



Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

THE HIGH HOLIDAYS AND THE ART OF LISTENING

Each *chag* relates to one of our senses. Pesach connects to speaking – פה-סָח – the mouth tells. We are commanded to relate the story of the Exodus via the Haggadah and “all who expound upon *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, וְאֵת הַלְפִידִים, are commended.

Shavuot relates to seeing. The Torah was given amidst a dramatic visual backdrop – וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת – the entire nation saw the thunder and the lightning. And Sukkot celebrates the sense of touch; we use our hands to build the *sukkah*, hold the *arba minim* and beat 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 וְחַתִּימָה טוֹבָה*. 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 *chazan* 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, שׁוֹפָר connects to לְהִשְׁתַּפֵּר, to improve. The key is listening. We must 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, לְשִׁמְעַת קוֹל שׁוֹפָר. Not to blow the shofar, but to hear it! Nowhere else do we have such a *bracha*; not for Megillah reading (עַל מִקְרָא מְגִלָּה), nor Torah study (לְעִסּוּק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה). The message is simply to hear. A message echoed in

the *Selichot's* לְשִׁמְעַת אֵל הַרְנָה וְאֵל הַתְּפִלָּה, and in שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ, in praising G-d as שׁוֹמְעַת תְּפִלָּה.

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. וְבִשְׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע, says the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, וְקוֹל דְּמִמָּה דְקָה יִשְׁמַע. 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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