

I

As many of you know, last week I attended a rabbinic mission to Capitol Hill, with hundreds of Orthodox Rabbis from around the country, to protest the International Nuclear Agreement with Iran. It just so happened that two of my colleagues who had flown in from the West Coast had their flights delayed and were close to missing the rally. They took a cab straight from the airport and got out on the north side of Capitol. They ran over to two police officers and asked; "where can we find the Rabbi's rally?" The officers thought for a moment and said: "oh head for the corner and turn left - for the west side of the building - you can't miss it." The two Rabbis swiftly followed the directions down the hill, but suddenly realized they had been sent directly to the Neturei Karta's anti-Israel counter rally (which I supposed looked more "rabbinic" than ours).

It was precisely at that moment, standing among their Satmar "brethren", that my two friends thought they heard the sounds of a booming *tekiyah* coming from another rally on the south side of the building. Figuring it was where they needed to be, they continued on down the hill and found the shofar - which was being blown by a right-wing Christian alongside Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, Michelle Backman, Donald Trump and an Anti-Obama Tea Party rally.

Turns out, my dear friends had missed the RCA rally completely. "Where were the Rabbi's?" you might ask! Truth is, the Rabbis were already in the cafeteria eating our corned beef sandwiches from a nearby kosher deli. My friends followed police directions **precisely**, the sound of a shofar they heard **clearly**, but they forgot after all that this was a Jewish Rabbi's event. They should have trusted their guts and gone straight for the food.

II

The single Biblical mitzvah we have on Rosh Hashana is to blow the Shofar. Yet, the Torah tells us so very little about **how** we are to blow the shofar, **when** to blow the shofar and most importantly **why** we blow the shofar. If we look closely at mitzvah and attempt to construct its meaning, at first blush, the Shofar is seamlessly integrated into our tefillot. The Talmud tells us that the Shofar should be *kafuf*-bent, resembling a humble servant in prayer before his Creator. Moreover, we blow 100 blasts of the shofar all of which are woven strategically throughout mussaf. Clearly then, our sages understood, the sound of the shofar represents a form prayer; it's not just a mitzvah of the day as a whole, but it's an essential piece of our tefillah in particular.

And yet, if mitzvah of shofar is an act of tefillah, which is incumbent on each and every one of us today – shouldn't each of us be blowing the shofar for ourselves? Granted, we are a people that can't even say kaddish in unison, so the thought of group shofar blowing is quite haunting. But it is still a strange halachic anomaly. On Succot, it isn't just the Chazzan who shakes a lulav and esrog from the bimah; each person holds one in prayer. But not the shofar. The Baal Tokeiah stands in front and his bracha is *l'shmoa kol shofar* – because you and I are not hear to **sound** the shofar, we are here to **listen**.

How then do we synthesize these two themes that on the surface seem so incongruous? Is the shofar an essential piece of our personal prayers, or are we meant to just sit back and listen?

III

At the conclusion of the Akeidah we find a subtle but surprising twist. If I asked you to describe Avraham's accomplishment and the test he passed, surely you would say it was his willingness to slaughter his and Sarah's beloved son, Yitzchak. The courage and commitment that such a sacrifice requires, is almost unimaginable. Yet the focus of the Torah itself and the angel who addresses Avraham, is very different.

וְהִתְבְּרַכּוּ בְּזַרְעֲךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עֲקֵב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי:

Through your children all the nations of the land will be blessed: because you listened to my voice.

The Torah chooses not to celebrate Avraham's ability to act or his willingness to kill his own son, because for him, we know action was second nature. He is the paradigm of a zariz – an eager and unhesitating servant. Rather on Rosh Hashana we focus on his ability to listen and remain attentive to the world around him and the possibility of change, during a mission that required his uninterrupted attention.

When the angel first appears on the scene he calls to Avraham twice: "*Vayikra eilav malach Hashem min hashamayim, vayomer; Avraham, Avraham!*"

The Kli Yakar asks, why is his name called twice? He suggests:

לפי שבשעה שעסק במצוה בעקידת בנו היה כל כך טרווד במצוה לגומרה כהלכתה עד שלא היה נותן לב לקול הקריאה, לפיכך הוצרך לקרותו שנית...

When the angel called out he was so engrossed in the Mitzvah he couldn't even hear. The angel was forced to call him again.

This was the test Avraham was meant to pass; not to slaughter his son, but to stop himself long after he had already said goodbye in his heart.

Similarly, yesterday we read about Yishmael, Avraham's first son, the one in whom he invested so much of his love and energy. But with Yitzchak now in the

equation it becomes clear to Sarah that Yishmael's presence is an increasing liability. It's no wonder that considering Avraham's passion for every human being and his love for his own son in particular that he wants Yishmael to stay. But Hashem tells him otherwise:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֲל־יִרְעַ בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנֶּעֱרַר וְעַל־אֲמַתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיצָחָק יִקְרָא לָהּ יָרַע:

Don't be distressed over Yishmael and Hagar – all that Sarah tells you – listen to her voice.

In both narratives, despite his best intentions, he isn't asked to do but to cease. Avraham was forced away from a sincere and noble cause, for a better and brighter future.

IV

In a letter written in December of 1962, the Lubavitcher Rebbe shared a story about his predecessors, R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi – their founding Rebbe of the Lubavitch movement and his R' Dov Ber. Late one night R' Shneur Zalman was upstairs in his room when he heard his grandson crying on the floor below. He arose from bed and went downstairs to sooth the young child, rocked him to sleep with a beautiful melody and put him back to bed. But as he returned upstairs, the zeidi noticed that R' Dov Ber had been awake the whole time, engrossed in Torah learning in the next room. So he approaches the baby's father (like any tired grandparent would do) and asks: "Why didn't you get the baby?" R' Dov Ber looked up and explained that he had been so focused on his learning he didn't hear a thing!

R' Shneur Zalman looked back at his oldest son, who would eventually become his successor and rebuked him. He said: "No matter how engrossed one is in the loftiest of occupations, it should never make you deaf to the sounds of someone crying."

We've all been in that place. We've invested so much in relationship it is so hard to break it off even though we know it's not headed where it should. We've worked at this job for so many years, that we can't listen to the voice in our head that says I need a change of environment. We make poor choices that quickly become habit, habit swells into rote, and we just **can't break the cycle**. We pass **the point of no return** and tell ourselves there's no looking back, no possibility to change. "This is who I am. I have to live with the choices that I made."

The test of Avraham Avinu and its message for us as we start the New Year, is that we must never shut our ears to the possibility of a new a calling. No matter how great our intentions have been, no matter how lofty the occupation, we might need to change for the better.

The meaning of Jewish prayer is not what you might think. We are often told that prayer is our platform to address *Hakadosh Barch Hu*, but in Judaism, our

responsibility to listen always precedes our privilege to speak. Long before we can ask for things in Shemona Esrai, we first have to hear Shema. Listen to our mission statement. Long before we seek forgiveness on Yom Kippur for all that we regret, we have to listen to the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashana.

Yes, the shofar represents our posture during tefillah, it is woven seamlessly throughout our Machzor, but the blessing is *l'shmoa*. There is no paradox at all. We don't blast the shofar as loud as we can to be heard up in heaven, we are charged with the mitzvah first and foremost, as a reminder to stay tuned to **what we are meant to hear.**

V

And there is a second sound of the shofar that we cannot afford to miss. In the first Haftorah we read on Rosh Hashana we read of Chana's plight, her infertility and her aspiration for a child. Eili looks out at a woman whose behavior is strange and assumes she is drunk. Why? *Sifaseiha naos, v'kolah lo yishameia* – her lips were moving, but he could not hear her voice. In this Eili makes a terrible mistake. He assumes that if he can't hear her, **she** must be foolish, but it turns out it was **he** that didn't know how to **listen.**

Much like the sounds of the shofar that vary in length and pitch; we all know someone who has cried out for help in an unusual way. It's the change in their mood, it's the self-destructive behavior, the seemingly over-sensitivity and their aggressiveness. An insensitive person dismisses that behavior as immature or erratic, but an attentive listener knows that someone is crying for help in the saddest of ways.

As we sit back and immerse ourselves in the blasts of the shofar, let us commit ourselves to being more attentive to our calling, but also to the calls of others in the year to come. To listen intently to those who reach out to us and to hear the silent cries of those who lack the capacity to articulate their needs. Unlike Avraham, the angels may not call our names twice; we might have to hear our calling the first time before it's too late and the decisions can't be undone.

Eizehu ben Olam Haba: asks R' Yochanan, who is one that merits a portion in the world to come? *Zeh hasomech g'eulah l'tfillah* – someone who connects his shema and shemona esrai with no break in between. It is that simple: the formula for our success is preceding every shemona esrai with a shema, prior to every request making sure we have given our fullest attention. This should be our aspiration on Rosh Hashana in particular. If we can commit ourselves to listening to all the different sounds of the shofars around us, G-d promises to hear the sound of **our** prayers for the year ahead as well.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף כו עמוד ב
 גמרא. אמר רבי לוי: מצוה של ראש השנה ושל יום הכפורים **בכפופין** ושל כל השנה בפשוטין. - והתנן: שופר של ראש השנה של יעל **פשוט!** - הוא דאמר כי האי תנא; דתניא, רבי יהודה אומר: בראש השנה היו תוקעין בשל זכרים כפופין וביובלות בשל יעלים. - ולימא הלכתא כרבי יהודה! - אי אמרת הלכתא כרבי יהודה, הוה אמינא אפילו של יובל נמי כרבי יהודה סבירא ליה, קא משמע לן. במאי קמיפלגי? **מר סבר: בראש השנה - כמה דכייף איניש דעתיה טפי מעלי**, וביום הכפורים - כמה דפשיט איניש דעתיה טפי מעלי. **ומר סבר: בראש השנה כמה דפשיט איניש דעתיה טפי מעלי**, ובתעניות כמה דכייף איניש דעתיה טפי מעלי.

בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב
 (י) וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמֶּאֱכֹלֶת לְשַׁחַט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:
 (יא) וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מִלֵּאךְ יִקְוֶה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִי:
 (יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יְדָךְ אֶל־הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מֵאוֹמֶה כִּי עֵתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי־יִרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:
 (טז) וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־יְקֹוֶה כִּי יַעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ:
 (יח) וְהִתְבָּרַכְוּ בְּזַרְעֶךָ כָּל־גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עִקְבֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקֹלִי:

כלי יקר בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב
 (יא) אברהם אברהם. לשון חיבה, ומה שלא קראו בפעם ראשון שתי פעמים לשון חיבה לפי שעדיין לא נודע חיבתו לכל באי עולם כי שמא לא יעמוד בנסיון, ואחר שעמד בנסיון אז נראה לעין כל ביתר שאת ויתר עוז על זולתו, על כן קראו אברהם אברהם שתי פעמים לשון חיבה, כי נסיון זה היה לתועלת המנוסה להודיע חיבתו:

דבר אחר, לפי שבשעה שעסק במצוה בעקידת בנו היה כל כך טרוד במצוה לגומרה כהלכתה עד שלא היה נותן לב לקול הקריאה, לפיכך הוצרך לקרותו שנית, וזהו טעם לכפל אברהם אברהם, מה שאין כן בראשונה שלא היה עדיין טרוד במצוה. ויש אומרים שאברהם הבין בקריאה זו ששמן השמים יעכבוהו לפיכך עשה את עצמו כאיש נדהם וכאיש אשר לא שומע כדי לגמור המצוה עד שקראו שנית:

בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כא
 (ט) וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:
 (י) וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן־הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:
 (יא) וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדֶת בְּנוֹ:
 (יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֲלֵי־יָרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל־אֲמַתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שָׁמַע בְּקֹלָהּ כִּי בִי־צָחַק יִקְרָא לָךְ זָרַע:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ד עמוד ב
 אמר מר: **קורא קריאת שמע ומתפלל**. מסייע ליה לרבי יוחנן, דאמר רבי יוחנן: איזהו בן העולם הבא? - זה הסומך גאולה לתפלה של ערבית.

Heeding the Cry of a Child

Correspondence by Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, The Lubavitcher Rebbe

By the Grace of G-d
13 Kislev, 5723 [December 10, 1962] Brooklyn, N.Y.

Greeting and Blessing:

I was pleased to receive the news of your forthcoming Dinner on the 20th of Kislev, the day after the historic Day of Liberation of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, author of the Tanya and Shulchan Aruch and founder of Chabad.

It is both timely and meaningful to recall the following episode from his life and teachings:

The Alter Rebbe shared his house with his oldest married son, Rabbi Dov Ber (who later succeeded him as the Mittlerer Rebbe). Rabbi Dov Ber was known for his unusual power of concentration. Once, when Rabbi Dov Ber was engrossed in learning, his baby, sleeping in its cradle nearby, fell out and began to cry. The infant's father did not hear the baby's cries. But the infant's grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, also engrossed in his studies in his room on the upper floor at the time, most certainly did.

He interrupted his studies, went downstairs, picked the baby up, soothed it and replaced it in its cradle. Through all this Rabbi Dov Ber remained quite oblivious.

Subsequently, the Alter Rebbe admonished his son: "No matter how engrossed one may be in the loftiest occupation, one must never remain insensitive to the cry of a child."

This story has been transmitted to us from generation to generation; I heard it from my father-in-law of saintly memory. It was handed down because of the lasting message it conveys, one which is particularly pertinent to our time. It characterizes one of the basic tenets of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement – to hearken to the cry of our distressed Jewish children.

The "child" may be an infant in years, a Jewish boy or girl of school age, fallen from the "cradle" of Torah-true Jewish education, or it may be someone who is chronologically an adult yet an "infant" insofar as Jewish life is concerned, an infant in knowledge and experience of the Jewish religion, heritage and way of life.

The souls of these Jewish "children" cry out in anguish, for they live in a spiritual void, whether they are conscious of this or feel it only subconsciously. Every Jew, no matter how preoccupied he may be with any lofty cause, must hear the cries of these Jewish children. Bringing these Jewish children back to their Jewish cradle has priority over all else.