



Sacred Speech: Explorations in Lashon HaKodesh

OU Israel's Torah Tidbits is honored to welcome Dr. Ariella Agatstein as a new monthly columnist. Dr. Agatstein will be sharing insights concerning the uniqueness of the Hebrew language and the inspiration that we can find in speaking Hebrew and appreciating its profound depth and true beauty.

The scene is familiar. The humming congregation quiets, and even the small children become silent and still, all waiting in anticipation of the great sounds which are meant to pierce their hearts. The shofar blasts are G-d's musical way of reaching our souls in ways that words cannot. The word for "shofar", which is from the root שפר means "to improve", teaching us even in the instrument, of the purpose of the sounds as catalysts for spiritual change and repentance.

In Vayikra 23:24 when the Torah describes Rosh Hashana, the word תרועה is mentioned for the very first time. The pasuk says: "It shall be a complete rest, a sacred occasion, commemorated with loud blasts". Indeed, one of the names of Rosh Hashana is Yom Teruah. What are these תרועה blasts and what message are we meant to

glean from them?

In the Torah, G-d uses every single word with Infinite precision. Lashon HaKodesh, the original language of mankind, brims with depth and meaning. The Talmud speaks of the importance of every single letter, and every stroke of ink in order to deem a Sefer Torah "kosher" and usable. The names of the Hebrew letters, their numerical values, the combinations of letters to create *shorashim*, roots of words, as well as the connection between different words with the same roots, are all purposely designed to be deeply significant. Even the Hebrew word for a single letter, an "אות", means a "sign", meant to signal to us the importance of even the smallest of units within our holy language. Rabbi Akiva was famous for spending time studying each letter, and even commented on the crowns in the Torah scroll (Menachot 29.).

The first time a Hebrew word is used in the Torah hints to its essence. When the word תרועה is used here for the first time, Rav Hirsch, as he frequently does, discusses its definition and its eternal message to the Jewish people. He explains that not only does the word תרועה appear

in relation to Rosh Hashana, but it appears in two other notable contexts: Firstly, תרועה is mentioned in connection to the ushering in of the Jubilee Year, the fiftieth year when all objects return to their original owners and when slaves are freed by their masters, returning to their original state of being only servants of G-d (Vayikra 25:9). Secondly, the תרועה is mentioned in relation to the Jewish people's formation. In Bamidbar 10:5, Hashem tells the people to blow the חצוצרות, the silver trumpets, when they are meant to break camp and travel, while they are supposed to blow a תקיעה, a long blast, when they are meant to assemble.

When we hear the punctuated, broken sound of the תרועה on Rosh Hashana, we are meant to recall the Yovel/Jubilee Year when physical items are reunited with their original masters. The תרועות of Rosh Hashana are meant to parallel this returning. On Rosh Hashana, we are spiritually returning back to our original relationship with our Master and Beloved King, Hashem. The תרועה is also meant to elicit a second memory- that of breaking camp, of breaking free of our past sins, of our bad habits and set ways, and taking a new path in our relationship with HaKodosh Baruch Hu.

As we celebrate the New Year, and we stand listening to these moving Shofar notes, we are meant to refocus ourselves to use our time for the next ten days to find our way back to our pure relationship with our Avinu Malkeinu, our Father and King. It is no coincidence that Hashem uses many words associated with Time to remind us of renewing our relationship

with him: The word חודש, for example, contains the root חדש/"chadash" which means "new". At the beginning of each month we are meant to go through a spiritual renewal and become a better version of ourselves. Similarly, the next unit of time, the שנה/"shana", not only means "a year" but its Hebrew shoshen is shared with other words that mean לשנות "to change", "to teach" and "to repeat". Indeed, as we experience a year going by, on the one hand, its cyclical nature is something which will repeat and yet, like a spiral, each time we experience the year's cycle we are meant to change, to grow, and to improve. Even the word for time itself, זמן, has the shoshen זמן which is shared with the word הזדמנות, "opportunity". Time is an opportunity to serve Hashem each and every single day.

As we stand in shul this year, listening to the תרועה's broken blasts, may we remind ourselves to use our precious time as an opportunity to break free of our past, investing in a renewed relationship with HaKodosh Baruch Hu. ■

Dr. Ariella Agatstein has been involved in Jewish educational leadership for over 20 years. She received her Doctorate in Jewish Educational Leadership from Azrieli Graduate School, focusing her thesis on the religious development of Modern Orthodox high school students. Dr. Agatstein has taught Limudei Kodesh in various schools throughout the United States and was the Assistant Principal of Girls Judaic Studies in Yeshivat Yavneh of Los Angeles. She subsequently moved with her family and children to Jerusalem where she became an Eshkolot Fellow at the Matan-Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. Dr. Agatstein continues to lecture all over Israel on topics related to Torah and pedagogy and she remains very passionate about bringing her knowledge and experience to the field of Jewish education in Israel. She is currently the Director of the Bellows Eshkolot Professional Development Fellowship in Matan.