

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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THE NESHAMA'S CRY

by Rabbi Ari Sytner

Suppose that after your lifetime your soul leaves the world and ascends to Heaven to meet your Creator. After reviewing your life, G-d sentences you to spend every day of eternity attending High Holy Day services in shul. Upon the conclusion of a long day of services, you head home, only to return again in the morning for more of the same. By going through this daily monotony of services, one is sure to arrive at one of two conclusions: either (s)he is in Heaven or in Hell.

For the active synagogue participant who utilizes these Days of Awe as an opportunity to reacquaint oneself with his/her mission in life, prayer represents a time of great inner satisfaction and fulfillment, perhaps even Heaven-like. If, however, these Holy Days are viewed as painfully long Hebrew services, accompanied by an occasional sounding of a ram's horn, then the experience itself may very well be one's worst nightmare.

The good news is that finding meaning and fulfillment from the High Holiday services are much easier than most people think. Many of us struggle with prayer because we do not know the words. However, the reality is, words or no words, we all know how to pray. The first step to reaching your prayer potential is to realize that the linguistic barrier that we often (cont. on p. 4)



'A SPIRITUAL SYMPHONY OF SOULS'

A LETTER ABOUT LIFE

by C.W.

As the New Year approaches, there is much time spent contemplating the year we've recently completed and the year to come. In our reflections, we come to acknowledge how many times the prayers that we offered have been answered, despite not having even realized it at the time. And in recognizing how prayers are answered, we see the force that we have in our own lives... by simply putting our lives into G-d's hands. The following letter received by Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald is a tale of exactly such an experience:

Dear Rabbi Buchwald,

I hope that you and your family are as well as can be expected --- given the happenings in Israel and in the USA. Forgive me for not responding to you sooner. Despite the delay, I am happy to report that in response to my last request, G-d has accepted the *Tzedakah* (charity) which I contributed for the prayers that you offered for the health of the people whose names I sent you. Given that success, I thought I'd share with you my personal strategy on how I plan to influence G-d, as shown in this story. The story is true, as much as the retelling of a story can be true - as much as one can discern what really happened to a little boy.

In Mineola, Long Island, a number of years ago, a little boy was angry with his parents. He was absolutely convinced that they always lied to him. He decided to test (cont. on p. 2)

WITH THE BLAST OF THE TRUMPET AND THE SOUND OF A HORN

By Linda Leshnik

One of my fondest childhood memories is of my mother reading to me the story about the crumbling walls of Jericho. How, I wondered, could the blast of a trumpet bring down a stone wall, which, in my imagination, was as thick as the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The trumpet sounds of the Israelite besiegers must have been enormously forceful to penetrate such dense stones.

Years later I learned that while the shofar was used to bring down the walls of Jericho, the children of Israel actually used two kinds of wind instruments during their wanderings in the desert and later in the Temple. The *Mishna* (Talmudic Oral Code) tells us that in the Temple, a shofar was blown, as were the trumpets (*chatzrotzot*), and, indeed, one of the Psalms calls upon us to "raise a shout with trumpets and a blast of the shofar before the L-rd, the King" (Psalms 98:6).

I had heard of the shofar, but what were these trumpets? The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus describes the trumpet used by the Israelites: "Moses invented the form of the trumpet It was a narrow tube, somewhat thicker than a flute, but wide enough to admit the breath of a man's mouth. It was made of silver and little less than a cubit long." Two of these were made. The call of a single trumpet was given to assemble the tribal heads. When both trumpets were sounded, they called the (cont. on p. 3)

LETTER ABOUT LIFE (cont. from p. 1)...his theory. In his room, he found a plastic bag from the local cleaners. He remembered being told that the bags could be dangerous, but was it true? He took the bag and placed it over his head. Then, slowly, he lowered it until it covered his face. "Ha," he laughed, "there is no danger in a plastic bag, as long as you are awake." He grabbed the bag and repeatedly, and rapidly, placed it over his face and took it off again, laughing.

Just as he had concluded that his parents had, indeed, lied to him, the bag suddenly got caught. He couldn't pull it off. "Oh," he thought, "That is what they meant!"

Methodically, he tried to remove the bag. First he pulled, he then scratched, then he tried to poke a hole at his ears, nose, and mouth. Unfortunately, with the bag on his head, he could exhale, but could not inhale. Being unable to remove the bag, he laid down and prepared to die.

But the young boy didn't die just yet. Instead, he pictured his mother coming into his room and seeing him dead on the floor. She screamed and cried, making him very upset. He wanted to tell her that he didn't mean to be bad, that he was sorry. But since he had imagined that he was already dead, he couldn't talk to her. The dream became too intense. He stood up and looked heavenward, repeatedly yelling in a silent voice, "G-d save me! G-d help me! I promise, I will not be bad anymore! G-d save me!"

Eventually he heard another silent voice reply, "What do you want?"

You might have thought that, under the circumstances, the young boy would have been ecstatic to get a response to his pleas. Instead, he was angry! He thought, "What type of an Angel did G-d send me? It doesn't even know what I want!" He wanted to walk away, but could not. He would have to respond to the voice.

"I want to breathe!" And, not trusting that the Angel would know what he was talking about, he added, "I want air to go into me."

Then he heard a faint voice say, "Show me."

This Angel didn't even know that humans breathe! He immediately considered a more practical solution... If he could find his mother, surely she could remove the bag. But he didn't know where in the house she was, or if she was in the house at all. His chest was heaving mightily, and he looked down at the spot where he thought he'd soon fall. But he didn't fall. So, he turned his attention back to the Angel, and pointed weakly to his mouth.

And he heard, "Is that all you want? You just want the air to go into your mouth?" That strange response confirmed his fear -- the Angel was lacking a good understanding of human breathing.

"No," the young boy said, "I want to breathe. I want air to go into my mouth, my throat, my lungs. I want to breathe."

The Angel replied once more, "Show me."

Now the boy was desperate. The Angel was surely not helping. He couldn't hear his mother. And he was certain that he didn't have enough air to go searching for her. He knew he would fall at any second. But he didn't, even though his chest was heaving uncontrollably.



Finally, he turned to G-d and said, "I am going to do and to listen to whatever the Angel says, and if I die, I die. But if I die, my death is Your fault, not mine, because You sent an incompetent Angel to save me!"

All at once, a total calm came over him. He had placed his fate in G-d's hand. With a complete determination – determination to place his finger into his lungs, as necessary – he proceeded to show the Angel. Placing his finger into his mouth, he pushed his finger back, back towards his throat on the way to his lungs. And with that determined push, the bag ripped open. And that is why I know the story – because the boy survived.


So now that I know how to influence G-d, I must show that G-d influences me. Were it so simple that I could merely point.


As you have often said, Rabbi, it is not enough to be a good Jew in your heart, you must do. I would now add, it is by doing that you show that G-d influences you.


Shalom,
C.W.


The author, who wishes to remain anonymous, is a graduate of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service.


Since Rosh Hashana is the day of judgment, it is customary to eat foods with symbolic meanings to invoke G-d's blessing. We therefore utter a prayer and then eat these items. (Except for apples and honey, which is universally practiced, the exact items eaten depend on family custom):


 Apples and Honey: A slice of apple is dipped in honey and the blessing for the fruit of the tree is recited: "Blessed are you L-rd, our G-d ruler of the world, Creator of the fruit of the tree." A bite of apple is eaten and the following brief prayer: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that You renew for us a good and sweet year."


 Dates: The Hebrew word for date is *tamar*, which is related to the Hebrew word *l'tama* "to be finished." A date is therefore eaten and the following is recited: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that those who hate us be finished."


 Beets: The Hebrew word for beet is *selek*, which is related to the Hebrew word *l'salek*, "to remove." A beet is therefore eaten and the following is recited: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our ancestors, that our enemies be removed."

 Squash/Gourd: The Hebrew word *kra* sounds like the Hebrew word *l'kro*, "to read" or the Hebrew word *l'kra* "to tear." A piece of squash is eaten and the following is recited: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that the decree of our sentence be torn asunder; and may our merits be read before You."

 Peas: *Rubia*, which is the Hebrew word for fenugreek, a plant in the pea family, sounds like the Hebrew word *l'rabot*, "to increase." Some fenugreek is therefore eaten and the following is recited: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our ancestors, that our merits increase."

 Pomegranates: It is said that each pomegranate has 613 seeds, representing the 613 commandments of the Torah: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that our merits be as plentiful as the seeds of a pomegranate."

 Fish - A fish is considered to be a symbol of fertility and blessing: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that we be fruitful and multiply like fish."

 Head of a Sheep/Fish: Some have a custom to have the head of a sheep or a fish on the table and to say: "May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that we be as the head and not as the tail."

BLAST OF THE TRUMPET (cont. from p. 1)... multitude together. The Israelites also made use of these trumpets "when they brought their sacrifices to the altar."

Rabbi Abraham Chill, in his book *The Mitzvot*, notes that the shofar was "separate and distinct from the silver trumpets that were sounded in the Temple on all festivals and during the sacrifices of *Rosh Chodesh* (the new month)." Further confirming Josephus' statement, Chill cites the *Sefer Hachinnukh*: "The trumpets were sounded every day. They were molded from one lump of silver."

In Numbers (10:9) we read: *And when you go to war in your land against the adversary that oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets.* The Talmud interprets this to mean that the trumpets were to be sounded not only on festive occasions, but at any time when the people were faced with a crisis. Those trumpets, however, were no longer used after the destruction of the Temple.

Today, we no longer use the trumpets, only the shofar, one of the earliest musical instruments known to man. The etymology of the word shofar itself is not clear. Some have understood the root to mean "bright," i.e. a reference to the sharp, piercing notes of the instrument. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), connects the word with the idea of "hollowing out." Halachically, the shofar is made from the horn of any kosher animal -- cattle, sheep, goat or antelope. But it is customary to use a ram's horn in remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. The horn of cattle is excluded, however, in order to avoid even a hint of Israel's sin of the Golden Calf. How, after all, could Israel possibly appear before G-d on the great Day of Judgment holding an instrument that would always recall that flagrant descent into idolatry?

The Torah commands us to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashana: *And in the seventh month, on the first of the month it shall be declared a holiday for you, a day of sounding the teruah* (the shofar) *for you* (Numbers 29:1)

Rambam (Maimonides 1135-1204) elucidates: *Although the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashana is one of those divine decrees that bind us although we don't understand the reason behind it, we still can discern a purpose in observing it. It is as if the shofar tells us: Sleepers, arise from your slumber, you who are dozing, awake from your lethargy. Review your actions, repent your sins, and remember your Creator! Look into your souls and improve your ways and your deeds.*

A few centuries earlier, the renowned Babylonian teacher, Rav Saadia Gaon (892-942) identified 10 symbolic elements in the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashana to: (1) reaffirm G-d as King on this day; (2) to herald the beginning of the period of repentance; (3) to renew our vow given at Sinai to observe the teachings of the Torah; (4) to remind ourselves of the ancient admonitions of the prophets; (5) to remind us to pray for the rebuilding of the Temple; (6) to recall the binding of Isaac, which symbolizes the concept that to give of one's self in the service of G-d is the essence of genuine religion; (7) to remind us of the dark side of existence and the evil that must be conquered; (8) to take a personal inventory: what shall we answer standing before the Throne of G-d when we are asked what we have made of our lives; (9) to hasten the coming of the Messiah and the in-gathering of Israel's children, as prophesied by Isaiah; (10) to remember that the soul of man is immortal, that what he does with his life is of eternal significance.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches us that although in ancient times the silver trumpets were sounded to summon the

people, on Rosh Hashana the shofar is used because the goal is to awaken the purely divine within each person. Therefore, no human-made artifact may be used for this purpose. The instrument must have a natural form, with life given to it by a human's breath, the speaking to the spirit of humankind. G-d is not to be reached by artificial means or artifice "The pure, unaffected sound of the natural shofar should stir the heart and mind, opening them to the message of its call."

The Book of Numbers (29:1) describes Rosh Hashana as a "day of blowing the horn," *Yom Teruah* in Hebrew. The Aramaic form of *Yom Teruah* is *Yom Yebaba*, a day of "yebaba." The mother of Sisera, the Assyrian general, whom the Israelites defeated in battle, "looked through the window *va-teyabev*" (Judges 5:28). This translates as "and she wept," which is the origin of the term *Yom Yebaba* -- the day of weeping. Sisera was killed by Yael after the battle and the Midrash tells us that his wicked mother shed one hundred and one tears upon hearing the news. On Rosh Hashana, we now sound one hundred shofar blasts to blow away the tears that were shed in anger and pain. One tear remains; the one shed in pure love by a mother for her son.

On Rosh Hashana the shofar may be blown at any time after sunrise and, if necessary, even after dawn. If the festival falls on Shabbat, as it does this year, the shofar is not sounded. But, says R. Hirsch, the lesson of the shofar concept remains: listening to and taking to heart the message of the tones are the essence of the mitzvah. Hearing the shofar refers to the actual sound, and not an echo. Consequently, hearing the shofar on the radio, or via a loudspeaker does not fulfill the listener's obligation, for this would be analogous to hearing an echo.

Some Rabbis maintain that the mitzvah of the shofar lies in producing the sounds. In this sense, listeners fulfill their obligation through the principle of *shomea keoneh* -- one who hears a prayer is considered to have recited the prayer himself. The sounding of the shofar thus may also be thought of as a form of prayer.

And so, again this year, let us listen to the shofar with joy but also trepidation and wish one another *Le-shana tova tikatev* -- "May you be inscribed (in the book of Life) for a good year."

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**The National Jewish Outreach Program
wishes you and yours a happy New Year!**

NESHAMA (cont. from p. 1)...face between ourselves and G-d does not exist during the High Holy Days.

The greatest testimony to this fact is the sounding of the shofar. After all, what significance does the sounding of a ram's horn have to the awesome days of judgment?

The sounding of the shofar is a spiritual symphony of souls. The notes that flow from the shofar have neither melody, nor words. In fact, the notes are not musical in nature. On the contrary, they represent the sound of human cries, cries that only a soul can emit. Crying has no words, yet we all know how to cry. Prayer often comes in the form of silence, silence which screams forth from the innermost chambers of our soul. A simple tear that rolls down one's cheek has no sound, yet it speaks volumes about what is in a person's heart.

There are actually four different calls that are sounded by the shofar, and each one evokes a slightly different emotion. The first sound, the *tekiyah*, is a long solid blast that seems to rise slightly in pitch as it grows stronger. The *tekiyah* can be heard as a solid cry of anguish (*abhhhhhh*), like the cry of one who has just come face-to-face with a mistake, or a note of joyous happiness at standing before G-d and having the opportunity to receive forgiveness. The second sound, the *shevarim*, is composed of three medium blasts and is reminiscent of deep sighs or soft crying (where one is gasping for breath). Following these soft sobs come the ten piercing cries that sound much like a person weeping...the *teruah*. Finally, the very last sound of the shofar is the *tekiyah gedola*. It is the solid blast of the *tekiyah*, only

longer, and it is a shout of triumph reaching out to every heart that has silently called out to G-d.

The sounds produced from the shofar are born from the air which fills our lungs, the very air which represents our *neshama* - the spiritual life force within each of us. This life force is then released through our lips, the source of speech, yet, is without words. The power of air from our lips being transformed by the Shofar has the ability to send our innermost cries to Heaven.

When the sounds of the shofar ascend to the Heavens, G-d hears the cries of our souls and the emotions of our hearts. These are sounds which no language can describe, and which only the shofar has the ability to translate. On the High Holy Days, G-d is listening not only to the words that are being spoken, but also to that which is not being said, the silent prayers of our hearts yearning to return to G-d.

When our prayers are genuine and heartfelt, regardless of the speed at which we can turn the pages in our *Machzor* (prayer book), G-d cherishes those prayers. When one prays with true emotion, to the extent that tears are shed, it is those tears which speak more than all the words in the *Machzor*.

Regardless of the actual prayers, the new year allows the inner silence that is within us to pray to G-d. The sounds of the Shofar, the tears from our hearts, and, most importantly the renewed commitment in our lifestyles for the coming year are all what make Rosh Hashana the heavenly experience it truly is.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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