YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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In memory of Batya Furst z"l  
Niftera 28 Elul 5765.  
Dedicated by her family.

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[**“The Shofar Is Considered Service in the Holy of Holies”**](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/%E2%80%9C-shofar-considered-service-holy-holies%E2%80%9D)

**Harav Yehuda Amital zt”l**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Speak to the Children of Israel, saying, “In the seventh month, on the first of the month, you shall have a Sabbath, a remembrance of sounding the shofar, a holy gathering.” (Lev. 23:24)

The shofar is closely associated with memory. Usually, the reason for a mitzva does not have halakhic ramifications, but this is not the case with the sounding of the shofar. According to the Mishna, the horn of any animal may be used for a shofar – except for a cow. The Gemara explains that the horn of a cow recalls the sin of the golden calf, and “a prosecutor cannot become an advocate for the defense.” The following discussion then ensues:

Rav Hisda said, “Why does the High Priest not wear his golden garments when he enters the Holy of Holies to perform the service? Because a prosecutor cannot become an advocate for the defense.”…But he wears the golden garments outside [the Holy of Holies]! We are speaking of the service in the inner Sanctuary. But is the shofar not also sounded outside [the Holy of Holies]? Since its purpose is to awaken remembrance, it is as if it were used within. (Rosh HaShana 26a)

The negative association with the golden garments applies only inside the Holy of Holies. Generally, gold arouses associations of splendor and majesty. However, the Holy of Holies is an area of special sensitivity. In this place, the golden garments indeed recall the sin of the golden calf, and therefore the High Priest enters wearing linen garments. What the Gemara teaches here is that the shofar too is a kind of “service inside the Holy of Holies”; therefore it may not be made from the horn of a cow.

*Hazal* here are saying something momentous: through the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShana, all of Israel are in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies; they are like the High Priest who enters to perform his service wearing linen garments. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi writes (*Kuzari* III:5) that a pious person should try to imagine great moments such as the *Akeda*, the Revelation at Sinai, or “the Sanctuary built by Moses and its order of service, and the dwelling of the divine glory in the Temple.” Regarding the Temple, this means an attempt to feel the exaltation and awe engendered by God’s Presence.

The time to do so is during the sounding of the shofar. During these moments we are, as it were, like the High Priest, in his linen robes, in the Holy of Holies. What a special moment! On Yom Kippur, the Jewish people stand in front of the Temple, while the High Priest enters, alone, the Holy of Holies: “And there shall be no one in the Tent of Meeting when he comes to make atonement in the holy place, until he comes out” (Lev. 16:17). On Rosh HaShana, however, anyone who listens to the shofar is standing, as it were, inside the Holy of Holies.

Why does our remembrance before God bring us into that holiest of places? Because when our remembrance comes before Him, it is not a distant recollection, as when a person says, “From afar the Lord appeared to me” (Jer. 31:2), or “Remember the Lord afar off” (51:50). It is a memory in which God accompanies the person, as it were, and brings him into His inner chamber. Then a person really feels God’s Presence. This is a remembrance in the sense of “This is my God and I shall extol Him” (Ex. 15:2).

This moment of sounding the shofar should arouse fear and trembling: “Enter into the rock and hide in the dust, for fear of the Lord and for the glory of His majesty” (Is. 2:10). This is a moment of repentance. However, it is a repentance that is not accompanied by confession, for on Rosh HaShana it is forbidden to confess. This is a repentance of both shaking oneself out of complacency and achieving elevation, “like a chicken shaking itself from ashes” (see Genesis Rabba 75).

The High Priest needs to prepare for seven days in anticipation of his entry into the Holy of Holies (Mishna Yoma 1:1). Before sounding the shofar too, there is a need for preparation, as *Hazal* taught:

R. Pinhas said in the name of R. Yehuda b. Levi, in the name of R. Alexandri, “Why does Israel not sound the shofar during the morning service, but rather only during the Musaf service? So that when they stand in judgment they are full of mitzvot, and will emerge vindicated.” (*Pesikta Rabbati* 40)

Perhaps this is how we can explain the custom of two sets of shofar blowing, the “seated blasts” (*teki’ot dimeyushav*) that precede the “standing blasts” (*tekiot dime’umad*). The Gemara teaches that we do this “in order to confound Satan.” Rashi explains:

“In order to confound” – so that he will not indict. When he hears Israel showing affection for the mitzvot, his words will be blocked. (Rashi, Rosh HaShana 16a)

Faithful adherence to the mitzvot is what prepares us for the sounding of the shofar.

Instead of a seven-day period of preparation, our Rabbis prescribed the recital of Psalm 47 seven times prior to the sounding of the shofar (cited in *Siddur Beit Yaakov* of Rabbi Yaakov Emden). This psalm expresses the acceptance of God’s sovereignty by all the nations, and this is the best possible preparation for the shofar. The moment when the Jewish people commune with God is significant for the entire world, and therefore we conclude with the words:

Sing out to God, sing! Sing out to our King, sing! For God is the King of all the earth; sing out a psalm. God reigns over the nations; God sits upon the throne of His holiness. The nobles of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the God of Abraham, for the defenses of the earth belong to God; He is greatly exalted. (vv. 7–10)

[This sicha is excerpted from Rav Amital’s book, [*When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/when-god-is-near.html) (Maggid, 2015).]