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The Shofar of Ne'ilah

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Rav Yosef Karo *zatzal* (1488-1575) is best known as the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. Toward the end of *Hilchot Yom HaKippurim* (623:6), he states that we are obligated to sound four shofar blasts at the conclusion of *Neilah*: *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah* and a final *tekiah*. In contrast, the Rema *zatzal* (Rav Moshe Isserles, 1530-1572), in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, notes that the widely accepted Ashkenazi *minhag* is to sound only one *tekiah*. Somewhat unusually, neither of these Torah giants discuss the reason why we sound the *shofar* at this time.

One of the earliest sources to address the rationale for sounding the *shofar* at the conclusion of *Ne'ilah* 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. In addition, 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* where it is written 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)

The RI maintains that in a world without accurate clocks and rapid communication, the *shofar* blast at the end of *Neilah* publicizes the end of *Yom HaKippurim* and the

permissibility to eat, drink and cook once again. Moreover, he summarily rejects any notion of a link between the conclusion of this day and the sounding of the *shofar* as a reminder of the Jubilee year.

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 *Shechinah*'s departure, namely, 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 [that is, 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: "God shall rise with the trumpet blast; Hashem, 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) offers 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." (*Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chaim* 623:8, translation my own) In Rav Epstein's view, the *tekiah* is a declaration of success, a sound that signifies we have encountered the Almighty through the medium of prayer and in His great *chesed* and *rachamim*, He has accepted our heartfelt *tefilot*.

In stark contrast to the opinion of Rav Epstein, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the "Rav" by his students and disciples, asserts

that the sounding of the *shofar* at the end of *Yom HaKippurim* is symbolic of our failure to communicate our depth-level spiritual longings to the Master of the Universe through our 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 we do when such a feeling of defeat descends upon us? Rav Soloveitchik provides us with this 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 short, for the Rav, when words fail us, the *shofar* blast at *Neilah* represents a radically different approach: In essence, we are expressing to our Creator our deep desire to renew our spiritual relationship with Him as it was in the past.

In conclusion, interpretations of the sounding of the *shofar* in the final moments of *Yom HaKippurim* range from the sublime to the practical, and from the assertion of man's greatness to the recognition of the futility of words in reaching out to the Almighty. Fortunately, no matter which perspective we take, we can rest assured that, "For through this day, He shall grant atonement for you to cleanse you. Before Hashem you shall be purified from all your sins." (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:30, emendation my own)

G'mar Chatimah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.