**The Human Dimension of *Shofar***

**Based on a shiur by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

Translated by David Strauss

Enhance (*shapru*) your deeds, do not break the covenant!

Heaven's enhancer shall heed your prayer,

Which pleases Him better than sacrifices. O holy One.

(from the Rosh Ha-shana liturgy)

### I. THe kingship of the *Shofar*

When we think about *shofar* blowing, we intutitively imagine a primal cry that breaches the boundaries of language and makes it unnecessary to spell out the message in clear-cut and precise terms.

The kingship of the *shofar* expresses the primeval aspects of our personalities and experiences. A striking echo of this idea is found in the midrash that likens the sound of the *shofar* to a maternal voice. Sisera's mother weeps over her dead son, giving voice to a natural sound, the wail of a mother that expresses far more than can be expressed in words, crying from the depths of the soul.

The *shofar* too sounds a cry that cannot be expressed in words; a broken sound that merges with the cry of nature; a sound that is rooted in the horn of a living creature. It is like the cry of an animal that senses that it is in immediate danger. The blast of the *shofar* breaches conscious, human existence.

This also finds expression in Halakha. As opposed to the mitzvaof *lulav* and *etrog*, there are almost no laws dealing with the *shofar*. The Talmud dedicates an entire chapter to the ritual fitness of a *lulav*, *etrog*, *hadas* and *arava*, stating that any flaw – slight as it may be – is liable to render them unfit ("if its top was lopped off," "if its leaves became separated").

The Sages were stringent about the laws of an *etrog* to the extent that the Gemara in *Sukka* draws a comparison between it and a *terefa*, in that in both cases a "flaw" disqualifies the object of a mitzva. With regard to the mitzvaof *lulav* and *etrog*, it is the "object" and its requisite beauty that seize our attention.

Regarding a *shofar*, on the other hand, there is almost no consideration of this issue. The mishna indeed speaks of "a *shofar* that was perforated," but according to most *Rishonim*, this hole does not create a flaw in the *shofar*, but rather in the sound coming from it. The passage itself is complicated and we shall not discuss it in detail, but the basic principle is that if the hole interferes with the sound of the *shofar*, it is disqualified. The focus is upon the sound, rather than the *shofar*. Accordingly, if the hole does not affect the sound, the very fact that the object/*shofar* is blemished does not disturb us. Everything revolves around the sound coming out of the *shofar*, the physical object of the *shofar* in itself being insignificant. This is what emerges from the words of Tosafot (*Rosh Ha-shana* 27b, s.v. *nikev*) and the rest of the *Rishonim.*

### II. The Rambam's position: "the mitzva is only to listen to the sound"

The Rambam writes as follows (*Hilkhot Shofar* 1:3):

At the outset, we should not blow a *shofar* [that was used for] idol worship. However, if one sounded it, one has fulfilled his obligation. [In contrast,] should one sound a *shofar* belonging to an apostate city, one has not fulfilled one's obligation.

Concerning a stolen *shofar*: one who blows it fulfills his obligation, because the mitzva is only to listen to the sound, even though the listener does not touch [the *shofar*] or lift it up. The laws of theft do not apply to sound alone.

Similarly, a *shofar* from a whole-burnt offering should not be sounded, but if one sounds it, he fulfills his obligation, because the laws of trespass do not apply with regard to sound alone. If you ask: But surely he has derived benefit from hearing [the *shofar's*] sound? - *mitzvot* were not given for our benefit.

Based on this concept, a person who vows not to derive benefit from a *shofar* may use it to blow the blastsrequired to fulfill the mitzva.

As opposed to a stolen *lulav* which is unfit for the mitzva, the Rambam rules that one who hears the blast of a stolen *shofar* has fulfilled his obligation, because the mitzvadoes not involve the object, i.e., the *shofar* itself, but only the sound that comes out from it.

### III. The Ramban's position: THe *Shofar* as an "enhanced" utensil

The Ramban adopted an approach that is entirely different, both from a halakhic and from a conceptual perspective.

In his *derasha* for Rosh Ha-shana, the Ramban discusses the various species of animals whose horns are fit for the mitzva of *shofar*, while relating to the position of the Tosafot on this issue. In the continuation, the Ramban writes as follows (*Kitvei Ha-Ramban*, p. 229):

With all of this, we have yet another difficulty with this mishna, according to the grammarians, for they say, and so it seems reasonable, that the word "*shofar*" refers to the finished instrument that can be used for blowing, whereas all the horns attached to the heads of animals are called "*keren*," and the term "*shofar*" applies not at all to attached horns, nor to whole horns before they are hollowed out. What disqualification then did they find in the horn of a cow from the verse, "and his horns are like the horns ('*karnei*') of a wild ox"? **Surely that refers to an attached horn**! And similarly a ram with its horns, and so all of them.

We see then that according to the Ramban, the disqualification of an attached horn lies in the fact that it has not been enhanced. He understands that the modification and enhancement (*shipur*) that the *shofar* undergoes is an important component in the fulfillment of the mitzva. This is also emphasized in what he says later:

And those that are scraped after they have been fashioned are called "*shofar*," in the sense of "By His wind the heavens were made fair ('*shifra*')" (*Iyov* 26:13), that He stretched them like a tent.

The Ramban brings an example from the creation of the world, where God took the primeval matter and gave it form. That is to say: Something that is still in its natural state cannot be a *shofar.* Only material that underwent human "enhancement" can serve for the mitzvain a meaningful manner. Prior to that process, it is still a natural object.

According to the Ramban, the *shofar* does not symbolize a return to nature, nor does it give expression to some primeval stage. On the contrary, it expresses what is unique about man – his ability to change nature, to form a utensil out of natural materials. Man alters the purpose of the horn, from a horn that gores to an enhanced utensil that can produce music.

Accordingly, when the Ramban discusses the disqualification of a *shofar* that had been perforated, he approaches the issue from a totally different angle. He writes as follows (*Kitvei ha-Ramban*, p. 235):

"A cracked *shofar*" means a *shofar* that was cracked along its entire length. And so explains Rashi. The reason that it is unfit is that it is not a *shofar*, but rather a broken *shofar*, for any broken utensil is excluded from the category of utensils, whether with respect to ritual impurity or any other matter.

The Ramban draws an interesting analogy between the laws governing the ritual impurity of utensils and the disqualification of a perforated *shofar*. As opposed to the position of the Tosafot cited above, the Ramban maintains that a cracked or perforated *shofar* is not disqualified because of the distorted sound that comes out of it, but because of the blemish in the object itself. Just as a utensil that contracted ritual impurity becomes ritually pure when it breaks, since it is no longer a utensil and therefore returns to its original state as raw material, so too a *shofar* – if it is no longer a utensil, it is no longer "enhanced," and therefore it is unfit for the mitzva*.*

### Iv. A *shofar* that was overlaid with gold

It is no surprise then that the Ramban explains the disqualification of "a *shofar* that was overlaid with gold" in similar fashion, and as opposed to the explanation of the Tosafot*.*

According to the Tosafot (27b, s.v. *tzipahu mi-bi-fenim*), if a person overlaid the inside of a *shofar*, it is unfit for use, "because there is no sound of a *shofar*, but only the sound of gold. And similarly, [it is unfit if he overlaid it] on the outside, since the sound has been changed." The emphasis here is on the **sound of the *shofar*.** It is not the change in the object that makes it unfit, but rather the change in the sound.

According to the Ramban, on the other hand (ibid., p. 236): "The reason that it is disqualified is that something intervenes between his mouth and the *shofar*." The person must be in direct physical contact with the object of the mitzva, and if there is anything intervening, he does not fulfill his obligation. This leads the Ramban to an additional conclusion: "It may be inferred from here that if he distanced the *shofar* from his mouth, and blew upon it and a blast emerged, it is disqualified."

Why is this so? Because there is no direct contact between his mouth and the *shofar*, even though the sound may be clear and strong. This stands in clear contrast to the viewpoint of the Rambam cited above, according to which: "Concerning a stolen *shofar*: one who blows it **fulfills his obligation**, because the mitzva is only to listen to the sound, **even though the listener does not touch [the *shofar*]** or lift it up. The laws of theft do not apply to sound alone."

### V. A *Shofar* from an unclean animal

In another passage in his *derasha* (*Kitvei Ha-Ramban*, p. 232), the Ramban writes:

Even though we learned: "All *shofars* are fit," we must consider that of an unclean animal, from that which they said (*Shabbat* 28a): "For the sacred work none but the skin of a clean animal was declared fit." And here they said: "Since [the *shofar*] comes for a remembrance [before God], we consider it as being in the innermost chamber [of the Temple]." This requires further study.

The fact that the mishna merely states: "All *shofars* are fit," without any further qualification, implies that there is no problem to use the *shofar* of an unclean animal. The Ramban, on the other hand, compares the law of a *shofar* to the law governing *tefilin* and *mezuzot*, according to which "heavenly objects" must come from clean animals.

In light of his approach above, this is understandable: Since the essence of the mitzvadepends on the "utensil," it is possible that not only objects with sanctity, e.g., *tefilin* and *mezuzot*, but all objects used for a mitzva must be made from a clean animal.

The Ramban regards the *shofar* as an instrument of man who improves upon nature and fashions utensils – not a person who **unites** with nature, but a person who **conquers** nature, enhances it, hollows out the animal's horn, and alters its purpose.

### VI. A *Shofar* of Kingship

Various reasons have been given for the mitzva of *shofar* blowing. On the one hand, the *shofar* expresses "kingship." "With trumpets and the sound of a *shofar* make a joyful noise before the Lord, the king" (*Tehillim* 98:5). The connection between the *shofar* and kingship was already noted in early times, as in the famous passage in *Rosh Ha-shana* (16a):

Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Pour out water before Me on Sukkot, so that your rains this year may be blessed. Also recite before Me on Rosh Ha-shana [texts making mention of] kingship, remembrance, and the *shofar*: kingship, so that you may proclaim Me king over you; remembrance, so that your remembrance may rise favorably before Me; and through what? Through the *shofar*.

As the *Rishonim* have explained, the last sentence, "And through what? Through the *shofar*," refers not only to the blessing of remembrance, but also to the blessing of kingship, that is to say: the *shofar* symbolizes the crowning of God as king over the entire world.

### VII. THe *Shofar* of Repentance

On the other hand, the *shofar* is also an expression of prayer and of repentance, as the Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (3:4):

Even though the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Ha-shana is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the *shofar*'s call] is saying: Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep, and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator.

The *shofar* can be seen as directed both upwards and downwards. On the one hand, a person prays through the *shofar* and directes its sound heavenwards, "With trumpets and the sound of a *shofar* make a joyful noise before the Lord, the king." On the other hand, the *shofar* is directed downwards, toward man, helping him repent and raise his prayers to God.

In his novellae at the end of *Rosh Ha-shana* (34a), the Ritva discusses the wording of the blessing over the *shofar*, which seems to depend on the essence of the mitzva: Is the mitzva to "blow" the *shofar* or to "hear the sound of the *shofar*"? The Ritva writes as follows:

There are two questions here: Why is the formula not "concerning the blowing of the *shofar*" as is the case regarding the reading of the *megilla*, where we recite the blessing over the reading and not over the hearing? And furthermore: Why is it with the letter "*lamed*" ("*li-teko'a*," to blow) and not with the word "*al*" ("*al teki'at shofar*," concerning the blowing of the *shofar*), inasmuch as *shofar* blowing is possible by way of others, just like *megilla* reading, the blessing over which is with "*al*" for that reason?

The answer to these questions: First, the essence of the mitzvais the hearing of the *shofar*, and the Torah intended that a person should stir himself to repent, and also that he should appease the attribute of justice on this day, so that if he blew [the *shofar*] but did not hear it, he did not fulfill his obligation.

According to the Ritva, the mitzva is to hear the sound of the *shofar* (in this he is in agreement with many other *Rishonim*). But he adds that there is a direct connection between the definition of the mitzva and its objective. The objective of the mitzva from a conceptual perspective has ramifications regarding its contents. Since the essence of the mitzva is that "a person should stir himself to repent," following the approach of the Rambam ("Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep"), the substance of the mitzva is to hear the sound of the *shofar*.

In light of this, it is possible to explain also the idea of the "*shofar* of kingship," through which man, as it were, crowns God as king, not as a creature of nature, but as one who has been given control over nature - "Be fruitful, and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it." Man was given a certain power, and it is his task to create and rule the earth.

Kingship is generally perceived as a socio-political framework, in which there exists the artificial relationship between ruler and ruled. In contrast, prayer, repentance and the *shofar* express the abandonment of ordinary life and entry into a primeval and more natural world.

The Gemara in *Rosh Ha-shana* (26b) discusses the question whether the *shofar* blown on Rosh Ha-shana must be straight or curved. Rashi, ad loc., connects this to one’s desired posture during prayer.

The Ramban, on the other hand, explains the viewpoint that the *shofar* must be straight in an entirely different manner: "So that our horn shall lifted up on Yom Tov." This is in opposition to other *Rishonim* who speak about man's duty to straighten the crookedness of his heart.

### VIII. THe *Shofar* in the *mikdash*

We saw earlier the two basic approaches to the essence of the *shofar*, whether it should be seen as a "utensil” with independent significance, or whether it should be regarded merely as a means for creating a sound.

In any event, there is a *shofar* that all agree is a utensil: the *shofar* in the Temple. The mishnastates: "The *shofar* used on Rosh Ha-shana [in the Temple] was of an ibex's horn and straight, and its mouth was overlaid with gold, and there were two trumpets, one on each side of it." And the Gemara there states (*Rosh Ha-shana* 27a): "And when this was reported to the Sages they said: This was not the practice save only in the gates of the East and the Mount of the Temple." The source for this is:

"With trumpets and the sound of a *shofar* make a joyful noise before the Lord, the king" (*Tehillim* 98:5) - before the king, the Lord, we require trumpets and the sound of the *shofar*, but elsewhere not.

The *shofar* in the Temple was overlaid with gold, and like a trumpet it was a man-made "utensil," fashioned by him from a natural material. And from there the definition of the verse, "Make a joyful noise before the king, the Lord" - "in the gates of the courtyard," "in the Temple," whether we are dealing with the Temple in the plain sense, or with the Temple as a symbol for the community, the center of the *Shekhina*. There, the *shofar* is blasted in a different way.

The Ramban himself took this approach a step further. It is not clear whether according to the Gemara's conclusion the *shofar* blown in the Temple was straight or curved. According to the Ramban, the *shofar* blown in the Temple and accompanied by trumpets was straight, whereas outside the Temple the *shofar* was curved. The *shofar* sounded in the Temple was a "*shofar* of kingship," directed toward heaven, and not a "*shofar* of repentance," directed at man here on earth. Therefore, the *shofar* was straight, similar to other *shofar*s of kingship.

The straight *shofar* is more perfect as a "utensil," similar to the utensils used by the nations of the world to express "kingship." [As an aside, it should be noted that the *Meshekh Chokhma* took the opposite approach. According to him, it is precisely the *shofar* used in the Temple which had to be curved, for in its essence it is a "*shofar* of prayer," which maintains a connection to the sacrifices, rather than a "*shofar* of kingship," and it is the *shofar* used outside the Temple that is a "*shofar* of kingship."]

According to the Gemara, when Rosh Ha-shana falls on Shabbat, the *shofar* is only blown in a community setting, and not by individuals, for it is only in a communal setting that the "kingship" element of the *shofar* finds expression.

### IX. "ReMEMBer THat which was caught by the horn, those who blow Before you today on the horn"

Going back to where we started, it may be proposed that a "*shofar*" expresses "*shippur*" (enhancement), man's task of perfecting the world. "Enhance your deeds, do not break the covenant!" means: The *shofar* is not only a wake-up call to repent, but also a call to "enhance" and repair the world, to make it a better place. If we do that, God will hear our prayers, for He too "enhanced heaven," improving on nature. When man engages in the task of improving the world, he becomes a partner to the eternal covenant made with God.

Alongside "enhance your deeds" – improving the world by way of human action - we also say on the second day of Rosh Ha-shana: "Remember that which was caught by the horn, those who blow before You on the horn (*keren*)." We come before God both with a "*keren*" (horn), that is directed heavenward, and with a *shofar*, that is directed at man, and call upon Him to improve the world.

(This is a summary of a *shiur* delivered on 22 Elul 5763.)