

## The Storm Before the Shofar

### *When the Body Trembles and the Neshamah Rejoices Before the Shofar*

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#### **The Contradiction of Rosh Hashanah**

Rosh Hashanah is the Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. Our health, our livelihood, our families, and our future pass before HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Yet Klal Yisrael does not approach the day dressed in mourning. We dress beautifully, make festive meals, and enter the day with confidence and simchah.

The Yerushalmi observes that a person awaiting judgment ordinarily dresses in black and worries about the verdict. The Jewish people, however, dress in white, eat, drink, and rejoice, confident that HaKadosh Baruch Hu will perform miracles for them.

***How can the Day of Judgment also be a day of genuine joy?***

#### **The Storm**

Perhaps something that happened this past week can help us understand.

Approximately ten days before Rosh Hashanah, Toronto experienced an extraordinary thunderstorm. I was doing carpool for my grandchildren. I found myself driving through pounding rain, with lightning repeatedly illuminating the sky and thunder exploding around us. I held tightly to the steering wheel, trying to see the road and bring my grandchildren safely to where they needed to go. The truth is, it was frightening.

As I drove, I thought: Here we are, approximately ten days before Rosh Hashanah. I cannot know why Hashem sends any particular storm. But I can ask what I am supposed to learn from experiencing it now.

לא נבראו רעמים אלא לפשוט עקמומית שבלב שנאמר והאלקים עשה שיראו מלפניו

*“Thunder was created only to straighten the crookedness within the heart, as it says: ‘And God acted so that people*

*should fear before Him.’ ” — Berachos 59a*

What does the thunder straighten? For a few moments, it straightens our illusion of independence. We make plans,

organize, visit doctors, and prepare responsibly for the future—as we are obligated to do. We hold the steering wheel. But sometimes we begin to believe that because we are holding the wheel, we are also controlling the world.

***I may be holding the steering wheel, but I am not controlling the world.***

The thunder creates pachad. It stops the physical part of us in its tracks. Our appetites, plans, and demands suddenly grow quiet. But the fear is not the destination. It is preparing us for something higher.

### **Who Is Capable of Crowning the King?**

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, opens a remarkable window into the meaning of Rosh Hashanah. Chazal describe four forms upon the Kisei HaKavod: the lion, king of the wild animals; the ox, king of the domesticated animals; the eagle, king of the birds; and the human being, who rises above them all.

Every part of creation reveals Hashem's majesty. But an animal does so automatically. It possesses no moral struggle and makes no meaningful choice. Its recognition carries no personal decision.

Even the physical human being, considered only as a creature with appetites and drives, cannot offer the ultimate coronation. The body is not eager to accept a king. A king means limits. It means that I cannot simply eat whatever I want, say whatever I want, pursue whatever I want, and live however I want. The body prefers to remain unbridled.

Who, then, can truly crown HaKadosh Baruch Hu? The neshamah—the highest and truest part of the human being. The neshamah possesses da'as. It knows whom it is crowning. Its recognition has meaning, and its decision has eternal value.

### **The Breath of the Neshamah**

Adam Harishon was created on the first Rosh Hashanah. On that day, Hashem breathed into him the neshamah:

ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים

*"And He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life." — Bereishis 2:7*

For the first time, there stood within the physical world a being capable of recognizing the Creator and willingly crowning Him.

ויאמר כל אשר נשמה באפו ה' אלקי ישראל מלך ומלכותו בכל משלה

*"Every being with a soul in its breath shall proclaim: Hashem, the God of Israel, is King, and His Kingship rules over*

*everything." — Rosh Hashanah Amidah*

אמרו לפני בראש השנה מלכויות זכרונות ושופרות כדי מלכויות שתמליכוני עליכם ובמה בשופר

*"Recite before Me on Rosh Hashanah verses of Kingship, Remembrance, and Shofar. Kingship—so that you will crown*

*Me over you...and through what? Through the shofar." — Rosh Hashanah 16a*

Why is the shofar the instrument of coronation? Because its sound begins with human breath. On the first Rosh

Hashanah, Hashem placed the neshamah into Adam through breath. Every Rosh Hashanah, we place our breath into the shofar. The breath Hashem placed within us becomes the sound through which the neshamah answers: “You are my King.”

***The shofar is the neshamah of the Jew proclaiming: Hashem is King.***

### **Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim—On Steroids**

Twice each day, we say Shema. The Mishnah asks why Shema precedes the paragraph of: והיה אם שמוע

למה קדמה שמע לוהיה אם שמוע אלא כדי שיקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים תחלה ואחר כך יקבל עליו עול מצוות

*“Why does Shema precede ‘And it shall be if you listen’? So that a person should first accept upon himself the yoke of*

*the Kingdom of Heaven, and afterward accept the yoke of the commandments.” — Mishnah Berachos 2:2*

If saying Shema is kabbalas ol Malchus Shamayim, what are we doing on Rosh Hashanah? Rosh Hashanah is kabbalas ol Malchus Shamayim on steroids! The entire day is devoted to— כדי שתמליכוני עליכם to crowning Hashem over ourselves.

But why should accepting an ol, a yoke, make us happy? A yoke can be misunderstood as nothing more than a burden placed upon an animal. Without it, the animal appears free. It can wander wherever it wishes, eat whatever it finds, and stop whenever it feels tired. Yet what does that freedom produce? Nothing. The animal may possess enormous strength, but its strength is wandering aimlessly.

Once the yoke is placed upon the animal, that same strength is directed. It travels a straight path, plows the field, and produces a harvest.

***The yoke does not destroy the animal’s strength. It gives its strength direction.***

That is what ol Malchus Shamayim does for us. Our physical drives contain tremendous energy. The body wants food, pleasure, possessions, recognition, and comfort. Those energies are not inherently evil. The question is: Who will direct them?

When the body is unbridled, it appears free, but it is actually dragged from one appetite to another. That does not create

happiness. It produces restlessness and emptiness. Under Hashem’s Malchus, those same energies become productive. Eating becomes a mitzvah. Money becomes tzedakah. Speech becomes Torah and chesed. Physical strength becomes avodas Hashem.

The Madreigas HaAdam describes the body in its ideal state as— לבוש לנפש a garment for the soul. The yoke does not eliminate the body. It enables the body to become the instrument through which the neshamah accomplishes its purpose in this world.

***When the body runs free, the neshamah is imprisoned. When the body accepts the yoke, the neshamah becomes free—and the body becomes productive.***

### **The Fear That Makes Space for Joy**

We can now understand why Rosh Hashanah contains both pachad and simchah. The body initially resists the yoke,

because it does not want restrictions. Therefore, we pray:

ובכן תן פחדך ה' אלקינו על כל מעשיך ואימתך על כל מה שבראת

*“And therefore, Hashem our God, place Your fear upon all Your works and Your awe upon everything You have*

*created.” — Rosh Hashanah Amidah*

The pachad is not the destination. It breaks the body's resistance and quiets its demands. Once the body is subdued, the neshamah is free to lead—and the neshamah is genuinely happy.

The neshamah does not experience Hashem's Kingship as a burden. It has been waiting all year to proclaim it. To recognize Hashem, to belong to Hashem, and to crown Hashem is the neshamah's deepest purpose and greatest joy.

***The body requires pachad. The neshamah experiences simchah.***

This is what happened when Ezra HaSofer read the Torah to the Jewish people on Rosh Hashanah. They recognized how far they had drifted and began to weep. But Ezra told them:

ואל תעצבו כי חדות ה' היא מעוזכם

*“Do not be saddened, for the joy of Hashem is your strength.” — Nechemiah 8:10*

The Torah first broke through the complacency of the body. Then the neshamah could experience the joy of returning to Hashem. Rosh Hashanah is not a celebration despite the yoke. It is a celebration of the yoke—the joy of having our strength, our abilities, and our lives directed toward the purpose for which we were created.

***The thunder quiets the body. The shofar releases the neshamah.***

### **A Shofar in Siberia**

I began by telling you about a grandfather driving his grandchildren through a frightening storm. Let me conclude with another grandfather and grandson—and with a young boy who found a way to transform fear into the sound of the shofar.

In the early 1940s, thirteen-year-old Meir Halberstam was imprisoned in a Siberian labor camp together with his grandfather, Rav Sinai Halberstam, the Zmigrader Rebbe. The Soviet authorities decided when the prisoners would awaken, where they would work, what they would eat, and when they would sleep. As Rosh Hashanah approached, young Meir saw his grandfather's distress. The Rebbe possessed a precious shofar passed down through his family, but blowing it could place everyone's life in danger.

Two nights before Rosh Hashanah, Meir devised an astonishing plan. In the middle of the night, he wrapped cloth around his hands and feet to muffle every sound. After the guards had fallen asleep, he crept across the frozen camp and climbed the tall pole holding the enormous bell that awakened the prisoners each morning. He loosened its rope. The bell crashed to the ground and shattered.

The next morning the guards were furious. Without the bell, how would they awaken the prisoners? Meir's uncle approached the commandant and offered a solution: "My father possesses an old shepherd's horn. He knows how to blow it. Until a new bell arrives, he can use the horn to awaken the camp."

The commandant tried to blow the shofar himself, but no sound emerged. He therefore appointed the Zmigrader Rebbe as the camp's official "waker."

Word quietly spread among the Jewish prisoners. The following morning was Rosh Hashanah. As the sun rose over

the frozen Siberian landscape, the Jews stood silently waiting. The Rebbe lifted the shofar and began to blow. He wept. The prisoners wept. Young Meir stood trembling with pride as the piercing sound traveled through the darkness of the camp.

The commandant believed that the shofar was summoning the prisoners' bodies beneath his yoke for another day of forced labor. In truth, it was summoning their neshamahs to accept the joyful yoke of the only real King.

***Their bodies were imprisoned—but their neshamahs were free to crown Hashem.***

### **Before the Shofar Sounds**

In a few moments, we will hear that same sound. As we listen, let us release—not our responsibility, but our demand to live without a yoke. Let us place our health, our families, our livelihood, our strength, and our future into the hands of the Melech.

The body may resist. Let the shofar quiet it. The neshamah has been waiting. Let the shofar set it free.

***Let the body tremble. Let the neshamah rejoice.***

ה' מלך ה' מלך ה' ימלך לעולם ועד

*"Hashem is King, Hashem was King, and Hashem will reign forever."*

***Hashem is King—and we belong to Him.***

**Source Note**

The Siberian account was preserved by Meir Halberstam's granddaughter, Chaya Halberstam-Evers, in "A Shofar in Siberia and the Young Boy Who Arranged It" (Chabad.org). The central Torah presentation is based upon a teaching of Rav Hutner.