

ROSH HASHANAH

The Mystical Tug of the Shofar

This Rosh Hashanah, we will once again gaze spellbound as the man in the prayer shawl (*tallis*) and white robe (*kittel*) raises the *shofar* to his lips and sends its exquisite sounds into our minds, our hearts, our very bones. Why do we tremble when the stillness in the synagogue is suddenly punctured by the piercing pitch of the *shofar* blasts? What do those sounds mean to us? Why do we find them so deeply moving yet so utterly mysterious?

The Sages, based on the words of the Prophets, describe the sound of the *shofar* as a call to repentance. If so, why is the *shofar* sounded at night at the close of Yom Kippur when there is as yet no need for a new call to repentance? Clearly, the sound of the *shofar* also signals an outburst of joyous confidence that our Yom Kippur prayers were accepted favorably. But this is in itself puzzling. How does one sound serve both as a call to repentance and a cry of joy?

The Kabbalists explain that the sounds of the *shofar* transcend all verbal expression. Human speech is constrained by the limitations of a person's ability to enunciate words, to find expressive words in his vocabulary, to arrange his words in a form that will accurately reflect and articulate his thoughts. But some thoughts and feelings are too exalted to find expression through such limited means. The yearning of the Jewish soul to come close to G-d, to cleave to the Divine, is so intensely spiritual that mere human speech is inadequate to give it expression. The sound of the *shofar*, however, connects with this inner yearning and gives it expression. It is the sound of the immortal soul crying out to its Creator in an ecstasy of love, devotion and yearning. It is the sound that breaks the barriers of mere words and embraces myriad spiritual expressions - from the most abject remorse to the most intense joy.

We find a similar concept in one of the ten forms of prayer identified by the Sages. It is called *naakah*, a groan. The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people were subjected to the cruelest slave labor by the Egyptians, they groaned in the agony of their distress. "And G-d heard their groans" and responded to them. The commentators point out that when the Jewish people directed their groans towards G-d it was one of the most eloquent forms of prayer imaginable. No sentences. No words. No entreaty. Just a cry from the depths of the

heart and the soul, the cry of the children of G-d torn from the warm embrace of their Father in Heaven. Prayer in its purest form.

In the same vein, the sounds of the *shofar* are the expressions of the soul in the purest form. They encompass all sort of thoughts and emotions that are too sublimely spiritual to be clothed in human speech. The call to repentance, the exuberant joy of Yom Kippur night, the mysterious tremble of spiritual longing in the soul of every Jew when he hears the *shofar*, all these and countless others find expression in the sounds of the *shofar*.

As we listen to the *shofar* this Rosh Hashanah, and as we feel the mystical tug of its poignant sounds, let us recognize that the *neshamah* within each of us is crying out to our Creator with an eloquence beyond words. Let us capture these sounds and these feelings in the innermost chambers of our hearts and carry them with us throughout the entire year. Undoubtedly, this will assure us of a sweet and wonderful year.