**S.A.L.T. – ROSH HASHANA 5780**

**PARASHAT VAYELEKH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Rama (O.C. 585:4) observes the time-honored practice that somebody announces to the *tokei’a* – the one sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah – each sound that he is to blow. Before each blast, this individual (the “*makri*”) – customarily the congregation’s rabbi – announces either “*teki’a*,” “*shevarim*,” “*teru’a*,” or “*shevarim-teru’a*,” informing the *tokei’a* which sound he is now to produce, following the required sequence of blasts (as printed in *machzorim*). This is done, the Rama explains, to ensure that no mistakes are made by the *tokei’a*.

The Gaon of Vilna, in his notes to the *Shulchan Arukh*, suggests that the source for this custom is the practice to announce to the *kohanim* each word of the priestly blessing. When the *kohanim* bless the congregation, the *chazan* dictates to them the text of the blessing, one word at a time, to ensure that the *kohanim* do not make any mistakes when pronouncing the blessing. This practice is based on a Midrash cited by the Rosh, in his commentary to Masekhet Megilla (3:21). The Gaon suggests that just as the *kohanim* are told each word of the blessing before they pronounce it, the “*tokei’a*” is similarly told each *shofar* sound before he produces it.

The Chafetz Chaim, in his *Mishna Berura* (585:18) cites the ruling of the *Magen Avraham* (based on the Shela) that even the first sound blown by the *tokei’a* – the initial *teki’a* sound- should be announced before it is blown. Although it is highly unlikely that the *tokei’a* will make a mistake when blowing the first sound, nevertheless, even this sound should be announced. However, in his *Sha’ar Ha-tziyun* (585:31), the Chafetz Chaim rules differently, noting that this announcement could constitute a *hefsek* (improper interruption) between the *berakha* recited immediately before the blowing, and the blowing. Noting that this custom is rooted in the practice to announce the words of *birkat kohanim*, the Chafetz Chaim references the opinions that the first word of *birkat kohanim* (“*Yevarekhekha*”) should not be announced to the *kohanim*. And although common custom does not follow that view, the Chafetz Chaim writes, this is because the practice to announce the words of *birkat kohanim* for the *kohanim* is a requirement established already by *Chazal*. The custom to announce the *shofar* sounds, by contrast, has no clear halakhic basis, and thus the announcement of the first word would appear to constitute an unwarranted *hefsek* in between the *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *shofar* and the fulfillment of the *mitzva*.

Common practice, however, follows the view cited in *Mishna Berura*, and even the initial *teki’a* sound is announced to the *tokei’a* before it is blown.

What might be the deeper significance of this comparison between *birkat kohanim* and the sounding of the *shofar*? Is this custom purely practical, intended to avoid mistakes, or might there be a deeper meaning behind the parallel between the announcement of the words of *birkat kohanim* and the announcement of the *shofar* sounds?

In *birkat kohanim*, the *kohanim* express their wishes for the congregation, that they should find favor in God’s eyes, and be granted peace and prosperity. The sounding of the *shofar* is a call for introspection and change. As the Rambam famously explains (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:4), the *shofar* is intended to “awaken” us from our spiritual slumber, to motivate us to scrutinize our conduct and resolve to grow and improve. Symbolically, then, announcing the *shofar* sounds to the *tokei’a* may perhaps reflect the need to carefully consider our words before expressing criticism in an effort to bring about change. Our words when offering criticism should be no less carefully measured than they are when “blessing” people, when offering compliments and good wishes. Too often, we are far stingier with praise than we are with criticism. The custom to model the sounding of the *shofar* after *birkat kohanim* perhaps reminds us that we must be at least as careful when sounding the *shofar*, when calling upon people to change their behavior, as we are when dispensing compliments and praise, and speak only words that will have the desired effect, and not those which will accomplish the very opposite.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (33b) raises the question as to the source for the requirement to sound specifically a *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. After all, the Torah never actually commands sounding a *shofar*, and merely establishes that Rosh Hashanah must be observed as a “*yom teru’a*” – a day of “sounding” (Bamidbar 29:1), without naming any particular instrument that must be used. The need for a *shofar*, the Gemara answers, is based on the association between Rosh Hashanah and the onset of the *yovel* (jubilee year), when a *shofar* is sounded. The Torah in Sefer Vayikra (25:9) explicitly commands sounding a *shofar* (“*ve-ha’avarta shofar teru’a*”) on Yom Kippur at the beginning of the *yovel*, and, as the Gemara demonstrates, the Torah alludes to a correspondence between the observance of Rosh Hashanah and the onset of the jubilee. It is on the basis of this correspondence that *Chazal* established that the “*teru’a*” on Rosh Hashanah must be done specifically with a *shofar*, like on the *yovel*.

Many have noted the significance of this connection between Rosh Hashanah and *yovel*, as reflecting the theme of “freedom.” The *shofar* blast on the *yovel* proclaims the emancipation of indentured servants. A servant who was forced to sell himself into servitude is released after six years of work, but he has the option of remaining, and if he chooses to remain, he leaves his master at the onset of *yovel*. Just as the *shofar* sounded on *yovel* announces the release of indentured servants, so is the *shofar* sound on Rosh Hashanah intended to “release” us from all forms of “servitude” that undermine, or conflict with, our subservience to the Almighty. The *shofar* blast on Rosh Hashanah proclaims the crowning of God as the sole Ruler over the earth, thus necessitating our freeing ourselves from our “servitude” to vanity, to our negative habits and sinful instincts, redirecting our fealty exclusively to the King of the universe.

The Tolna Rebbe added further insight into this association between Rosh Hashanah and *yovel*. The Gemara earlier (Rosh Hashanah 8b) discusses the servant’s status during the first ten days of the *yovel* year, until the sounding of the *shofar* on Yom Kippur. During this period, the Gemara establishes, the servant is, on the one hand, released from servitude, but on the other, he is not permitted to return home. Instead, during this period, servants “eat, drink, and rejoice with the crowns on their heads.” They are to spend these days celebrating, until they return to their homes after the sounding of the *shofar*. The Tolna Rebbe finds this celebration very significant. After all, the servant willfully chose to remain in his master’s service after having been given the opportunity to leave after six years, because of his affection for his master and for the non-Jewish maidservant whom he is permitted to marry during his term of servitude (Shemot 21:5). Yet, in anticipation of his release, he is expected to celebrate. The servant is to spend that week contemplating the value of his freedom, and embracing this opportunity. And thus by the time the *shofar* is sounded on Yom Kippur, he will leave exuberantly – welcoming his newfound opportunities with great enthusiasm.

By the same token, the Tolna Rebbe explains, on Rosh Hashanah, we are to “release” ourselves from all that we have subjugated ourselves to, with joy and excitement. Rosh Hashanah is a joyous, festive occasion, when, alongside the fear of judgment, we enthusiastically recommit ourselves to God’s rule. We are expected not to begrudgingly renounce our other “masters,” but rather to “eat, drink, and rejoice” in festive celebration of our reaffirmed commitment. And even if until now we, like the indentured servant, willfully chose to remain chained to other “masters,” Rosh Hashanah is the time to change our perspective, and to joyfully release ourselves from all that hinders us from reaching our full potential, entering the new year fervently committed to devoting ourselves solely to the service of our Creator.

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (33b) draws a curious association between the *shofar* sound and a verse in Sefer Shoftim (5:28) describing the weeping of the mother of Sisera, a Canaanite general who waged an unsuccessful battle against *Benei Yisrael*. *Targum Onkelos* (Bamidbar 29:1) translates the word “*teru’a*” – the word used by the Torah in reference to *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashanah – as “*yevava*,” which the Gemara links to the prophetess Devora’s description of Sisera’s mother’s cries: “*va-teyabeiv*.” Devora envisions Sisera’s mother anxiously looking out the window, awaiting her son’s triumphant return from battle. As time passed, she grew increasingly fearful that tragedy struck – which is, indeed, what had happened. The word “*va-teyabeiv*” is the basis for the Gemara’s interpretation of the word “*teru’a*” as referring to a crying sound.

*Tosafot*, citing the *Arukh*, extend this association even further, claiming that the widespread custom to sound one hundred *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah commemorates Sisera’s mother’s cries. Tradition teaches that she wept one hundred times, and we commemorate these cries by producing one hundred sounds with the *shofar*. Many different explanations have been offered for the point of connection between the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah and Sisera’s mother’s weeping as she peered in vain through the window.

The Tolna Rebbe offers an especially creative approach, one which focuses on the subsequent verses in Sefer Shoftim, that speak of the attempts made by Sisera’s mother’s advisors to calm her fears. Devora imagines them assuring Sisera’s mother that Sisera had not yet returned because he and his troops were busy dividing the spoils looted from *Benei Yisrael*. Not knowing that Sisera’s army had been vanquished, these advisors sought to comfort Sisera’s mother by depicting Sisera as making his way home laden with riches. The Tolna Rebbe suggests that when *Tosafot* speak of Sisera’s mother weeping one hundred times, this means that she was repeatedly consoled by her advisor’s assurances, stopping her weeping until more time elapsed, when she would resume crying only to be consoled again. Over and over again – one hundred times – her fears were falsely eased by the prospect of her son coming home a fabulously wealthy man. This incident, the Tolna Rebbe noted, reflects the power of greed, how a person plagued with a lust for material wealth can never feel satisfied, and always desires more. The comfort Sisera’s mother experienced each time she imagined her son collecting additional spoils testifies to her insatiable desire for wealth, how nothing brought her more joy and satisfaction than the promise of vast amounts of riches.

This, the Tolna Rebbe explained, might be the reason why the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is linked with the story of Sisera’s mother. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the day of man’s creation, offering us the exciting opportunity for rebirth and renewal as we begin the new year. The first human beings, Adam and Chava, were given the entirety of *Gan Eden* – except for one tree, and they easily succumbed to the temptation to partake of the fruit of that one tree. As we celebrate our “re-creation,” we are to commit ourselves not to repeat this mistake, to enter the world content and satisfied with all that God has given us. We are to begin our new lives feeling grateful and gratified over all we have, rather than constantly feeling deprived and displeased. Our process of renewal on Rosh Hashanah must include our renewed gratitude and appreciation, so that the coming year will be one of joy and contentment, when we celebrate all that we have, rather than focusing on what we do not have.

Tuesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (11a) tells that it was on Rosh Hashanah when Yosef was released from the Egyptian dungeon and brought before Pharaoh. Yosef had been imprisoned on false charges of attempting to rape his master’s wife, and after languishing in prison for twelve years, he was released through a most unlikely sequence of events. Pharaoh dreamt an unusual dream, and his cup-bearer recommended that the king consult with Yosef – who had successfully interpreted the cup-bearer’s dream when he sat in prison. Yosef was brought before Pharaoh, and his interpretation so impressed the king that he promptly named Yosef his vizier – instantly transforming Yosef from an unknown prisoner to the second most powerful man in the Egyptian Empire.

What is the significance of the fact that this miracle occurred on Rosh Hashanah?

One possibility is that the Gemara here underscores the theme of renewal, that on Rosh Hashanah we are given the opportunity – and presented with the challenge – to create ourselves and our lives anew. Just as Yosef’s life was suddenly transformed on Rosh Hashanah, so are we able to change ourselves, our conduct, our beings, and our world, through the process of introspection and reaffirming our commitment to live the way God wants us to live. In a similar vein, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* taught that Rosh Hashanah empowers us to “free” ourselves from the “chains” that “imprison” us. We oftentimes feel trapped by certain negative habits, tendencies and routines, and the occasion of Rosh Hashanah brings a special power to extricate ourselves from these unwanted bonds so we can become the people whom we truly wish to become.

Another possibility is that *Chazal* here seek to demonstrate the gravity of the judgment on Rosh Hashanah. As we know from text of the *Zikhronot* section of the *musaf* service on Rosh Hashanah, on this day God decrees the fate of entire countries – whether they will prosper and flourish, or whether they will be struck by catastrophe. A drastic example of how nations’ fate hang in the balance on Rosh Hashanah is the story of Pharaoh’s dream, which he beheld on the night of Rosh Hashanah. It was this vision which effectively saved Egypt – and the entire region – from starvation. God decreed that a devastating famine would strike the region seven years later – but He also put into place the system that would rescue the region from widespread, deadly starvation, sending Pharaoh a dream that led to Yosef’s prediction and program of saving grain in anticipation of the drought. The future of the empire and the region was being determined that day, and God mercifully chose to rescue the region from what would have been a catastrophic condition.

Returning to Yosef’s personal transformation, we might also point to the fact that Yosef’s life mission began on that day. As he languished in the dungeon, falsely accused of a severe crime, it appeared that Yosef would never be heard of again, that he would spend the rest of his life sitting idly, in obscurity, unable to make any contribution to the world. All of Yosef’s extraordinary potential – his intelligence, insight, charisma and piety – seemed to be going to waste, withering in a dark, dreary prison cell. Suddenly, Yosef was lifted from the dungeon and thrust into a position in the capacity of which he saved untold numbers of lives. By teaching us that this transformation occurred on Rosh Hashanah, *Chazal* perhaps seek to challenge us to do what we can to leave our own personal “prisons,” to see if maybe we have voluntarily confined ourselves to the comfort of obscurity and inactivity. Whether out of misplaced humility, low self-esteem, or simple laziness, we might – knowingly or unknowingly – be “imprisoning” our potential, denying the world the valuable resources that we can offer. Rosh Hashanah, the day when Yosef left the obscurity of prison to the palace of the world’s largest empire, is the day when we are called upon to leave our own self-made “prisons” and make the decision to enter whichever “palaces” in which we can help, give, and make the most significant contribution to the world that we can make.

Wednesday

In the final verses of Parashat Vayeilekh, we read that Moshe called for the assembly of the nation’s leaders to present to them the poem of *Ha’azinu*, which warned of the consequences of *Benei Yisrael*’s breach of their covenant with God. Moshe asked the *Leviyim* to assemble the leaders for this purpose, and the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 15:15) raises the question of why he did not instead sound the *chatzotzerot* – the special trumpets used for, among other purposes, assembling the nation’s leaders. As we read in Sefer Bamidbar (10:1-10), God commanded Moshe to make silver trumpets which would be sounded as signals, including a signal to assemble the leadership. Why, then, did Moshe instruct the *Leviyim* to bring him the leaders, instead of sounding the *chatzotzerot*?

The Midrash answers that the *chatzotzerot* used by Moshe were not to be used again by anybody – not even by his successor, Yehoshua, and they were therefore buried. Specifically, the Midrash adds, the trumpets were buried just before Moshe’s death, and so they were not available at the time Moshe presented the poem of *Ha’azinu*, just prior to his passing. The Midrash cites in this context the verse in Kohelet (8:8), “*Ein shilton be-yom ha-mavet*” – There is no authority on the day of death.” On Moshe’s final day of life, he no longer exercised “*shilton*” (“authority”), and this loss was expressed in the burial of his *chatzotzerot*.

Symbolically, the sounding of the trumpets represents control and influence over other people. Through the sounding of the trumpets, Moshe had the nation travel and had people assemble. These instruments were a powerful symbol of the influence he wielded. Once a person departs, although his memory and legacy might continue to guide and inspire, nevertheless, he can no longer directly exert any sort of control, and the extent of his influence is diminished. Appropriately, then, as Moshe prepared to depart from this world, his *chatzotzerot* were buried.

The barring of any subsequent use of Moshe’s instruments may perhaps be understood in a similar vein. Every person has his or her own “trumpets,” a unique way to influence and impact people. No two people’s “*chatzotzerot*” are exactly alike. We all affect other people differently, and have very different ways of exerting influence. The Midrash here reminds us that as our time on this world is limited, we must seize the opportunities given to us to sound our special “trumpets,” to make the unique impact that we and only we are capable of making. Nobody else can use our “*chatzotzerot*,” can exert the precise same kind of influence that we can, and so we must all sound our personal “*chatzotzerot*” as effectively as possible during our brief sojourn in this world.

Thursday

In the *haftara* read on Shabbat Shuva (the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), the prophet Yoel conveys to the people God’s call to prayer and repentance in response to the devastation wrought by swarms of locusts. God promises that in reward for their prayer and repentance, He would bless them with prosperity (2:19) and would keep the “*tzefoni*” away from them (2:20). The simple meaning of this word is that it refers to the swarms of locusts, which, apparently, originated from the north (“*tzafon*”). Rashi brings those who explain “*tzefoni*” as a reference to foreign nations who attacked *Eretz Yisrael* from its northern border; God will respond to the people’s prayers by blessing them both with economic prosperity and with protection from hostile nations.

A different interpretation is given by the Gemara in Masekhet Sukka (52a), which lists “*tzefoni*” as one the seven names of the *yetzer ha-ra* - our negative instincts. The promise announced by Yoel – “*ve-et ha-tzefoni archik mei-aleikhem*” – is understood by the Gemara to mean that in the future, God will eliminate our sinful inclination so that we will serve Him properly. The *yetzer ha-ra* is given this name, the Gemara explains, because it is “*tzafun ve-omeid be-libo shel adam*” – hidden deep within a person’s heart. The Gemara adds that the prophet here speaks of how the *yetzer ha-ra* will be “punished” for instigating the Jewish People to sin, for relentlessly attempting to cause us to stumble. Abayei adds that this is especially true of Torah scholars, who are particularly vulnerable to the lures of the evil inclination.

Many have noted that the seven names given by the Gemara to the *yetzer ha-ra* likely refer to its numerous different manifestations, the different kinds of spiritual challenges that we face. The phenomenon of “*tzefoni*,” then, might speak of our “hidden” evil inclination, the challenge of unholy instincts that appear to us as holy, or at least innocent. The form of *yetzer ha-ra* referred to by the name “*tzefoni*” is improper thoughts, attitudes and practices which do not seem to us as improper, which we can easily justify as acceptable, or even mistake for piousness.

If so, then we can perhaps understand why it is specifically in reference to the “*tzefoni*” that Abayei observes the particular vulnerability of Torah scholars. Those who are spiritually accomplished, who have devoted themselves to intensive study and to meticulous and devout religious observance, are especially prone to experience the phenomenon of “*tzefoni*” – the “hidden” *yetzer ha-ra*. They might complacently trust their instincts, and assume that they have reached the point where they are naturally inclined to follow God’s will, such that they fail to exercise careful discretion in how they speak and act. And, having grown accustomed to teaching and giving guidance, they are prone to the “hidden” vice of arrogance and excessive self-assurance, confidently thinking that they are always correct and can never be criticized. The Gemara’s discussion of the “*tzefoni*” thus reminds us to beware of our “hidden” vices, to realize that negative behavior does not always appear negative, and that no matter how much we grow and advance, we must always introspect and honestly assess our conduct so we do not arrogantly ignore our faults, and we instead constantly work to correct them.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeilekh tells that Moshe, before his death, wrote the complete text of the Torah and gave it to the *Leviyim* who carried the ark, instructing them to store the scroll alongside the ark (or inside the ark; see Rashi, based on Bava Batra 14b). Moshe tells the *Leviyim*, “Take this Torah scroll and place it to the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, where it will serve for you as testimony” (31:26). The original copy of the Torah was to be carefully preserved, as an eternal testimony.

The *Beit Yosef*, in discussing the laws of the congregational Torah reading (O.C. 139), cites the *Orchot Chayim* (by Rav Aharon of Lunel) as pointing to this verse as the source for the practice to hold the handles of the *Sefer Torah* during the reading. Both the reader, and the one who is called to recite the *berakha* over the Torah, customarily hold the scroll’s handles. The *Orchot Chayim* cites the Talmud Yerushalmi as bringing this verse from Parashat Vayeilekh – “**Take** this Torah scroll” – as the source of this practice. Just as the *Leviyim* took the *Sefer Torah* from Moshe, so must we take hold of the Torah scroll.

Interestingly, the *Orchot Chayim* formulates this custom by stating that one takes hold of the Torah “as if he has now received it from Mount Sinai.” In his view, the practice to hold the *Sefer Torah* symbolizes our receiving the Torah from God at Mount Sinai, an event which is reenacted through the congregational Torah reading.

However, in light of the citation of this verse from Parashat Vayeilekh as the source for this custom, we might explain that the custom serves to reenact not our receiving the Torah from Sinai, but rather the *Leviyim*’s receiving the Torah from Moshe. When we read the Torah, we are to accept upon ourselves the burden of responsibility which Moshe assigned to the *Leviyim* – the responsibility to preserve the Torah and transmit it intact to the next generation. Each time we study, we are being given that piece of Torah knowledge just as the *Leviyim* were given the Torah scroll from Moshe – charged with the obligation to preserve it. Learning is not merely an intellectual exercise, but rather part of the historical process of the Torah’s preservation and transmission. And so every time we learn a portion of Torah, we are to approach the experience with a sense of mission and responsibility, committed to doing our part to ensure the successful, accurate transmission of our sacred tradition to future generations.

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