



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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Sounding, Hearing

Context: The Rosh Hashana mitzva of *tekiat shofar* is not commanded directly in the Torah text.

Instead, the obligation emerges obliquely; out of the Torah's description of Rosh Hashana as a *Yom Terua*, a day of a broken [shofar] blast, and a *Zichron Terua*, a remembrance of a broken [shofar] blast.

The Torah's lack of clarity concerning the shofar's sounding creates ambiguity about the character of the mitzva, itself.

Specifically, the rabbis ask, are we each obligated to *sound the shofar* on Rosh Hashana or are we obligated to *hear the shofar blasts*?

Is tekiat shofar a mitzva of sounding or of hearing?

The answer to this question not only carries practical ramifications, but shapes a centuries-old debate concerning the mitzva's philosophical underpinnings, as well.

Approaches:

A. Some authorities maintain that the Torah obligates each individual adult male to *actually blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana*.

This approach, however, presents an obvious problem. Only select individuals are capable of properly sounding the shofar. How then, can members of the general population fulfill their personal responsibility to sound the shofar?

The solution to this problem, according

to many authorities, lies in the application of the halachic principle of *shomeia k'oneh*, "one who hears is as one who recites."

Based on the concept of *areivut*, the deep interconnection between all Jews, the principle of *shomeia k'oneh* enables an individual to fulfill certain mitzvot through another Jew's performance of those obligations. For this to happen, both the individual performing the mitzva and the "listener" must have their reciprocal relationship in mind.

Thus, if the *Ba'al Tokea*, the individual who sounds the shofar in synagogue, intends to sound the shofar on behalf of all those who hear his blasts; and the members of the congregation aim to fulfill their mitzva through those shofar sounds; *the halacha regards each individual present as having personally sounded the shofar*.

B. Other authorities, including the Rambam, adopt an entirely different approach to the mitzva of *tekiat shofar*.

In their view, the mitzva of *tekiat shofar* does not require the personal sounding of the shofar by each individual participant.

On the contrary, these scholars maintain, the mitzva of *Tekiat Shofar simply obligates one to hear the appropriate shofar blasts, even if those blasts are sounded by another*.

The blessing for *Tekiat Shofar* adopted by

most authorities over the years, and universally recited today in conjunction with the mitzva, mirrors this position.

Baruch ata Hashem, elokeinu Melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvosav, v'tzivanu lishmoa kol shofar. Blessed are you, HaShem, our Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us in his mitzvot and commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar.

C. Whatever the upshot of this halachic debate, however, the question remains. Why isn't the Torah clearer in its exposition of the laws of *tekiat shofar*? Why leave the nature of this important mitzva shrouded in mystery?

One could argue that the textual ambiguity is deliberate. Perhaps the Torah wants us to recognize that there is a dual character to the mitzva of Tekiat shofar. This mitzva reminds us that there are times to “sound” and times to “hear.”

The two dimensions of the mitzva will shift from moment to moment over the course of every Rosh Hashana...

D. At times, when words fail, the shofar blasts serve as prayers to be “sounded;” wordless pleas intended to pierce the heavenly vaults.

In these moments, we transcend the limitations of speech; as through the sounding of the shofar we communicate to God the unspoken fears, concerns, hopes, and aspirations that lie deep within the recesses of our hearts.

Not everything can be put into words, we effectively declare. And we beseech God to accept the powerful emotions that remain unsaid.

The insertion of the *Tekiot D'me'umad*, the “Standing Tekiot,” directly into the Rosh

Hashana Musaf Amida, underscores their role as wordless prayer.

E. There are other times, however, when the shofar blasts are not are not meant to be “sounded,” but to be “heard.”

These are the moments when the demand upon us is to stop talking and to listen; to hear the myriad voices that should power our prayers.

In the shofar blasts we should hear:

The voices of our earliest progenitors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, whose search for God led them to establish the three daily prayer services; the voice of King David, whose psalms bring the myriad of human emotions into our tefilla each day; the voices of scholars over the ages who further shaped our prayers; the voices of Jews across time, whose unrealized dreams for the future are now dependent on us; and, above it all, the voice of God, telling us of His dreams for our people, of the challenges of our time that must be met...

And, if we listen carefully enough, we will also hear in those shofar blasts the voices of our own hearts; reminding us of the true priorities that we know, deep down, should guide our lives; of the truly important facets of our lives, so often lost in the daily grind ...

F. On Rosh Hashana, the shofar must be both “sounded” and heard. Whether this happens is entirely dependent upon us.

The mitzva of *tekiat shofar* demands that we be sensitive to the rhythm of the festival, to the shifting moments of the days. We must be ardent in our prayers, yet contemplative in our thoughts.

Only if we both “sound” and “hear” the shofar, will we achieve our Rosh Hashana goals. ■