

ROSH HASHANAH

A Breath of Air

The *shofar* has a strange voice, jarring yet entralling. It cannot rightfully be called music, nor can the *shofar* itself be considered a musical instrument. And yet, the *shofar* plays an exceedingly prominent role in Jewish observances. Its voice accompanied the Giving of the Torah, and subsequent momentous occasions, such as declarations of war, are also accompanied by the sound of the *shofar*. It is considered the perfect sound to awaken the slumberer from his spiritual torpor, the quintessential call to repentance.

Wherein lies the secret power of the *shofar*? True, the *shofar*, a ram's horn, is reminiscent of Abraham's preparedness to sacrifice his only son Isaac on the Akeidah, but surely the sound itself must have some visceral force even for those unaware of the connection to Isaac.

Let us consider for a moment. What is the ultimate form of communication? Most of us would be inclined to say it is language, sophisticated combinations of words that express the ideas and concepts we seek to communicate. But what if we want to communicate something much more basic? What if we want to communicate who we are and what we are? Could we weave a tapestry of words that would capture the essence of our very beings? Probably not. Strangely enough, our voices actually offer a much better glimpse into the innermost chambers of our souls than any words we can string together. Why is this so?

When the Creator first formed man from the dust of the earth, the Torah tells us that "He blew the breath of the Lord into his nostrils." This brought the man to life, and this represents his very essence, the breath that flows through his body. The unadorned breath of life, free of the artificial manipulations of speech, is the most expressive form of communication. A gasp, a sigh, a scream are more eloquent than pages of prose, because they don't tell about what is inside us, they actually are what is inside us.

Therefore, the voice itself, the exhalation of the breath, is more expressive than the spoken words it transports. When Hashem wanted Abraham to heed the advice of his wife Sarah, He told him to "listen to her voice." The voice is the key, not the words.

In this light, we gain a new appreciation for the role of the *shofar*. The *shofar* dispenses with all the affected trills and warbles of musical instruments. Its sound is the unadorned magnification of the human

breath. The barely audible sound of breathing heard on a very high decibel level shocks us, because we are suddenly confronted with our very beings. It is traumatic and disconcerting, but it can also be uplifting. Deep down, on a very primal spiritual level, we are reminded of who and what we are. We are awakened from our slumber, and we are moved to repent.

For this very reason, the *shofar* has such a ubiquitous role in Jewish observance. We need to approach all momentous occasions as real people, devoid of the airs and layers of affectation in which people ordinarily clothe themselves. We need to remove the barriers of artificiality that stand between us and our Creator. The *shofar* accomplishes this as nothing else can. It presents us with the primal substance of everyman, the pristine essence of humanity as it was formed by the Creator. When we listen to the sound of the shofar, we are in touch with ourselves.

The Polish government once issued a decree abolishing ritual slaughter of animals. With the greatest difficulty, the Jewish communities arranged for one of the leading sages of the time to meet with a high-ranking Polish minister and plead for the abolition of the decree.

The sage and his delegation were shown into the presence of the minister, and the sage immediately began to speak. There was just one problem. The sage spoke only Yiddish, and the minister understood not a word of it.

Another member of the delegation immediately interposed himself as the interpreter, but the minister waved him aside. Instead, he sat and listened intently as the sage spoke for many minutes.

Afterwards, the would-be interpreter tried once again to translate and summarize the sage's remarks. Again, the minister waved him aside.

"I did not know the meaning of a single word he uttered," said the minister, "but I understood him completely. The decree is abolished!"

This year, as we listen to the *shofar*, let us recognize its message and reflect on it. Let us reach down to the very core of our identity and present ourselves to our Creator stripped of all the vanities we accumulate in our daily lives. Let us stand before Him as He created us, without the barriers of artificiality. If we open our minds and hearts and souls to Him, surely He will gather us in His loving embrace and bless us with a wonderful new year.