



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Rosh Hashanah

By Sara Hurwitz

*JOFA strives to promote women's learning and scholarship,
and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to
increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

Crying: An Expression of Prayer

By Sara Hurwitz¹

תקיעה. שברים-תרועה. תקיעה.

Tekiyah. Shevarim-Teru'ah. Tekiyah.

These are the sounds of the shofar, sounds that penetrate deep into our souls and reverberate in our ears. We stand in solemn silence as the *tokeya* blows the shofar. But what should be running through our minds as the sounds emanate from the shofar? What should these sounds signify to us?

The Torah provides little instruction for how we are supposed to sound the shofar. The Torah simply describes Rosh Hashanah as “זְכוֹרֹן תְּרוּעָה,” a remembrance of *teru'ah* or as “יוֹם תְּרוּעָה,” a day of *teru'ah*.² Targum Onkelos translates the word “*teru'ah*” as “*yebava*,” sobbing. Following the Targum’s translation, the verses read, “[Rosh Hashanah] shall be a day of sobbing for you,” and “a remembrance through sobbing.”³

The root “*y-b-v*” appears only once in the Bible, in the Song of Devorah in *Shoftim* (the Book of Judges). There, Devorah sings a song of victory for Israel’s conquest of Sisera and his troops. She describes Sisera’s mother, waiting for the return of her son:

בַּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וַתִּיבֵב אִם סִיִּסְרָא בָּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב מְדוּעַ בִּישׁ רָכְבוֹ לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אֶחְרוּ פְעָמֵי מְרַכְבוֹתָיו :
חַכְמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָה אֶף-הִיא תִשָּׁיב אֶמְרֶיהָ לָהּ : הֲלֹא יִמְצְאוּ יַחֲלְקוּ שָׁלַל רַחֵם רַחֲמַתִּים לְרֹאשׁ גְּבֵר

At the window Sisera’s mother looked out, and cried (*vateyabev*), through the lattice: “Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariots?” The wisest of her attendants answer her, and she too replies to herself: “they must be dividing the spoils, a damsel or two for each man...”⁴

Sisera and his troops wrought havoc for years in the north of Israel. God finally rescued the Jewish people, and delivered Sisera’s army into the hands of Israel. Although on every other occasion Sisera had come back victorious,⁵ Sisera’s mother senses that this time he will not return. She thus stands at the window mourning her lost son.

The *Aruch*, quoted by *Tosafot*, notes that the number of blasts we sound on Rosh Hashanah recalls the 101 letters contained in the lament of Sisera’s mother as she waits for her son to return from battle. However, the custom in Ashkenazic communities is to blow the shofar 100 times.⁶ We blow 100 blasts to nullify Sisera’s mother’s cries, which were ultimately cries lamenting Israel’s victory. But her final cry was genuine, unalloyed grief and cannot be discounted. Her cry is one of pain and suffering, a cry that only a mother who has lost a child can truly understand. And this cry we cannot ignore; her staccato groans cannot help but pierce our hearts, for even an enemy of the Jewish people is deserving of compassion when she laments her son.⁷ This is the sound of the shofar.

The Talmud goes on to debate the nature of the cry of Sisera’s mother. One authority understands *vateyabev*, and by extension the word *teru'ah*, to mean drawing a long sigh, like the sound of the *shevarim*. Another authority maintains that *vateyabev* implies a series of short piercing cries, the *teru'ah*. Finally, Rabbi Abbahu suggests that the *teru'ah* is a complex sound beginning with sobbing then developing into uncontrollable weeping. This sound is the combination we hear every Rosh Hashanah as *shevarim-teru'ah*.⁸ Thus, the cry of Sisera’s mother is not just the general source of the shofar’s sound; rather, the Sages looked to her cry in discerning the specifics of these blasts.

But the theme of crying on Rosh Hashanah is not limited to Sisera’s mother. On Rosh Hashanah we read two stories about women whose prayerful tears moved God to change their destiny. The Haftarah we read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is about the plight of Hannah, the barren woman who turns to God and pleads

for a child.⁹ Initially, Hannah beseeches God through well thought-out arguments. She makes a vow promising to dedicate her son to the service of God; she wonders why God gave her breasts if he would not provide a child to let her suckle;¹⁰ she argues that all earthly beings should eat, drink, and procreate.¹¹ However, the Jerusalem Talmud suggests that Hannah's prayers were too verbose: "by adding superfluous words to her prayer, Hannah shortened her son Samuel's life to fifty-two years."¹² Ultimately, what moved God to give her a child was her prayer coupled with a heartfelt cry: "וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל-ה' וַבְּכָה תִבְכֶּה" and she prayed to God and wept bitterly.¹³ And because of this teary prayer, God blessed her with a child, "וַתֵּהָר חַנָּה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן," Hannah conceived and she gave birth to a son.¹⁴

The Haftarah we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, recalls Rachel's cry:

קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים רָחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל-בָּנֶיהָ... מִנְעִי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינַיִךְ מִדְּמָעָה כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לַפְּעֻלָּתְךָ :

A voice is heard on high, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children...Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your accomplishments.¹⁵

Rachel, like Hannah, also makes a compelling case for why God should save the Jewish people from exile.¹⁶ However, it is her tears that ultimately pierce the heart of God and move God to promise eternal redemption to the Jewish people. Thus, the motif of crying pervades the Rosh Hashanah experience.

The Midrash in *Eichah* (Lamentations) *Rabbah* states that if the Jewish people did not cry, they would not have been redeemed.¹⁷ Redemption requires the ability to emote through tears, to respond in the most natural way to the pain and suffering of the world. Therefore it must be crying, not words, that is the most effective way to influence God to accept our plea of *teshuvah*, of repentance.

The notion that words are not necessary for communication may be lost in a world where we communicate obsessively with language, through text messaging, email and voicemail. We carefully weigh the words of diplomats, and scrutinize the statements of politicians. But we often fail to appreciate the power of a cry. Even the most pious of Jews who recite psalms in times of despair and turn to our poetically rich liturgy for edification, may not recognize the value of a wordless cry. We are therefore given the simple gift of the shofar, the unadorned horn through which our tears find expression.

Tekiyah, Shevarim and Teru'ah: these are our wordless cries to God.

This is not to suggest that the shofar takes the place of our Rosh Hashanah prayers, but rather that the shofar is a meaningful expression of prayer. The very fact that the shofar is blown in the middle of reciting *Malchiyot, Zichronot* and *Shofrot* – the three sections of the Rosh Hashanah *musaf* service – proves that the sound of the shofar is not an interruption of the *tefillah*, but is rather the cry which is integral to the Rosh Hashanah prayer experience.

In fact, I would argue that crying as expressed through the shofar is not only the essence of the Rosh Hashanah prayer service; it is also the essence of prayer in general. Nachmanides, in his commentary to Maimonides' *Sefer Ha'mitzvot*, says that prayer is only biblically mandated in times of distress.¹⁸ Nachmanides derives this obligation from the verse:

וְכִי-תִבְאוּ מִלְחָמָה בְּאַרְצְכֶם עַל-הַצָּר הַצָּר אֲתָכֶם וְהִרְעַתֶּם בְּחֻצְצוֹת וְנִזְכַּרְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְנוֹשַׁעְתֶּם מֵאֲיֻבֵיכֶם

And if you go to war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, then you shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies.¹⁹

Targum Onkelos on this verse renders the words "blow an alarm" as "*u'tiyabivun*." As we have already seen, the word "*tiyabivun*," from the root "y-b-v," signifies crying. In the words of Nachmanides: "It is a mitzvah to plead fervently with God through prayer and *teru'ah* (shofar blasts) whenever the community is faced with

great distress...for it is a mitzvah to affirm in moments of distress our belief that the Holy One listens to prayers and intervenes to grant aid.”²⁰ In short, we should commune with God, not only through words, but through the prayer of a shofar.

Sometimes the right words evade us; sometimes the only way to communicate is through unadorned sound, through the primal hum of crying and tears. Jewish law teaches that we are supposed to stand completely silent during the blasts of the shofar. Our thoughts must be properly directed, focusing completely on the sound of the shofar.²¹ It is a time when we must submit to the fact that there are just no words, when the shofar enters our souls, and carries our silent prayers directly to God.

There is a story told of the shofar blower, Rabbi Ze’ev Kitzes, who was told by the Baal Shem Tov to study all of the meditations and prayers associated with the shofar blasts. Rabbi Ze’ev applied himself to the task joyously, and wrote all he learned on a piece of paper so he could concentrate upon it while he blew the shofar. However, when he got up to blow the shofar for the community, he reached into his pocket and discovered that the paper had disappeared. He desperately searched his memory, but all he had learned had escaped him. He was speechless and at a complete loss for words. He began to cry. And through his tears, he managed to sound the shofar. As he cried the gates of heavens opened up, and his tearful shofar blasts went directly to God.²²

King David understood the simple power of the shofar, and proclaimed in Psalms: “אֲשָׁרֵי הָעַם יוֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה,” fortunate are those who know the power of *teru’ah*, the shofar blast.²³ There are times when we cannot find the words, when our words are inadequate. No matter. The shofar will intercede for us to carry our prayers, spoken or silent, directly to God.

1 Sara Hurwitz is the *Madricha Ruchanit*, Religious Mentor at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, where she serves as part of the Rabbinic staff. She was also the Curricula Researcher and Writer for JOFA’s Gender and Orthodoxy Curriculum Project. She graduated from Drisha Institute for Jewish Education’s 3-year Scholars Circle Program and received a B.A. from Barnard College, Columbia University. Sara continues to study halakha under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss.

2 *Vayikra* 23:24; *Bamidbar* 29:1.

3 Targum Onkelos, *ad loc.*

4 *Shoftim* 5:28-30. Ralbag and many other commentaries interpret “*vateybaba*” to mean a loud cry or wail

5 *Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim* 43: “He was then thirty years old, and in his might had conquered the entire world—there was no city whose wall he could not cause to collapse with his voice...”

6 Aruch in *Erech Arav*, cited by *Tosafot* in Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 33b, s.v. “*Shi’ur*.”

7 Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage*, p. 35 (Feldheim Publishers 1970).

8 Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 33b-34a. In order to cover all the possibilities, each version of *teru’ah* (the three short blasts of the *shevarim*, and the nine short sounds of the *teru’ah*) must be sandwiched by *tekiyot*, and repeated three times. This is the custom followed in most communities today before *musaf* in order to be certain that the basic mitzvah of hearing the shofar is fulfilled.

9 I Samuel 1:1-2:10.

10 Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 31b.

11 *Pesikta Rabbati* 43:3.

12 Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 4:1.

13 I Samuel 1:10.

14 I Samuel 1:20.

15 Jeremiah 31:14-15.

16 *Midrash Rabbah* - Lamentations Prologue 24.

17 *Ibid.* “The Holy One, Blessed Be He, wept and said, ‘Woe is Me for My house! My children, where are you? My priests, where are you? My lovers, where are you? What shall I do with you, seeing that I warned you but you did not repent?’ The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to Jeremiah, ‘I am now like a man who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage-canopy, but he died under it. Feelest thou no anguish for Me and My children? Go, summon Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Moses from their sepulchers, for they know how to weep.’”

- 18 In contrast, Maimonides holds that prayer is mandated by the Torah on a daily basis, based on the verse: “And to serve Him with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 11:13).
- 19 *Bamidbar* 10:9.
- 20 Nachmanides gloss on Maimonides Book of Commandments, Positive Commandment 5.
- 21 Mishnah *Rosh Hashanah* 3:7 “If one were passing behind a synagogue, or if his house was close to a synagogue, and he heard the sound of the shofar or the sound of the megillah: if he concentrated (*im kivayn libo*)—he has fulfilled his obligation. But if not—he has not fulfilled his obligation.”
- 22 Based on a story cited in R. Moshe Bogomilsky, *Vedibarta Bam: And you shall Speak*, p.183 (published by author 1997).
- 23 Psalms 89:16.

To access previous issues of *Vehigadet Levitekh*, please visit our website at www.jofa.org.