

Can One Sound Really Do So Much?

As a child, I remember my first visits to synagogue for the Rosh Hashana services. One of the most astonishing contrasts was the moment right before the sound of the shofar. There was always dead silence, not even a murmur. The anticipation for the moment when the piercing sound would begin was a sight to behold. And when the first tekiyah was blown, the impact on each and every person was visible. While the sound was so powerful, the question always was – what should I be thinking about?

Saadia Gaon offers **ten** (!) rationales for why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana. He begins with the fact that Rosh Hashana is the day of the Creation of the universe. On this day, God declared His kingship over all. The commencement of a new reign of any king would bring with it the blowing of trumpets; the same applies to God.

The second reason references the reality that Rosh Hashana is the first of the Ten Days of Repentance. We blow the shofar to announce to all this important opportunity. Already we see the shofar functioning in a much different capacity than “normal”, an announcement of something important.

He moves along, explaining that the shofar reminds us of the Divine Revelation at Sinai (the verses in the Torah mention the presence of the sound of the shofar). What does this have to do with Rosh Hashana? The fourth reason is quite cryptic as well. We blow the shofar to remind us of the words of the prophets. Their messages are compared to the blowing of the shofar. Again, how does this fit into Rosh Hashana?

He continues with how the shofar reminds us of the destruction of the Temple. The actual sound of the shofar is reminiscent of the war cries of our enemies. We can ask once again how this fits into the idea of Rosh Hashana? While remembering the destruction of the Temple is a fundamental tenet of our faith, why is Rosh Hashana an appropriate place to reflect on it?

The next two reasons offered are most often cited as the reasons for blowing the shofar. The sixth idea is the recollection of the *Akeidat Yitzchak*, when Avraham was commanded to sacrifice Yitzchak. Saadia Gaon focuses on the specific idea of Yitzchak’s attitude of self-sacrifice throughout. In a similar vein, we turn to God with an attitude of self-sacrifice regarding the sanctity of His name, hoping to merit a positive response. The seventh reason is probably most familiar to us. When we hear the sound of the shofar, we are filled with a sense of fear and trepidation. These emotions are the natural result of the sound of the shofar, its piercing cry bringing about this state.

The last three reasons swerve far away from the above themes. The eighth reason is to recall the “big” Day of Judgment, an allusion to the future times of the Mashiach. The ninth reason is

to recall the returning of those in exile to Israel, as we mention in our daily prayers. Finally (whew), he concludes with the blowing of the shofar reminding us of the idea of the resurrection of the dead (*techiyat hameitim*). While the first of these final reasons at least has an allusion to an idea of a Day of Judgment, it seems to be quite different than the specific Rosh Hashana we are celebrating. Overall, these last three do not appear to fit into how one would normally look at the shofar.

One final question: as these reasons are quite disparate, is someone expected to juggle these various reasons in their mind when hearing shofar? How does one do that?

When reading through the various *tefilot* of Rosh Hashana, it is fairly clear that the recognition of God's kingship is a primary theme. We spend Rosh Hashana acknowledging this reality, submitting ourselves to His authority and pleading that the world recognize His reign. The other subject matter that lurks in the background is that of repentance. We do not recite the selichot prayers or open up ourselves to admonition through the recitation of *viduy*. Rav Soloveitchik (Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 7) notes the missing overt theme of repentance, and explains a person begins the "awakening" to repentance on Rosh Hashana. The various thoughts and emotions one experiences as he internalizes the reality of his impending judgment serves as a catalyst to the process of repentance. Therefore, while the theme of repentance may not be outright and in the open, it is clearly an important element of the day.

The first two reasons offered by Saadia Gaon focus on the above two themes. In announcing God as King, we are emphasizing the idea of God's role beyond Creator. His reign is clearly expressed through His control over the universe. On this day, when we are being judged, we must see His control through the lens of His judgment. We submit ourselves to His judgment, His authority complete. We also acknowledge the beginning of the process of repentance, the shofar announcing its arrival. Thus, the simultaneous announcements serve to introduce the dual themes.

When we come to the next reason, the emphasis on the above themes seems to disappear. In truth, though, as we will see throughout, each of the reasons fit into either the idea of God as king or the focus on repentance. In this instance, the event at Sinai ties directly to the idea of God's kingship. In discussing God as king, we may search for a specific moment that we can directly point to which best exhibits this concept. When we received the Torah, we were more than accepting upon ourselves a system of commandments and way of life. We were submitting ourselves to the authority of God, a persistent reality present to this very day. The event at Sinai, then, was the example we turn to in understanding the idea of God's kingship. In a similar fashion, we seek out a starting point to assist in our path of repentance. Rambam notes that the role of the prophets after the death of Moshe was to reinforce his admonitions given over to the Jewish people. The prophets delivered messages from God in order to

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reorient ourselves to the proper path. The words may be harsh at times, but they are necessary in order for us to evaluate ourselves in an honest and forthright manner. The fourth reason for shofar, reminding us of the role of the prophets, points us in the right direction to begin the process of repentance.

While there is a somber nature to Rosh Hashana, it is not considered a day of mourning; yet Saadia Gaon suggests the sound of the shofar reminds us of the destruction of the Temple, a source of sadness and grief. One of the primary roles of the Temple is to serve as the sanctification of God to the world. The operation of the Temple is when God's reign as king is completely manifest. Therefore, without the Temple in existence, the ability to sanctify His name is incomplete. The sound of the shofar reminds us that we perpetually tolerate this void, and we must acknowledge our allowance of God's "defective" kingship to continue.

The sixth and seventh reasons begin to merge the two themes together. Thinking of the attitude of self-sacrifice expressed by Yitzchak, the complete submission to Him, evokes the imagery of kingship. It also assists in creating the proper framework of repentance, as our sense of desperation begins to creep into our thinking. When the sound of the shofar produces trepidation and fear, the pathway to repentance becomes more visible to us. While at first seemingly incongruent, the idea of God as king and the beginning of repentance begin to intertwine.

Now we can understand the idea behind the final three reasons. All three of these reasons point to the time of the future Redemption. This epoch will come about through a combination of our true recognition of God as king and our complete repentance. They are symbiotic, as our imperfections cloud our ability to see God in the proper manner as king. The Redemption will come about when we can coronate God properly, which will only take place when we complete our repentance.

Rosh Hashana, then, does not really have two discrete themes. While we can analyze the ideas of kingship and repentance separately, the two ideas are in fact intricately tied to each other. At the same time, as we understand the idea of God as judge, we are inspired to begin the process of repentance. And when we begin the process of repentance, the idea of God as the True King becomes more and more of a reality. Rather than be ten separate disparate reasons, the ideas presented by Saadia Gaon demonstrate how for the shofar are a window to the core ideas of Rosh Hashana. When that moment of silence begins immediately prior to the penetrating sound of the shofar, we should reflect on the powerful words of Saadia Gaon and internalize the majesty of the day.