

Rosh Hashanah: A Time for Listening

A Supplement to the Shofar Service, The Nesiya Institute 5765/2004

Learning How to Listen

Am I a good listener?

What are the obstacles to being a good listener?

Am I affected by what I hear? Does what I hear change me?

"ציוונו לשמוע קול שופר ביום ראשון מתשרי."
(ספר המצוות לרמב"ם, מצוות עשה קע)

"... We are commanded to hear the sound of the shofar on the first of Tishrei."
(Maimonides Book of Commandments, Positive Commandment 170)

"ובשופר גדול יתקע, וקול דממה דקה ישמע."
(מוסף לראש השנה)

"The great shofar is sounded, and a still, small voice is heard."
(Rosh Hashanah Musaf Service)

The challenge of blowing the shofar is in the listening. The essential act is not the blowing of the shofar but rather the hearing of its sounds. Listening is not a passive mode but a positive action. This idea is appropriate to a time of year where we are encouraged to listen, to our families, to our communities, and to our tradition's sacred texts and prayers, in order to begin a process of reflection and evaluation.

Becoming an Active Listener

What must I do in order to actively listen?

What are the voices in my life that inspire me toward reflection and renewal?

How do I respond to internal or external voices which challenge me to act differently?

"אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב, רמז יש בו, כלומר: עורו עורו ישנים משנתכם, והקיצו נרדמים מתרדמתכם; וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה, וזכרו בוראכם."
(משנה תורה להרמב"ם, הלכות תשובה ג:ד)

"Although the sounding of the shofar is commanded without a stated reason in the Torah, a reason may be discerned, namely: awake, awake sleepers from your sleep, and arise, drowsy ones, from your slumber; search your deeds and return in repentance, and remember your Creator."
(Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 3:4)

Many of us lapse into the comfort of daily routine rather than respond to the unique challenges of each and every moment. Sometimes our fear of change prevents us from examining the choices that we have made and continue to make. The shofar serves as an alarm clock, waking us out of our ego-driven slumber. It calls us to open ourselves to the possibility of renewal, self transformation, and action. But waking up is not so easy, and staying awake is even harder. It demands attention to our own voices and the voices of others. We must be willing to hear what may be uncomfortable. We must be ready to admit that sometimes we are wrong. And changing ourselves sometimes means we have to take risks.

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Listening Beyond Words

*Do I make time in my life to hear the beauty and power of nature?
How can I listen beyond the words a person speaks to try to hear the person speaking?
Is my prayer only words? How can I experience prayer without words?*

"לא האדם בלבד מתפלל, אלא כל בעל חיים שופך את לבו לפני הבורא באופן אינסטינקטיבי ובלתי מודע. נביחת הכלב, רחשי הציפורים, יללת התנים... – כל אלא מתמזגים ומצטרפים לתפילה אחת... צריך האדם שיתפלל לא רק בתורת אישיות רוחנית המשתמשת בכוח הדיבור, אלא אף בתורת בשר ודם. התפילה צריכה להביע לא רק את גדלות האדם אלא אף את שפלותו... ותפילתו זו מתבטאת בקולות השופר, וכי מהו קול שופר אם לא זעקת האדם ללא דיבורים וללא מילים."
(הרב יוסף דב סולובייצ'יק, ימי זיכרון, "בסוד שיח השופר")

"It is not only the human who prays; rather every living thing pours out its heart before the Creator in an instinctive, unconscious way. The bark of the dog, the song of the bird, the cry of the jackal... – all of these mix and join together into one prayer... A person must pray not only as an elevated personality who uses the power of words, but also as a creature of flesh and blood. Prayer must express not only human greatness, but also humility... And this prayer is expressed through the sounds of the shofar. For what is the sound of the shofar if not the cry of one without words or speech?"

(R. Joseph Soloveitchik, Days of Remembrance, "The Unrevealed Voice of the Shofar")

While language serves many needs, it is ultimately limited in its ability to express our deepest feelings and sense of wonder and appreciation. We must create time and space to hear the sounds and silences in the natural world. In our relationships, we must learn to go beyond words in order to really hear and understand the feelings and needs of others. It is not enough to wait for our turn to speak. How can we make the experience of listening to another person like sharing a laugh or crying with someone – or listening to the ocean, the birds, or the wind?

Listening to Your Own Voice

*Do I listen to my own voice?
Am I true to my internal sense of what is good and just?
In what areas do I need to listen more closely to my own sense of integrity?*

"וישנה גם תשובה הדרגתית. לא בריקה הבריקה בקרבו להתהפך מן העמק של הרע אל הטוב, אלא מרגיש הוא שצריך להיות הולך ומטיב דרכיו ואורחות חייו, רצונו, הלך-מחשבתו, ובמהלכו זה הולך הוא וכובש לאט לאט את דרכי היושר, מתקן את המידות, מטיב את המעשים, מלמד את עצמו איך להתכשר יותר ויותר, עד שהוא בא למעלה רמה של זיכוך ותיקון."
(הרב אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק, אורות התשובה, פרק ב)

"There is also a gradual form of teshuva (repentance). No sudden flash of illumination dawns upon the person to make him change from the depth of evil to the good, but he feels that he must mend his way of life, his will, his pattern of thought. By heeding this impulse he gradually acquires the ways of equity, he corrects his moral attributes, he improves his actions, and he conditions himself increasingly to becoming a good person, until he reaches a high level of purity and perfection."

(R. Abraham Isaac Hacoeh Kook, Lights of Teshuva, Chapter 2)

Sometimes we don't know where our own identity begins and where the needs, expectations, and demands of others end. It is a challenge to judge ourselves according to our inner sense of who we are. How can we develop and listen to our own sense of integrity? How do we learn to let our inner voice speak, and to ensure that our actions reflect that voice?