

# The Mitzvah of Shofar: Who's Listening?

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A central theme on Rosh Hashana is the Mitzvah of Shofar. When the Torah describes the holiday of the first of Tishrei (what we call Rosh Hashana) it refers to it as Zichron Teruah (Vayikra 23:24) and Yom Teruah (Bamidbar 29:21). The entire Mussaf Tefilah, with its special character of Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot, is arranged around the blowing of the Shofar, as Rabbi Akiva exclaims in the Mishna in Rosh Hashana (32A): "If one doesn't blow [the Shofar] for Malchuyot why should he even mention them?" The only Mitzvah that is unique to Rosh Hashana is blowing the Shofar. Let us examine the precise nature of this celebrated practice.

The Torah states that Rosh Hashana is a Yom Teruah, a day of Shofar sounding, but it does not clarify the parameters of this obligation. It would seem from the wording of "Teruah" - "Shofar sounding" that the essence of the Mitzvah is the sounding – blowing - of the Shofar.

*(The Shofar sounding of) a deaf mute, insane person or child cannot fulfill the public's obligation (to blow or hear the Shofar). This is the rule: Anyone that isn't obligated in a certain thing cannot fulfill the obligation of the public in that mitzvah.*

**Rosh Hashana 29a**

חרש שוטה וקטן אין מוציאין את הרבים ידי חובתן. זה הכלל: כל שאינו מחוייב בדבר - אינו מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן.  
מסכת ראש השנה דף כט.

A person who *sounds* the Shofar must be obligated in the Mitzvah of Shofar, and hence a minor is excluded. We learn from this that *sounding* the Shofar is an integral part of the Mitzvah. However, there is another aspect of the mitzvah.

*If one blows (Shofar) into a pit ... if the sound of the Shofar is heard, the mitzvah has been fulfilled, but if the sound of the echo is heard, the mitzvah has not been fulfilled.*

**Rosh Hashana 27b**

התוקע לתוך הבור, או לתוך הדות, או לתוך הפיטס, אם קול שופר שמע - יצא, ואם קול הברה שמע - לא יצא.  
מסכת ראש השנה דף כז:

We learn that sounding the Shofar alone does not suffice - one must also *hear* the sound of the Shofar. One who blows but does not hear the sound of Shofar does not fulfill his obligation; hence, once who blows into a ditch and hears only an echo falls short of fulfilling the Mitzvah, as the echo is not considered the sound of the actual Shofar.

These two Mishnayot teach us two different requirements of Shofar, sounding and hearing. Many commentaries debate which of these requirements is the essential, defining characteristic of the

Mitzvah, with a very important ramification: the blessing on the Shofar. Should the Nusach Haberacha (text of the blessing) follow the Tekiah (the sounding) or the Shemiah (the hearing).

The Rif (R' Yitzchak Alfasi of Morocco, 11<sup>th</sup> c.) in his summary of the laws of Rosh Hashana quotes a question that was discussed in his Beit Midrash:

*They asked before the head of the academy: one who recited a blessing on the day of Rosh Hashana on the sounding of Shofar after reading from the Torah, and then spoke, must he recite the blessing on the Shofar blasts of the [mussaf] prayer, or not?*

**Rif Rosh Hashana 11a**

שאלו מקמי ריש מתיבתא המברך יום  
ר"ה על תקיעת שופר בתר ס"ת והשיה  
צריך לברך על התקיעות של סדר ברכות  
או לא  
רי"ף ראש השנה דף יא.

The Rif implies that the Beracha of Shofar is on the Tekiah - the sounding. This opinion is also attributed to the Or Zarua (R' Yitzchak of Vienna, 13<sup>th</sup> c.) cited by the Shiltei Giborim on the Rif (ad loc.). He states that one should recite the Beracha "Litkoah Bshofar" just like one recites a Beracha on the recitation of Hallel "Likro et HaHallel." However, The Rosh (R' Asher ben Yechiel, Germany and Spain 14<sup>th</sup> c.) in his Halachot (Rosh Hashana Perek 4, Siman 10) cites the Raaviah (R' Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi, Germany 12<sup>th</sup> c.) and the Behag (Author of the Halachot Gedolot) that we recite "Lishmoah Bkol Shofar" because "with the hearing of the sound of the Shofar he fulfills his obligation, and not with the sounding."

The Rambam (R' Moshe ben Maimon, Spain & Egypt, 12<sup>th</sup> c.) rules:

*And one stands and recites the blessing: "Blessed are You, Hashem, Our God, King of the world, who sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us to hear the sound of the Shofar"*

**Rambam Hilchot Shofar 3:10**

ואחד עומד ומברך ברוך אתה ה'  
אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו  
במצותיו וצונו לשמוע קול שופר.  
רמב"ם הלכות שופר ג:י

In asserting that the central element of Shofar is the listening, and hence that the text of the Bracha should read "to hear the sound of the Shofar," Rambam is consistent with his definition of the mitzvah stated in the introduction to his laws of Shofar:<sup>1</sup>

*It is a Biblical commandment to hear the sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana*

**Rambam Hilchot Shofar 1:1**

מצות עשה של תורה לשמוע תרועת השופר בראש  
השנה.  
רמב"ם הלכות שופר א:א

With this understanding, that the Rambam views listening to the sound of Shofar as the essence of the Mitzvah, we can resolve a seemingly difficult opinion of the Rambam. The Rambam (Laws of Shofar 2:4) records that one who heard the sound of Shofar but did not intend to fulfill his Mitzvah would not fulfill his obligation. Seemingly, this indicates that the Rambam considers Kavvanah, intent to perform a Mitzvah, an indispensable requirement, and if one did

<sup>1</sup> See also the Rambam's formulation in the "Koteret," heading, of the Laws of Shofar, and in the Sefer Hamitzvot, Aseh 170. The Rambam explains this position clearly in his responsum, Pe'er Hador, no. 51.

not have intention of fulfilling a Mitzvah, one would not fulfill it. However, the Maggid Mishna (ad loc.) notes that the Rambam seems to hold otherwise! In the laws of Chametz and Matzah the Rambam teaches:

*One who ate Matzah without intent, for example, if he was coerced by gentiles or bandits to eat, he fulfills his obligation.*

**Rambam Hilchot Chametz Umatza 6:3**

אכל מצה בלא כונה כגון שאנסוהו גוים או לסטים לאכול יצא ידי חובתו.  
רמב"ם הלכות חמץ ומצה ו:ג

We see that if one ate Matzah, even without the intention of fulfilling the Mitzvah, one would still fulfill the obligation. Why is this not the case in the Mitzvah of Shofar; why does Rambam not issue a parallel ruling that if one heard Shofar, even without intent to fulfill his mitzvah, he fulfills his obligation?

Some suggest<sup>2</sup> that the Rambam distinguishes between two types of Mitzvot. When a Mitzvah is defined by an action, then any completion of that action, even without intent, fulfills the requirement. The mitzvah to eat matzah is primarily a mitzvah to act. Hence, eating Matzah without intention for the Mitzvah still satisfies the requirement. However, Mitzvot whose essence is in the person's experience and consciousness, such as ones that entail speaking or listening, require intent for fulfillment of the Mitzvah. According to our analysis, that for the Rambam the Mitzvah of Shofar is in the listening, it is very logical that fulfilling the mitzvah of Shofar requires intent.

This legal characterization, that the listening to the Shofar is the essence of the Mitzvah, complements the Rambam's understanding of the message and meaning of the Mitzvah.

*Although blowing the Shofar on Rosh Hashana is a mandate of the Torah, there is a hint in it. As if to say, "wake up sleepy ones from your slumber and the dozing ones arise from your sleep and examine your deeds and return with Teshuva and recall your Creator, those people who forget the truth with the silliness of the times and waste all their years on foolishness and emptiness that will not help and not save. Look to your souls and improve your ways and mistakes and abandon each one of you his mistaken path and his intention that is not good."*

**Rambam Hilchot Shofar 3:4**

אע"פ שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עורר ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם, אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל הביטו לנפשותיכם והטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ויעזבו כל אחד מכם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה.  
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ג:ד

The purpose of the Shofar is for us to hear its sound, its cry, and be inspired. This wordless cry is a call to better ourselves, to extricate ourselves from our current slumber that distances us from our Creator. Hearing the Shofar arouses within us the desire to improve our lives and seek a closer connection to Hashem. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903- 1993) expands upon this notion:

*Once my father was standing on the synagogue platform on Rosh Hashana, ready and prepared to guide the order of the sounding of the Shofar. The Shofar-sounder, a G-d fearing*

<sup>2</sup> Shemen L'ner quoted by Iturei Torah, volume 7 page 19. This answer resolves a similar difficult between the Rambam's ruling in the laws of Matzah and his ruling in the laws of Keriyat Shema.

*Habad Hasid, who was very knowledgeable in the mystical doctrine of the "Alter Rebbe," R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, began to weep . . . .*

*The mystic understands the symbolic significance of the sounding of the Shofar- the concept of a plain note - whereby man attempts to pierce through lawful existence and reach the glory of the Atik Yomin, the Ancient one.*

*(Halachic Man, pp60-61)*

The sound of the Shofar stirs us to reach for the heavens. It empowers us to transcend our past and connect to Hashem through sincere Teshuva. If we only sound the Shofar, without hearing the Shofar's sound resonate within our souls, we miss the essence of the experience and hence the essence of the mitzvah.

Each year, as we experience Rosh Hashana and the Mitzvah of Shofar, we have an opportunity to renew our connection to Hashem, to awaken from our slumber, and to be moved by the sound of the Shofar. Hopefully, this year we will listen closely to the Shofar's sound, in fulfillment of the letter of the law, and also be inspired by its unique spirit.