Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

THE HIGH HOLIDAYS AND THE ART OF LISTENING

Each chag relates to one of our senses. Pesach connects to speaking – תְּפִלְיָה – the mouth tells. We are commanded to relate the story of the Exodus via the Haggadah and “all who expound upon Yetziat Mitzrayim, יָרֵה הָרִנָּה,” are commended.

Shavuot relates to seeing. The Torah was given amidst a dramatic visual backdrop – כל העם רואים את הקולות – the entire nation saw the thunder and the lightning. And Sukkot celebrates the sense of touch; we use our hands to build the sukkah and beat the arba minim and hold the hoshanot.

But what of the High Holidays? I suggest they focus on listening. No other time of the year is so sensitive to sound. The sound of prayer, of greeting one another, asking mechila and wishing a כְּתִיבָה וַחֲתִימָה טוֹבָה – asking one another, thanking and safeguarding each other for the future. The powerful poems and songs which fill our liturgy, the Selichot chanted deep into the night or at the break of dawn. This is the time of year when chazanim and choirs reign supreme.

This theme of listening is most clearly connected to the sounds of the shofar. For 40 days – from Rosh Chodesh Elul until that dramatic last moment of Neilah – it is the shofar that provides the soundtrack. This number 40 is significant: 40 years in the desert; 40 days on Har Sinai, 40 days of the flood, 40 days after conception when an embryo is formed, etc. 40 represents a unit of time, an incubation during which amazing transformations can be made.

The 40 days of the Yamim Noraim are meant to change us into a new creation, an improved model of our former self. Indeed, we are commanded to listen attentively to the shofar blasts and discern the message which each note carries: the sounds of contrition and humility, the sounds of the broken heart, the sounds of majesty, the trumpeting of the glory of the King and His deep devotion to us.

Together, these sounds create a symphony that instills in us a sense of gratitude to G-d, reminding us how dependent we are on Hashem each moment of our existence. At the same time, these sounds overwhelm us with a deep pride and confidence in who we are, and what we can be: a nation of destiny, an Am Segula cherished by our Creator and safeguarded by His mighty Hand.

In the sounds of the shofar, with lyrics provided by the Machzor, we perceive our whole history, from Creation to Flood to Matan Torah to the Exodus to our return to Israel and eventual redemption, when the Shofar Gadol will be sounded and the entire world will hear. The sounds of the shofar – like all music – have a mystical power that can penetrate to the deepest parts of our neshamot.

The surprising bracha on tekiat shofar is, לא שמיע קול שופר. Not to blow the shofar, but to hear it! Nowhere else do we have such a bracha; not for Megillah reading הנני אדם, nor Torah study הלAMENTациות, neither. The message is simply to hear. A message echoed in the Selichot’s לא Namen אהל הţורף; and in praising G-d as שומע תפילת.

We must train ourselves to listen and to hear. It’s not easy; it’s an acquired trait. To be a good listener requires patience and humility. It’s not contingent on a reply, we just need to know someone out there is listening. People often complain, “This one-way conversation is so frustrating; I speak to Him, but He never answers!” But isn’t it wonderful to talk and not be interrupted, to have G-d’s complete attention, to say what we want to say, with faith that He hears us out?

As for answers, perhaps, if when we are done praying and pouring out our hearts, we stop to listen – deeply – we might just hear G-d reaching towards us. נאנה ועומדים המים, says the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, קול דקמא הדרק 것입니다. A thin little whisper emerges amidst the grand blasts of the shofar. That small voice – perhaps the one inside our head, or inside our heart – is trying to speak to us, and it carries a powerful message.

This art of listening doesn’t always come naturally. But if we work at it, if we learn to listen, to hear, then a whole new world – G-d’s world – will open up to us.

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