

Rosh Hashana 5776

Blowing the shofar is one of the fundamental mitzvot of Rosh Hashanah, but the Torah itself gives us very little information on what we are supposed to do. It calls the festival *yom teruah* and *zichron teruah*, which while giving some idea of the sound to make, does not tell us which instrument to use – possibilities include the *chatotzra* (trumpet) or *tzeltzelim* (cymbals, as in Tehillim 150 – *tziltzelei teruah* – which we mention in davening every morning). Chazal teach us that it does in fact refer to the shofar, learning from a connection with the year of *yovel* where the shofar is mentioned explicitly (Vayikra 25:9).

Another aspect of the mitzvah of shofar that is hidden by the Torah in its description of *yom teruah* / *zichron teruah* is whether the requirement is to blow the shofar, or to hear it. Interestingly, this issue is also not addressed (explicitly at least) by the gemara, but it was clearly a discussion point in medieval times, and the classic point of departure was by consideration of the correct beracha to make.

The Rambam (*Pe'er HaDor 51*) was asked “What is the difference between [the beracha of] *lishmo'a kol shofar* [to hear the sound of the shofar] and *al teki'at shofar* [on the blowing of the shofar]”. The question would seem to indicate that both forms of the beracha were prevalent at the time, and the questioner wanted to know which was more appropriate.

The Rambam answers unequivocally that “there is a great difference between them, because the specific mitzvah is not to blow, but hearing is enough; because if the mitzvah had been to blow, then every person would have to blow for themselves, just like everyone has to shake lulav and sit in the succah...and therefore we have to make the beracha of *lishmo'a kol shofar* just like we make the beracha of *leisheiv* [to sit in] *baSuccah* and not *la'asot* [to make] *succah*.”

This answer shows the importance of correctly formulating the beracha in order to capture the essence of the mitzvah. It also shows that we can't apply to shofar the well-known principle of *shome'a k'oneh*, that listening to someone fulfilling a mitzvah is as good as doing it yourself, otherwise why would he say that everyone would have to blow for themselves. Presumably the Rambam holds that this principle only applies to mitzvot involving the recitation of words, like Megilla or Kiddush, rather than actions, like blowing a shofar.

However, this is certainly not such a simple matter as the Rambam implies.

- The Rif (Rosh Hashana 11a) mentions only the beracha of *al teki'at shofar*
- Rabbenu Tam (brought by Rosh 4:10) also says the beracha is *al teki'at shofar*
- The *Machzor Vitri* (compiled by a student of Rashi) also has *al teki'at shofar*

- However Siddur Rashi (compiled by another of his students) lists the beracha as the combination *al teki'at shofar, lishmo'a b'kol shofar*, although the second phrase would appear to be an editorial addition, not in all the manuscripts.

On the other hand:

- The Ra'avya (early German Tosafist) says the beracha is *lishmo'a b'kol shofar*, apparently based on a Yerushalmi, although we no longer have this source
- The BeHaG (one of the Geonim) also writes that the beracha is *lishmo'a b'kol shofar*, stating similar reasons to the Rambam above, and most of the Geonim also follow this view.

Perhaps the most unusual interpretation is that of the Ba'al HaMa'or (an early Provençal Rishon) who claims that there was originally no beracha at all on blowing the shofar. The primary mitzvah of shofar is to blow during the Amidah, and therefore because it is a quintessential part of prayer itself, it does not warrant its own beracha. This is very similar to the reason why we don't make a separate beracha on eg birkat hamazon, or the Hagada. In later generations, when the extra set of shofar blasts were introduced before mussaf, divorced from the Amidah, the Geonim added a new beracha.

Why is the text of the beracha so important? If we follow the approach of the Rambam, then the text of the beracha defines the essence of the mitzvah. This can have technical consequences: for example can a deaf person fulfil the mitzvah of shofar? – yes if the mitzvah is to blow; no if it is to hear the shofar. Or what happens if you blow into a pit and don't hear the sound at all – the case in the Mishna in Rosh Hashana 27b. Can you blow on behalf of someone else? – clearly yes if the mitzvah is to hear, but more problematic if it is to blow – those who hold that the mitzvah is indeed to blow must somehow explain the universal minhag that a single person blows for the whole congregation.

On a deeper level, the essence of the mitzvah also affects the way that we relate to it. As the Rambam says in Hilchot Teshuva 3:4 “Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashana is a divine decree, there is a message in it, as if to say ‘Wake up you sleepers from your sleep, and you slumberers from your slumber, examine your deeds, and return in teshuva and remember your Creator’ ”.

This is the real message of the shofar, that we should not just see it as a mechanical act of blowing where we watch the *ba'al toke'a* and rate him on the length of his shofar, and the length of his shofar blasts. But it is an opportunity to listen to this mitzvah, with its unique combination of primal scream and prayer to Hashem, and let it permeate our being, so that we emerge from the experience as a changed person.