

Yom Kippur 5776, 2015

Understanding the Shofar of Ne'ilah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The great Sephardic luminary, Rav Yosef Karo *zatzal* (1488-1575), is best known as the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. Towards the end of *Hilchot Yom HaKippurim* (623:6) in that work, wherein the laws pertaining to the *Ne'ilah* service are discussed, he stated that as part of the conclusion of this section of *tefilah* (prayer), we are obligated to sound four shofar blasts – *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah* followed by a final *tekiah*. In contrast, Rav Moshe Isserles *zatzal* (the Rema, 1530-1572), in his glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch*, noted that the widely accepted Ashkenazi *minhag* (custom) is to sound only one shofar note, namely, the *tekiah*. Neither of these Torah giants, however, discussed the reason as to why we sound the shofar at this time. As a result, it is to this task we now turn.

One of the earliest sources to address the underlying rationale for sounding the shofar at the conclusion of the *Ne'ilah* service is a gloss of Tosafot in the name of Rashi's great-grandson, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Shmuel *zatzal* (known as the "RI" or the "RI-HaZaken," 1115-1184):

The sole reason why we sound the shofar at the conclusion of Yom HaKippurim is to publicize that it is now fully nighttime so that people may proceed to feed their children who have fasted [until now]. In addition [i.e. a corollary], [this is to inform the Jewish community that it proper] to prepare the meal for the night that has followed the Yom HaKippurim day, for it is similar in kind to a Yom Tov... This is in contradistinction to

the incorrect opinion of the *Machzorim* (Prayer books for the Days of Awe) where it is written therein that the *tekiah* is a reminder of the Jubilee year (*yovel*). [If this were to be the case,] why would we sound the shofar year after year [at this time?] – is it possible for the *yovel* to be each and every year? (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 114b, s.v. V'amai*, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, in a world without accurate clocks and rapid communication, it was crucial to somehow publicize that Yom HaKippurim had, indeed, ended and that it was proper to return to the normal behaviors of eating, drinking and cooking. Moreover, the RI-HaZaken summarily rejected any notion of a nexus between the conclusion of this day and the sounding of the shofar in order to be reminded of the Jubilee year, and essentially declared such a notion to be patently absurd.

Approximately 400 years later, Rabbi Mordechai Yoffe *zatzal* (1530-1612) presented three additional reasons as to why we sound the shofar at the end of Yom Hakippurim:

We sound the shofar with one *tekiah* blast as a sign of the *Schechinah*'s (Hashem's immanent presence) departure – i.e. that the *Schechinah* has left [this world] and has gone up to the firmament, just as it had done at the time of the giving of the Torah. As it is written: "No hand shall touch it [i.e. Mount Sinai], for he shall be stoned or cast down; whether man or beast, he shall not live. When the ram's horn sounds a long, drawn out blast, they may ascend the mountain." (*Sefer Shemot* 19:13) It is also written: "G-d shall rise with the trumpet blast; the L-rd, with the sound of the shofar." (*Sefer Tehillim* 47:6, with my emendation)

The *tekiah* is a symbol of joy and victory – this means we have been victorious over the Satan (Evil Inclination).

The sound of the *tekiah* is the symbolic representation of freedom – for on this day we have made our souls free from sins and our bodies have become free from enslavement and punishments. (*Sefer Levush Malchut, Levush HaHod* 623:5, translation, brackets, underlining and parentheses my own)

Closer to our own time, Rabbi Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Halevi Epstein *zatzal* (1829-1908), popularly known as the "Aruch HaShulchan" after the title of his halachic

magnum opus, suggested a new interpretation for sounding the shofar at the conclusion of *Ne'ilah* “We sound one *tekiah* as a sign of good fortune to proclaim the news that Hashem has received our prayers.” (*Sefer Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chaim* 623:8, translation) In Rav Epstein’s view, the *tekiah* is a declaration of success – a sound that signifies that we have encountered the Almighty through the medium of prayer and He, in His great beneficence, has accepted our heartfelt *tefilot*.

In stark contrast to the opinion of the Aruch HaShulchan, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his students and disciples, suggested that the sounding of the shofar at the end of Yom HaKippurim is symbolic of our abject failure to communicate our depth-level spiritual longings to the Master of the Universe through words:

... the Rav said that on Yom Kippur, at the conclusion of the *Ne'ilah* service, he often felt that despite having spent the entire day in prayer, he had not articulated even a tiny fraction of what he had wanted to express... [He was convinced that on the existential level, every] Jew has similar feelings at the conclusion of *Ne'ilah*, the final prayer on Yom Kippur: [they have] spoken, yet said nothing.

What can one do in such a moment of black despair when the feeling of defeat captures him? Does the Jew give up or does he pursue a radically different approach in order to reach out to the Creator? Rav Soloveitchik provides us with his groundbreaking answer:

In order to adequately express his deep longing when words have cruelly failed him, he feels the compulsion to release an instinctive, inarticulate cry. In the seconds before the Holy One Blessed Be He once again retreats into obscuring clouds, man must urgently express what he could not verbalize in an entire day of prayer. He thus sounds the shofar as a response to the ultimate futility of verbal prayer to express his needs. (*Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe, summarized and annotated by Dr. Arnold Lustiger, page 24, underlining and brackets my own)

In conclusion, as we find in almost all substantive areas of Jewish thought, there are a plethora of opinions as to how to interpret the sounding of the shofar at the final moments of Yom HaKippurim. They run the gamut from the sublime to the practical, and from the assertion of man's greatness and success, to the recognition of his lowly status and ineffectual efforts to verbally communicate with the Holy One Blessed be He. No matter which approach we may choose to follow, however, we can rest assured that, "For on this day He [G-d] shall effect atonement for you to [spiritually] cleanse you. Before the L-rd, you shall be purified from all your sins." (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:30, emendation and brackets my own) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

G'mar chatimah tova v'tizku l'shanim rabot

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.