead." Indeed, what are these books?

There is another serious difficulty with R. Abbahu's statement: While he seems to deem celebratory praise incongruous with judgment, elsewhere the Talmud tells us that Hallel-type exaltation befits Rosh HaShanah and that the very blast of the *shofar* constitutes such adoration. For the ten verses each of Kingship, Remembrance, and *shofar* recited that day represent the ten expressions of Hallel in Tehillim 150, which states: "*Haleluhu* with the blast of a *shofar* ..." (ibid. 150:3).³

If we praise G-d on Rosh HaShanah with a *shofar*, why not with the traditional Hallel?

2. G-D IN HISTORY

Two Paths

Two paths lead to repentance. One is individualistic, the other universal.

The individualistic path focuses on man. Disappointed with himself and his flaws, he resolves to mend his ways. Standing alone, He implores G-d to pardon his sins.

Yom Kippur is the day for the introspective penitent. Fasting and the *vidduy* in the day's liturgy and in the Yom Kippur Temple service allow him to confront his errors and pledge never to repeat them, thereby cleansing himself before G-d. "Said R. Akiva: Fortunate are You, Yisra'el. Before Whom do you become purified ...? Before your Father in heaven" (*Mish. Yoma* 8:9).

In both scope and content, the alternate path to *teshuvah* differs dramatically from the individualistic approach. Here, the focus is not on man but on G-d. Rather than seeking the Almighty through the burden of his sins, man thinks beyond himself. His is a *teshuvah* of Rosh Hashanah. On the day that commemorates the creation of man, he contemplates G-d's role in the history and destiny of mankind. He is awestruck by the magnitude of G-d's role not only as Creator and Master of the universe but as the Prime Mover in human affairs. Mankind's fate is in G-d's hands, and He determines it on Rosh Hashanah. One recognizes his own moment in time as but a fleeting link between man's past and future. He realizes that eternity can be achieved only by connecting to G-d and His people. And so he accepts the Sovereignty of the L-rd and becomes His loyal and inspired servant.

You shall seek G-d your L-rd from there,

[and] you shall find;

for you will seek Him

with all your heart and all your soul.

(Devarim 4:29)

On Yom Kippur, man discovers himself and, in the process discovers G-d. On Rosh HaShanah, man discovers G-d, thereby discovering himself.

Kingship

The most potent vehicle for apprehending G-d's ongoing involvement in history is the sound of the *shofar*. The Jewish nation first heard this blast when G-d revealed Himself as Lawgiver on Mount Sinai. Indeed, the first three verses expressing the theme of *shofar* in "*Musaf*" refer to this momentous event. The next three come from King David's Tehillim, reflecting — as do all the psalms — man's constant longing for his Creator. The three from Nevi'im anticipate the *shofar* blast of ultimate redemption and the fulfillment of Judaism's eschatological vision. In short, by symbolizing G-d's role from the dawn of history until the end of time, the *shofar* powerfully affirms His Kingship.

"Kingship — that you may declare Me King over you. ...And with what? With the shofar" (Rosh HaShanah 16a)

Remembrance

You remember the deeds of the universe and recall all the creations of old. Revealed before You are all hidden things and the manifold mysteries since the beginning of time. There is no forgetfulness before Your throne of glory, and nothing is concealed from Your eyes. ... This day [commemorates] the first of Your handiwork, a remembrance of the first day. "For it is a decree for Yisra'el, a judgment [day] for the L-rd of Ya'akov" (Tehillim 81:4).

...regarding nations, it will be said which are destined for the sword, and which for peace. ...And creatures are recalled on [this day] to be remembered for life and death. Who is not considered on this day?

("Musaf" of Rosh HaShanah)

The *shofar* captures G-d's continuous impact on the affairs and destiny of man. Though Chazal state that the ram sacrificed in Yitzchak's stead was created at twilight on the sixth day of Creation,⁴ R. Ovadyah of Bartenura explains that what came into being then was not the animal itself but its destiny.⁵ At that time, G-d decreed that this creature be "caught by its horns in the thicket" (BeReshith 22>13) at the moment of Yitzchak's binding. The ram's horn therefore symbolizes G-d's interest and intervention in human events ever since Creation. Additionally, this emblem of the binding of Yitzchak recalls the covenantal relationship between G-d and Avraham's descendants, the nation of Yisra'el:

Our L-rd and L-rd of our fathers, remember us favorably before You, and be mindful of us for deliverance and compassion.... And let there appear before You the binding with which our father Avraham bound his son Yitzchak upon the altar and suppressed his compassion to do Your will wholeheartedly; so may Your compassion suppress Your anger toward us. ...For You are He Who remembers all forgotten things ...and may You remember with compassion today the binding of Yitzchak on behalf of his descendants. Blessed are You, G-d, Who remembers the covenant.

("Musaf" of Rosh HaShanah)

"Remembrance — that your remembrances may come before Me for good. And with what? With the shofar (Rosh Hashanah 16a).

3. CONCLUSION: THE ULTIMATE HALLEL

Words can encapsulate moments in history. On Pesach, Hallel commemorates our national deliverance from Mitzrayim by recalling, "When Yisra'el went out of Mitzrayim.... The sea saw [and] fled ..." (Tehillim 114:1, 3). On Shavu'oth, Hallel notes, "The mountains skipped like rams..." (ibid. 114:4), trembling before the presence of the L-rd on Mount Sinai.⁶ On Sukkoth, we declare, "Better to

take refuge in the L-rd than to trust in man" (ibid. 118:8), dependence on G-d being a theme of the holiday. On Chanukah, the festival marking the rededication of the Temple, we sing of "the courtyards of G-d's house" (ibid. 116:19).

Yet what verses can express the essence of Rosh HaShanah, when we recall all of human history and destiny? Surely no praise can capture the awesome scope of this day.

It is not merely G-d's determination of life and death on Rosh HaShanah that prevents us from saying Hallel. It is the unfathomable sweep of the day when all mankind, alive or dead, come before Him.

There is only one way to laud G-d's role in history — *Haleluhu* with the blast of a *shofar*, which recalls G-d's revelation on Mount Sinai; the *shofar*, which underscores the eschatological vision of man; the *shofar*, which symbolizes divine intervention in human affairs since Creation; the *shofar* is the only means of praising G-d on this anniversary of creation, when humanity and G-d took their initial steps together on the glorious path toward mankind's destiny. This breath — and breadth — of history and eternity inspires *teshuvah*.

NOTES

1. See *Yoma* 85b.
2. See *Pesachim* 117a.
3. See *Rosh HaShanah* 32a.
4. See *Avoth* 5:8.
5. See R. Ovadya of Bartenura's commentary on *Avoth* 5:8.
6. See *Pesachim* 118a.