

Dear Community,

Rosh Hashana is upon us once again. Again, we are faced with the underlying paradox that is this Day of Judgment. Joy or fear? Confidence in G-d's mercy or fear of His disappointment in yet another stagnant year? Do we focus on what we need, or what is demanded of us? Do we focus on our flaws, or do we argue our merits? All these contradictory themes seem so inextricably linked with this one holiday. How do we resolve the complexity and move from the observance of Rosh Hashana to experiencing the head of the year?

The shofar is the key to the mystery of Rosh Hashana. A simple ram's horn, as unprocessed as possible; its sound, a raw cry; yet a sound so powerful that it heralds history's greatest events. First heard at the giving of the Torah, the shofar will sound again to end these millennia of exile. Blown each year by a people recognizing their place in the cosmos, reaffirming their national and individual mission, proclaiming an allegiance and covenant with G-d; the shofar, with its plaintive cry, vocalizes the meaning of Rosh Hashana.

The Talmud (Rosh Hashana, 16a) describes the purpose of the blowing of the shofar in a perplexing way. "Why do we blow the shofar both sitting [before the Shemona Esrei] and standing [during the Shemona Esrei]? In order to confuse the Satan and prevent him from testifying for the prosecution." To confuse the Satan? Are we to assume that the Satan is gullible enough to be surprised every year by the same trick? I can't even hide candy in the same underground bunker twice before my kids sniff it out. Yet this divine angel, who has been around for eons, gets startled every year?

The Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderet, an early medieval commentary) writes that the blowing of the shofar to startle the Satan applies only to the shofar blasts that take place during the actual Mussaf service. These blasts are not mandated by the Torah--in fact, the Rashba discusses at length why the blasts during Mussaf don't constitute a violation

of *Baal Tosif*, the prohibition to add mitzvot to the Torah. The Rashba goes on to explain that the confusion of the Satan stems from his fear that these blasts herald the coming of the Final Redemption, the end of the line for his existence in this world (corresponding to the opinion of Abudraham as well).

This explanation only makes things more difficult. If the Satan is worried that the R'H shofar blast in shul is the final blast blown at the coming of Mashiach, why is he only frightened by the second series of blasts? Additionally, this doesn't resolve our original difficulty: the assumption of total memory loss for this seemingly powerful being is highly dubious.

Reb Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin writes that the sound of the shofar awakens the inner divine essence inside all of us. This spiritual resurgence is so powerful that it has the potential each year to completely rejuvenate our march to the completion of our national mission and bring us back from the abyss. While we may not feel the power of Rosh Hashana, the Satan is well aware of the precariousness of his existence. He exists while we sleep, if we are to awaken, he is gone. The apathy we feel is our own. The Satan lives in the moment, experiences the moment, and fears the power of the inspired Jew.

Why is it only during the second set of blows does the Satan fear redemption? Why is he confident in our weakness during the first set of blasts? The second set of blasts, as the Rashba points out (along with many others), is not a Biblical commandment. It was instituted by our sages to inspire us and motivate us to change. When the Satan sees that we are still following in the ways of our sages and actively seeking inspiration and renewal, this is when he panics. An observant Jew is not a threat. A motivated one is.

The Satan, who lives in the spiritual reality, knows that if we Jews are motivated to seek out more shofar blasts, to awaken our innate spiritual spark, then he may be out of a job with the coming of Mashiach. This is why we experience the feeling of joy intermingled with fear, optimism tinged with concern. Our fate is in our hands. We are confident in our power, focused on our future. In the sound of the shofar we hear both the wail of

regret, and the rallying cry of an energized people. We eat, celebrate, and rejoice- but we are level-headed and prepared for the task ahead of us. We can only be joyous if we have started the climb and know where the summit is. We ask for what we need, assured in G-d's love for us; we declare G-d's dominion, and our relationship with Him; but we are clear eyed about the chasm we are attempting to cross.

This Rosh Hashana, let us heed the call and the spirit of the shofar, awaken from this deepening sleep, and rouse ourselves to return to G-d. Let's refuse to allow the atrophy of our spirit to undermine what we can and should be.

Ksiva V'Chasima Tova,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein