



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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Sounds of the Soul

Context:

During the month of Ellul, following the Shacharit service, the familiar blasts are sounded: *Tekia* (a long unbroken Shofar sound), *Terua* (nine staccato blasts), *Shevarim* (three medium-length sounds).

Questions:

What is the significance and origin of each Shofar sound?

Is there a biblical source for the specific blasts of the Shofar?

A. The Shofar emerges as a powerful symbol early in Jewish history...

While Rabbinic tradition traces the Shofar's origin to the ram offered by Avraham on Mount Moriah, following the binding of Yitzchak; the Torah's first clear reference to the Shofar emerges from the site of another mountain, Mount Sinai.

There, during the moments of God's closest contact with man, Revelation is accompanied by Shofar blasts of increasing intensity

B. In order to understand the origin and meaning of the specific Shofar blasts, however, we must travel back to another point, a bit later in our national history. There, we encounter sounds emerging from an entirely different source:

the biblically-ordained *chatzotzrot*, silver trumpets.

C. The scene confronting us could not be more significant...

With the Exodus and Revelation behind them, the nation's encampment at Mount Sinai is now about to end. All is in place. A divinely chosen nation has been formed. That nation's journey is about to begin.

But, God has yet one more commandment to deliver... His final instructions before the nation takes its first steps away from Sinai:

"Make for yourself two *Chatzrotzrot Kessef*, Trumpets of Silver; of beaten work shall

you make them; and they shall be for you for the summoning of the Assembly and to

cause the camps to journey."

D. As first introduced, the Trumpets seem solely utilitarian in character; to be used for such practical tasks as mustering the people and announcing travels.

A further reading of the text reveals, however, that there is much more to the *Chatzotzrot* than first meets the eye:

"And when you go to wage war in your land against the adversary that oppresses you, then you

shall sound an alarm with the Trumpets, *and you shall be recalled before the Lord, your God, and you shall be saved from your foes.*

And on the day of your gladness, and on your festivals, and on your new moons, you shall sound the Trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your feast peace offerings; *and they shall be a remembrance for you before your God; I am the Lord, your God.*"

E. The sounding of the Trumpets described in these passages is far from ordinary...

Here, the Chatzotzrot are apparently to be used to communicate with God; their sounding a form of wordless prayer, designed to pierce the heavens.

F. As our understanding of the broader role of the *Chatzotzrot* expands, a fascinating pattern begins to emerge.

The Torah identifies two distinct blasts to be sounded by the *Chatzotzrot*:

1. The *Tekia*- A long unbroken sounding of the Trumpet; associated in the text with congregational assembly, leadership assembly and communal celebration.

2. The *Terua*-A broken sounding of the Trumpet; associated with a call to travel and the advent of war.

Apparently, even the initially mentioned usage of the Trumpets is not solely utilitarian. *The sounds of the Chatzotzrot consistently mirror the mindset of the people at the moment of their sounding.*

Times of comfort and stability; such as occasions of assembly and celebration; are marked by a *Tekia*-an unbroken, sound of certainty. Times of instability, challenge, and distress, on the other hand; such as occasions of journey and war; are associated primarily with the *Terua*-a broken, uncertain sound.

At our departure from Sinai, the first clear sounding of two types of blasts that are ultimately connected to the sounding of the

Shofar: the Tekia and the Terua.

G. Tellingly, however, although both the *Tekia* and the *Terua* are sounded on the days leading to, and on, Rosh Hashana; only the latter, broken sound is clearly connected to the festival in the Torah text. So central, in fact, is the association between the broken sound of the Shofar and Rosh Hashanah that that the Torah refers to this holy day as *Yom Terua*, "a day of *Terua*," and *Zichron Terua*, "a remembrance of *Terua*." The message is clear. The aura of Rosh Hashana, the yearly Day of Judgment, is captured by the *Terua*, the broken, uncertain sound of the Shofar.

H. While the *Terua* is defined as a broken sound, however, its exact nature becomes the subject of discussion and debate. Three distinct traditions emerge over time, all reflective of the uncertain character of the *Terua* sound.

Some maintain that the *Terua* is meant to mirror an individual in the act of *sobbing*. This opinion is fulfilled through the sounding of the blasts that we refer to as the *Terua*; nine, quick, staccato sounds. Others maintain that the sound is meant to reflect an individual in the act of *sighing*, a mandate fulfilled through the series of blasts that we refer to as the *Shevarim*, three medium-length sounds. Yet a third position combines the two, resulting in a *Shevarim-Terua*, representing an individual whose *sighing leads to sobbing*.¹ The Talmud relates that Rabbi Avahu decreed the sounding of all possibilities, thus creating the universal

1. Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashana 33b; Notably, the rabbis do not suggest the sounding of a *Terua-Shevarim*. They maintain that *sighing* leads to *sobbing*, while *sobbing* does not lead to *sighing*.

practice that continues to this day.²

Just as the notes of the *Chatzotzrot* mirror the internal state of the Israelites at the time of the Trumpets' sounding, so, too, the blasts of the Shofar reflect the internal turmoil of each individual standing on Rosh Hashana, in judgment before God.

I. The message emerging from this imagery, however, strikes even deeper. The *Terua* blasts of the Shofar, after all, are not meant to simply mirror an individual's internal struggle.

These sounds are instead designed to awaken, cultivate, and develop that very struggle.

As the Rambam proclaims:

"Although the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is an unexplained edict of the text, a lesson is imbedded within it:

'Awaken slumberers from your sleep... examine your ways ... return to and remember your Creator... Look into your souls, examine your ways and actions, and let each one of you abandon his evil path...'"³

Sounded as the beginning of the year approaches, as our personal journeys begin again, the sounding of the Shofar is designed to arouse the one element essential to all religious striving: our own human spirit, our heart and our soul. That awakening accomplished, the Shofar sounds then reflect our spirit back to God in wordless, heartfelt prayer.

J. Circling back, our analysis of the Shofar blasts illuminates the true significance of the *Chatzotzrot*, as well.

Like the Shofar sounds, the blasts of the Trumpets were designed to awaken and

to reflect the one final component essential to the success of the Jewish journey, the indomitable human spirit lying in the heart of each Israelite.

As the people prepare to depart Sinai, God turns to Moshe and says:

I have given you all that I can. The laws, the symbols, the rituals and the legal process are all in place. Now, however, you must add the one ingredient that I cannot; the one essential element that must come from each of you, of your own free will: your own personal spirit.

Create for yourself Chatzotzrot..." sound them again and again... and let those trumpets awaken your spirit, in times of certainty or doubt, in times of celebration or conflict. Meet each of these vastly different circumstances with the same inner strength and devotion. Above all, remember that all that I have given you will be meaningless without the investment of your spirit and your soul...

*And if you are successful, then the notes of those Trumpets will themselves be transformed into wordless prayer, piercing the vaults of the heavens and reaching My Heavenly Throne. For those sounds will represent your spirit and soul as no words can.*⁴

4. A final, easily missed, textual nuance underscores the symbolism of the *Chatzotzrot*. Based on the phrase "Make for yourself two Trumpets of silver," the rabbis determine that—alone among the sacred objects fashioned in Moshe's day—the *Chatzotzrot* were "generation-specific."

While all other utensils could be handed down across the years, the Trumpets could not. After Moshe's death, Yehoshua's generation would have to fashion their own, as would each generation that followed.

Representing the spirit unique to each generation, over and over again, the Chatzotzrot must be created anew.

2. Talmud Bavli Ibid 34a

3. Rambam ibid Hilchot Teshuva 3:4

K. Two sets of wordless sounds...Trumpets heralding the onset of our nation's journey... a ram's horn heralding the beginning of the year.

Two sets of wordless sounds...both reflecting one critical component: the sanctified spark lying at the core of each soul; a spark that must be kindled again and again, are we to reach our full potential. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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