

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST, PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

I remember last Rosh Hashanah thinking about and planning for the year ahead, with all of its possibilities and opportunities. Who then could have possibly imagined what the year would actually have in store for us? And who now could have any clear sense of what lies in front of us in the coming year? This Yamim Noraim season is like no other, because we live in a time like no other. How do we prepare for the upcoming chagim? How do we prepare for the year ahead?

The start of every new year begins with the blowing of the shofar. There is a dispute among the rishonim as to which aspect of shofar is the essential mitzvah. Rambam (*Hil. Shofar* 1:1), for example, writes that the mitzvah is to hear the shofar, and thus its requisite blessing is “*lishmo`a kol shofar*” (to hear the sound of the shofar). Others, like Rabbeinu Tam, write that the blessing is “*al teki`at shofar*” (on the blowing of the shofar), since the actual act of blowing is the culmination of the mitzvah (see Rosh, *Rosh Hashanah* 4:10). Noting the proofs that support each claim and the internal halakhic contradictions within Rambam’s codifications, Rabbi Soloveitchik cited his grandfather, Reb Chaim, who formulated a hybrid approach. According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, we only fulfill the essential mitzvah of listening by hearing the sound of a shofar that is produced under particular halakhic conditions (See *Reshimot Shiurim, Sukkah* 2a). In this sense, both the *teki`ah* (blowing) and

the *shemi`ah* (hearing) have halakhic content. This hybrid approach not only resolves particular textual tensions in our halakhic sources, it also directs us to a new sense of the message of the shofar.

The sound of the shofar, according to our tradition, is the sound of tears. The representative image for these tears is the crying of a mother waiting and hoping for her son to return from war (*Rosh Hashanah* 33b). Having lived in Israel during a time of war, I know how these tears sound. They are filled with worry, uncertainty, concern, and anxiety. They are guttural and inexpressible. They are prayerful and hopeful, tinged with dread of what could be.

In this sense, the shofar is a tefillah to Hashem, which includes our deepest and most personal *bakashot* (requests). But there is a second layer of the mitzvah that is revealed in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s explanation. For if both the *teki`ah* and the *shemi`ah* are significant, then the mitzvah creates an image of a conversation between the *toke`a* and the *shome`a*. Of one Jew crying out to another. And the essential question that this mitzvah raises is — Are we listening? Do we listen when others around us are in pain? Do we respond to our family, friends, and neighbors who are in need?

When considering the year ahead, this is the message that, now, more than in any other year, should shape our consciousness. We are all in pain.

We are all uncertain. There have been real losses and there is enormous anxiety. We need to first turn to Hashem with all of our *bakashot*.

Not simply asking Him to remove us from trouble but bringing Him into our trouble. Bringing Him into our lives, to walk with us and carry us when there is no immediate end of our current challenges. And we need to turn to each other for comfort and support. To bolster one another and unite together. Now is the time to think of the other. To both cry to and listen to those who are around us. To strengthen the bonds that will help us navigate these uncharted waters. To surround ourselves with our family and friends, rabbis and teachers, neighbors and the broader community, and to walk through this difficult time together.

The shofar has been sounded in every year for thousands of years, through the most triumphant and challenging times throughout Jewish history. It is both the sounding of the shofar and the listening to the shofar that has given us the strength and ability to not only survive but to thrive. *Ashrei ha-am yodei teruah* — fortunate is the nation that understands that message of the shofar, for it is our strength and secret to our success.

Wishing you a ketivah ve-chatimah tovah.

Warmly,

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