

THE SHOFAR REMINDS US WHO WE REALLY ARE

A Rosh Hashanah Class for Women — First Day (Shabbos)

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

HEARING THE CALL

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz relates a story about taking a walk with his young granddaughter, who had recently returned to America after living for several years in Eretz Yisrael. Her small hand was clasped tightly in his as they walked. Suddenly, sirens sounded in the distance, calling volunteer firefighters to a blaze.

Because the sound was not unusual, and because he was not a firefighter, the siren barely registered in his mind. His granddaughter, however, panicked. He felt her tense up and squeeze his hand.

"Zaidy, we have to run," she said.

"Why do we have to run?" he asked.

Tears filled her eyes, and her voice trembled. "Otherwise, Zaidy, rockets are going to fall on us!"

They heard precisely the same sound. Yet he heard a fire siren that had nothing to do with him, while she heard a warning that demanded an immediate response.

From his granddaughter, Rabbi Lipschutz learned what it means to hear - to truly hear.

Today, on Shabbos Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is silent. But perhaps that silence asks us an even sharper question: What will we hear tomorrow? Will it be a familiar religious sound that belongs to the day, or will we hear a personal call that demands an answer from us?

WAKE UP AND REMEMBER

The Rambam writes that although the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Divine decree, it contains a powerful allusion. It is as though the shofar is calling: Wake up, those who are asleep. Examine your actions, return to Hashem, and remember your Creator. Do not lose the truth amid the distractions and vanities of ordinary life. Look honestly at your souls, improve your ways, and abandon the paths and thoughts that are carrying you away from Hashem. (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4)

The shofar tells us to awaken and remember our Creator. But its message is even more personal. The shofar does not only say, "Wake up." It says, "Come home to the person you were created to be."

Most of the year, we define ourselves by what is immediately in front of us. I am busy. I am tired. I am worried. I have appointments. I have bills. I have family complications. I have things I enjoy and things that frustrate me. All of that may be true, but none of it is the deepest truth about us. Beneath every role and every circumstance stands a neshamah, a Jew created and chosen for a mission.

The shofar does not merely ask, "What did you do?" It asks a deeper question: "Do you remember who you are?"

CORONATING THE KING

Rosh Hashanah does not begin with our self-worth. It begins with Hashem's Kingship - and that is precisely what gives a Jewish life its dignity and responsibility. Rav Saadia Gaon, as quoted by the Abudraham, explains that one meaning of the shofar is the trumpet blast sounded at a coronation. On Rosh Hashanah, we proclaim Hashem's kingship. But a kingdom requires subjects who recognize their King and understand that their conduct represents His kingdom.

The King is not merely asking whether we believe that He exists. He is asking whether His kingship will govern our next choice. Hashem is telling each of us: "My kingdom includes you. Will you crown Me again this year? Will you live as someone whose choices matter to the King?"

That is what the shofar asks us to hear. It awakens us not only to our failings, but also to our greatness and responsibility. It tells us: Look at what you are worth. Recognize the importance of your life. Remember what you can become.

This helps explain the profound joy of Rosh Hashanah. In many Chassidic communities, people dance on Rosh Hashanah, not because the seriousness of the day is forgotten, but because its seriousness reveals how deeply Hashem values us. We have been invited into the palace. Our prayers, our choices, and our return matter.

LIVING UP TO A HIGHER IDENTITY

The Gemara in Bava Metzia (85a) tells us that Rebbe once visited the city of Rabbi Elazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and asked whether Rabbi Elazar had left behind a son. He was told that he had, but that the young man's conduct was very far from the greatness of his father.

Rebbe brought the young man close. He gave him the title "Rabbi," dressed him in the distinguished clothing appropriate to that position, and appointed Rabbi Shimon ben Isi to teach him. At first, the young man repeatedly wanted to return home. His teacher challenged him: "They have placed a golden garment upon you and call you 'Rabbi.' How can you speak of returning to your former life?"

The young man accepted the challenge. He remained, learned, and eventually became a great Torah scholar. Years later, when he entered Rebbe's academy, Rebbe heard his voice and recognized in it the voice of his father.

What changed him? Rebbe did not begin by listing everything that was wrong with him. Rebbe elevated his understanding of who he was. He dressed him as the person he could become.

The young man did not become great because someone shamed him for what he was. He became great because someone showed him who he could be.

Once he saw himself differently, he began to live differently.

This is one of the great gifts of Rosh Hashanah. Hashem brings us, as it were, into the royal palace and reminds us who we are. We are not insignificant figures moving anonymously through the world. We are the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We are members of Hashem's kingdom, entrusted with a mission that gives consequence to every decision we make.

A PEACH OR A DIAMOND?

In his book 48 (pages 130-137), Rabbi Nachman Seltzer tells the story of a mother named Liora and her daughter Tami. Tami's manner of dress had become a source of tension between them. Her mother would object, Tami would become angry, and the relationship would deteriorate. Liora wished that someone could find the words that would help her daughter understand that the attention and pleasure gained by dressing in a revealing way were not the genuine happiness they appeared to be.

One Shabbos afternoon, Tami attended a shiur at the local shul. She returned home with her eyes shining. She told her mother that the speaker, a rebbetzin, had offered a mashal unlike anything she had heard before.

If you want to buy a peach, you walk into a fruit store and find a large open display. The peaches sit where anyone may touch them, squeeze them, and examine them. A customer handles several, chooses a few, pays, and walks away. That is normal, because a peach is an ordinary piece of fruit.

But buying a diamond is entirely different. You enter a secure store after someone buzzes you in. Cameras watch the room. The jewels are protected under glass, behind locks and alarms. You cannot simply reach across the counter and handle whatever attracts your attention. The salesperson removes one piece carefully and presents it to a serious customer. The diamond is not guarded because it lacks beauty. It is guarded precisely because it is valuable.

The rebbetzin then asked the young women to consider: How do I wish to see myself? Am I something displayed openly for any stranger to inspect, or am I a diamond whose inner beauty and dignity are reserved for a sacred relationship?

For the first time, Tami understood tznius not as an attempt to make a Jewish woman small, unattractive, or invisible, but as a declaration of her worth.

Tznius does not create a Jewish woman's value. Her inherent value explains why she protects what is personal, private, and holy.

This lesson reaches beyond clothing and beyond women. Every Jewish neshamah is precious. When the Torah places boundaries around what we see, say, eat, pursue, and permit ourselves to do, those boundaries do not testify that life is ugly. They testify that a Jewish life is valuable. We protect a Sefer Torah because it is holy. We guard Shabbos because it is precious. We are careful with a Jewish neshamah because it is a piece of eternity.

The world often says that freedom means having no boundaries. Torah says that true freedom begins when a person understands that not everything deserves access to what is most precious within her. The shofar calls out: Remember your value, and live with the dignity of the person you truly are.

NO JEW IS DISPENSABLE

There is a story told about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. One year, a Jew who had endured many hardships did not come to Kol Nidrei. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak noticed his absence and summoned him to shul.

The man described the suffering he had experienced. "I could forgive Hashem for all of my troubles," he said, "but someone stole my large machzor, and for that I cannot forgive Him!"

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak tried to appease him. "Is there anything that could be done so that you would forgive Hashem?"

"If it will be a good year for our entire community," the man replied, "then I forgive Him."

His request was granted.

This is not a lesson in blaming Hashem or bargaining with Him. It is a lesson in how desperately Hashem desires the return of even one wounded and alienated Jew.

The story expresses a startling truth: Hashem's kingdom is missing something when even one Jew feels alienated from it. Every Jew is needed. Rosh Hashanah is therefore a time of reconciliation, a time to remember that each of us plays an indispensable role in Hashem's plan for the world.

That gives us another way to hear Malchiyos and Zichronos in the Mussaf prayer. We declare Hashem's kingship, and we ask to be remembered because our lives and our mission have eternal significance. In Aleinu, we thank Hashem for making us part of that mission, and we look forward to the day when the entire world will recognize Him.

THE POWER OF KIDDUSH HASHEM

Once we understand who we are, ordinary moments become opportunities for Kiddush Hashem. A single act of honesty, sensitivity, or self-control can reveal Hashem's presence in the world. We may never know how far the influence of such an act will travel.

Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk told a remarkable story that took place in Israel. A yeshiva student took a ride in a taxi. He was so engrossed in his learning that when the driver stopped at his destination, he forgot that he was in a cab and thought he had simply been given a lift. He therefore got out without paying.

The driver realized that the boy had not deliberately failed to pay. It was clearly an honest mistake, so he decided to ignore it and drive away. Moments later, however, the student realized what had happened and began running after the cab as fast as he could.

He nearly caught it at a red light, but just then the light turned green and the taxi drove away. The boy felt terrible. "He may think that yeshiva students steal and cheat," he thought. "I must do whatever I can to pay him."

He continued running. Several times he nearly caught the taxi at a red light, only to watch it drive away again. Finally, after twenty minutes of frantic running, he caught up with the cab and knocked on the window. The driver opened it. The boy apologized, explained that he had forgotten to pay, and handed him the money.

The driver was stunned. "You ran all the way here?" He could not believe it.

Thirty years later, that yeshiva student, now a grown man, saw a sign in Yerushalayim announcing a special drashah about Kiddush Hashem. The subject was especially dear to him, so he attended. He thoroughly enjoyed the lecture and approached the rabbi afterward.

"I have one question," the man said. "You mentioned that when someone creates a genuine Kiddush Hashem, Hashem may arrange for him to witness its effect. But I once made a Kiddush Hashem some thirty years ago, and I never saw anything come from it."

He described the incident with the taxi driver. The rabbi's face lit up. He smiled and said, "Ani ha-nehag. I am the driver."

The integrity of that yeshiva student, and the extraordinary effort he made to pay a small fare, had affected the driver so profoundly that he decided to become a baal teshuvah and study Torah. Eventually, he became a rav.

The young man believed he was chasing a taxi. In truth, he was running after another Jew's neshamah.

Because he remembered what a yeshiva student represents, his conduct changed the course of a life.

The shofar asks us not only, "What did you do this year?" It also asks, "What did another person learn about Hashem from meeting you?"

NOT EVERY DANCE IS A CELEBRATION

Rabbi Seltzer introduces his second story with a striking image. When fishermen pull a net filled with fish from the ocean, the fish appear to dance. They jump, twist, and throw themselves into the air. To someone who does not understand what he is watching, it might look like the fish are having the time of their lives.

But the fish are not dancing. They are dying. Their frantic movement is the result of being separated from the water that gives them life.

A life can look completely full while the neshamah is gasping for air.

We live in a world filled with glossy pictures of people who seem to be "having it all." They are traveling, spending, partying, and dancing. The lights are bright and the music is loud. It is very easy to look at that world and feel that Torah observance is keeping us away from where life is really happening. The dancing fish teach us to ask a more intelligent question: Is all this movement a sign of life, or is it the desperate motion of people who have been disconnected from their source of life?

Rabbi Seltzer then relates what happened while he was studying for semichah at the Jerusalem Kollel under Rav Yitzchak Berkovitz. One of the other men in the kollel was named Matt. Rabbi Seltzer asked him how he had found his way to Eretz Yisrael and to a life of Torah.

Matt had grown up wanting to work in London's corporate world. He was drawn to expensive suits, impressive offices, and the lifestyle of high finance. As a young man, he obtained a temporary summer position at a firm dealing in stocks, bonds, and corporate investments. To everyone's surprise, including his own, Matt proved to be exceptionally gifted. He understood the markets instinctively and predicted trends with remarkable accuracy. The company offered him a permanent position even though he had never attended university.

He rose rapidly. By the age of twenty-one, he had a large office, a secretary, a staff, and an income most people twice his age could only dream about. He had reached his goals almost before his adult life had begun. And that was precisely the problem.

Matt looked at the older men around him working exhausting hours to achieve what he already possessed, and one question began to disturb him: What for? Was making more money the entire purpose? He went to his boss, hoping that a successful older man would reveal the next great goal.

His boss listened and told him that his problem was that he thought too much. He advised Matt to enjoy London, dine in expensive restaurants, travel, spend his money, and stop asking questions that might interfere with his success.

Matt tried. His year-end bonus was forty thousand pounds. He owned a bright red BMW and an apartment in one of London's most expensive areas. One night, he went with friends to an exclusive gathering filled with people he did not especially care about and activities that did not interest him. He looked around and realized that he had enough money to do almost anything he wished, yet he did not want anything the room was offering.

Everyone seemed to be dancing. But Matt felt as though he were dying.

He left immediately, drove through London in the middle of the night, and stopped outside a friend's home at two o'clock in the morning. He knocked on the window and announced, "Let's go to Israel."

His friend assumed that Matt meant on their next vacation. Matt answered, "No. Now." The friend stared at him, but Matt was completely serious. "Pack," he said. "I will wait. Then we are going to the airport."

They boarded the next available flight. In Yerushalayim, they made their way to Aish HaTorah in the Old City. His friend returned home after a few weeks. Matt remained for months. A few months became half a year. He briefly returned to London, but then came back to Eretz Yisrael. Eventually, Rabbi Seltzer met him in kollel, learning for semichah.

Matt concluded his story with an unforgettable line: "I was dancing then, and I am dancing now. But then I felt that I was dying. Now I am simply happy to be alive."

That is the difference the shofar asks us to hear. Judaism does not oppose pleasure, success, beauty, or celebration. Rosh Hashanah itself contains joy, dignity, beautiful meals, song, and hope. The question is whether our pleasures are connected to the Source of life or are distracting us from Him. A fish is not deprived because it must remain in water. The water is what allows the fish to live.

Torah and mitzvos are not the cage of the Jewish soul. They are the water in which the Jewish soul remains alive.

THE PRACTICAL AVODAH: ONE DECISION FROM IDENTITY

An inspiring idea is not yet a Rosh Hashanah avodah. We must leave with something concrete. I suggest that before tomorrow's shofar, each of us complete one sentence privately: "Because this is who I really am, this year I will..."

Do not begin with a long catalogue of failures. Begin with identity. "I am a Jew whose words have power; therefore, I will be more careful not to speak negatively about another person." "I am a member of the King's household; therefore, I will protect one fixed period of Torah learning each week." "My neshamah is precious; therefore, I will place one clear boundary around what enters my eyes, my home, or my mind."

Choose one decision that is small enough to keep and important enough to express who you are.

Write it down after Yom Tov if necessary. Tell it to someone who can help you protect it. When the shofar sounds tomorrow, hear it calling your name. Say silently: "Ribbono Shel Olam, this is who I want to be. This is the one step with which I crown You."

Rebbe's young student changed because someone showed him the garment that fit his real identity. Tami understood tznius when she discovered that she was a diamond. The yeshiva student chased a taxi because he remembered what he represented. Matt left London because he recognized that apparent movement was not necessarily life. In each case, the person did not merely learn a new rule.

The person discovered a truer self, and that discovery demanded a decision.

HEAR WHO YOU ARE

The shofar begins without words because its message lies deeper than words. It pierces the layers of distraction that accumulate during the year and reaches the place within us that still remembers.

It says: Wake up. Remember your Creator. Remember your mission. Remember the dignity of a Jew. Remember that you are a diamond. Remember that not every dance is life. Remember that your smallest act can become a Kiddush Hashem whose influence lasts for generations.

Hashem brings us into His palace on Rosh Hashanah and shows us what we are capable of becoming.

Tomorrow, when the shofar sounds, do not hear only a mitzvah. Hear your name.

May the sound of the shofar awaken us to our genuine greatness. May we crown Hashem through lives of integrity, holiness, joy, and kindness. And may we merit a year in which we are not merely moving and not merely appearing to dance, but are fully, deeply, and eternally alive.

Kesivah v'chasimah tovah.

A CARD FOR TOMORROW

And now I would like to give each of you a small gift: a card to keep with you tomorrow. Before the shofar, take a quiet moment to read it and remember these kavanos—who you are, Whose child you are, and the one step through which you will come closer to Hashem this year. Those reading online may print and cut out the card below.

WHEN THE SHOFAR CALLS MY NAME

**Before the shofar, pause and
remember:**

**“Hashem, I am Your child. I am part
of Your kingdom. My neshamah is
precious, and my choices matter.”**

Then complete this sentence silently:

**Because this is who I really am,
this year I will take one step closer
to Hashem by...**

Ribono Shel Olam, help me hear Your call
and live as the person You created me to
be.

**WHEN THE SHOFAR BEGINS,
PUT DOWN THIS CARD AND LISTEN.**