



Who Am I?

Point to yourself. Where did you point? Are you a specific body part? Who are you? This is one of the most simple yet sophisticated questions anyone can ask of themselves and the New Year is a great time to start.

The central command of Rosh Hashanah and the Biblical name that represents its essence is יום תְּרוּעָה – a day of *terua* sounding (Bamidbar 29:1; Vayikra 23:24). In defining the term *terua*, which comes from the *shofar*, the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 33b) translates it to be a *yevava*, sobbing or moaning. This is derived from a story in Shoftim (5:28), in which a pagan army general named Sisera went to war with the Israelites and was defeated and killed. Sisera's mother looked out of the window, awaiting her son's return, and cried (*vateyabev*). Tosafot (Rosh Hashanah 33b) cites the custom of sounding a total of 100 *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah to parallel the 100 cries she let out as she waited in vain for her son.

The reason she is sobbing seems obvious – imagine waiting for a loved one and not knowing whether they will ever return. I remember when my brother called us from the army to let us know he was going to be without a phone for a few days, as the IDF was about to enter Gaza in Operation Protective Edge. I remember searching for a lost child in our community along with thousands of others. It's a terrible feeling.

Unable to do anything about her son's return, Sisera's mother lets out a guttural cry because that's all she can do. That is the broken sound of the *shofar*, a plea from a place of desperation to pierce the heavens in search of a positive outcome.

Perhaps there is more in this story that gets to the very heart of what the *shofar* represents. We are never told the name of Sisera's mother. We are never told what she did or what kind of person she was. Rather, she is only mentioned by association, suggesting perhaps that she has no real independent identity other than her relationship to her son. Therefore, when she loses her son, she loses the only sense of identity she ever knew and cries out in anguish.

She metaphorically looks out of the window and does not see her son on the other side. She sees a translucent reflection of herself. A self she did not fully recognize beyond the context of her son. If one were to try to touch one's reflection in water, it would dissolve and if one were to reach out to a reflection in the window, it always remains beyond reach. A reflection is simply an empty, intangible image. This is symbolic of Sisera's mother's perception of herself without her son. She was only ever defined by someone else and the thought of losing that was terrifying.

Most people are defined by something other than their essence. Someone who is good at sport, music or art can become defined by that talent rather than let it be but one expression of

who they are. When that is lost, they often experience an existential crisis – who are they now? I remember a close friend who was a phenomenal soccer player before he damaged his leg and couldn't play again. He was faced with the big question – now what? Others whose identities are based around another person are faced with the same question when that relationship is severed.

We often classify ourselves by our job or title or relationship to a relative. However, if our internal identity is built upon something external, we are profoundly affected when the externality changes. This unique period of political uncertainty, Covid-19 and other global instabilities has caused many to question basic assumptions, which will undoubtedly force a different Rosh Hashanah.

The cry of the *shofar*, like that of Sisera's mother, beckons us to ask who we truly are – what makes us who we are and how are we going to focus in the New Year on that which contributes to the person we truly want to be. More than the ephemeral reflection Sisera's mother saw, let us build an identity that is palpable, substantive and of immense value. So we can appreciate who we are and know who we want to become.

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Benji Levy is CEO of Mosaic United.