

## **Not Fearing Crises – Reflections on the Sounds of the Shofar**

*Rosh Hashanah* is a seemingly a "deprived holiday." Almost nothing is written about this festival in the Torah, certainly less than about any other festival. Even the *shofar* is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah in the context of *Rosh Hashanah*. All that is mentioned is that *Rosh Hashana* is *Yom Teruah* - "a day of blasting", or *Zichron Teruah* - "a remembrance of blasting", but nothing more.

The mitzvah of blowing the shofar is actually derived by the Rabbis from the laws of the Jubilee Year: "You shall proclaim [with] the shofar blasts, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the shofar throughout your land." (Vayikra 25:9). Rabbeinu Bachya (Vayikra 23:24) explains that "The reason that the wording of this paragraph is more enigmatic than any other paragraph dealing with the festivals is that it deals with fundamental aspects of our religion. You will find that the more mystical the subject matter, the more enigmatic the explanation in the written Torah." Perhaps the reason why the word *Teruah* is the only word used in the Torah regarding *Rosh Hashana*, is to direct us to understand the essence of the day.

What is the meaning of the word *Teruah* in Hebrew? According to the Onkelos Aramaic translation, the word *teruah* means *yevava* – wailing. The Gemara brings up two options regarding this sound of wailing, that became the practice of the Shofar blowing: "One Sage says 'moaning' [as in the blasts of *shevarim*]. And one Sage says 'whimpers' [as in the short blasts of *teruah*]." (*Rosh Hashana* 22b). *Teruah* is wailing, moaning or whimpering, it's a sound of brokenness, as symbolized in the synonym for *teruah* - *shevarim*. Another example can be found in the commandment to sound the trumpets during wartime: "When you are at war in your land... you shall sound short blasts (*teruah*) on the trumpets" (BaMidbar 10:9) The *teruah* is a sound we blast in times of trouble or war - in times of crisis.

The name of the shofar note *shevarim* evokes the Hebrew word for crisis: *mashber*. The root of that word is *shever*, brokenness, but the origin of that word is the exact opposite, it means a birthing stool: "Ki *vau banim ad mashber* - for the children have come as far as the birthing stool and have no strength to give birth" (Melachim II 19:3). Birth is an experience soaked in pain and anguish, but in the end it brings new life into the world.

Every crisis that we experience has the potential to become the birthplace for a new stage in our lives, but most people are afraid of crises and changes. Many prefer stability, safety and routine when it comes to their life experiences, work, family, spirituality or personal growth. Stability guarantees peacefulness, but there is a great danger in this delusional serenity - the danger of stagnation, degeneration, loss of courage to dream, and lack of a meaningful vision for life. Times of crises and brokenness which are symbolized by the sounds of *teruah* and *shevarim* have the potential to serve as a driving force for epic personal growth and become the birthplace of something new and surprising which is symbolized by the sound of *tekiah* that follows the *shevarim* and *teruah* notes.

In the special psalm we say during Ellul - "Le'David Hashem Ori ve'Ishi" – King David is experiencing *yom ra'ah* – a day of calamity. Surprisingly, he does not seek shelter or refuge in a safe place but rather in a *sukkah* – the most temporary and unprotected dwelling: "He will hide me in His *sukkah* on the day of calamity; He will conceal me in the secrecy of His tent." A strong and sheltering house gives a false sense of safety. When a house collapses from an earthquake, for example, it is very difficult to rebuild. The temporary *sukkah* that serves as a shelter on "a day of calamity", is more flexible and adaptable, and it can easily be rebuilt. This is precisely the sense of flexibility accompanying the deep faith in G-d that should give us true resilience. As King David says: "Be'tzur yeromemeni – He will uplift me, like a rock."

I believe that these are the essential issues that we need to consider this year while hearing the sound of *teruah* during *Elul and the High Holydays*: How can we use these unprecedented times of crisis and struggle in order to grow into something stronger and more authentic? Which of our unhealthy habits are we courageous enough to get rid of? What genuine changes can we make in our lives?

Many people float through the stream of life instead of swimming to the destination they need to reach to fulfill their life's mission. It is only when facing a major crisis or hitting rock bottom that we wake up from our slumber. Especially this year, in light of the global crisis that we are all facing, the day of *teruah* should give us the strength and courage to not be afraid of crises and change. Rosh Hashana should reassure us that at the end of every crisis rebirth will take place, just as after every broken *teruah* there is a solid blast of *tekiah* which symbolizes joy and peacefulness: "U've'yom simchatchem... u'teka'atem - On your joyous occasions, you shall blow on the trumpets." (Bamidbar 10:10)

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook in *Orot Hatshuva* (5:6) deals with the concept of wholeness. How can a person be whole if "there is not one good man on earth who does what is best and doesn't err"? (Kohelet 7:20) Rav Kook explains that "the main element of one's perfection is the ongoing striving and aspiration for perfection." Only a person who constantly strives to grow and progress, a person with dreams, vision and big aspirations, and who is not afraid of crises and failures can truly experience wholeness, not only in reaching their destination but mainly and especially in the way and mean in which they get there.

The famous management consultant Peter Drucker wrote: "You cannot predict the future, but you can create it." On *Rosh Hashanah* we not only pray for our future but also draw from the shofar blasts the emotional strength and courage to create it, to recalculate our life route and better direct ourselves to the next destination of our journey. These experiences of insecurity and unsafety are familiar for many of us, particularly with the traumas caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the terrible uncertainties that we are living with, Rosh Hashana 2020 is an opportunity to practice that sort of personal growth, from the broken *teruah* to the peaceful *tekiah*. It is an opening to turn the global crisis into the

birthplace of a profound new dimension in the way we live our lives, with more strength, resilience and faith.

So, what should we be thinking about while hearing the Shofar blasts? *Yom Teruah* is the day to consider the following questions: Are you willing to make a change (*le'shanot*) on *Rosh Hashanah*? What are you willing to improve (*le'shaper*) in your life while hearing the sound of the *shofar*? Are you ready to be renewed (*le'chadesh*) on the only festival that takes place on *Rosh Chodesh*?

If we are not afraid of the sound of *teruah*, and if we are not scared of change and can find the courage to lean into uncertainty, and if we truly believe that from every crisis a new birth will emerge, at the end of all the *shevarim* and *teruah* blasts comes the great and peaceful *tekiah*. Now we can stand at the beginning of the New Year before Hashem and exclaim - "*Hineni! Here I am!*"

Wishing you *Shana Tova, Ketiva ve'Chatima Tova* and prayers for good health and healing for Israel and the entire world.

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