

## The Mystical Meaning of the Sounds of the Shofar

On Rosh Hashanah morning, Neil Golub will sound the notes to usher in the year 5783. These notes from the Shofar are more than sweet sounds from a ram's horn—there is a purpose behind this ritual. And ask different rabbis, you will get different explanations of their significance. In fact, I just stumbled on one that is down-right-terrific! It comes from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav. I encourage you to keep this teaching in mind when you come to the synagogue and hear the majestic sounds that make Rosh Hashanah different than any other day of the year.

Let me tell you about this Rav. Rabbi Nachman lived in what is now known as the Ukraine from 1772-1810. He died very young, but left a devoted group of followers. His disciples never found another rabbi who was worthy to sit in his chair—literally and figuratively. His teachings are still studied by the Bratslav Chasidim. His chair was smuggled out of Uman after World War II and reconstructed in the Meir She'arim section of Jerusalem. And his teaching on the sounds of the shofar may give you an inkling of why his words are held in such high regard.

He wrote in his anthology, Likutei HaMaRaN: This is likewise the aspect of *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*. *TeKiAh* is the aspect of an absence of speech, the aspect of “*TaKAta* (If you have shaken) hands with a stranger, you have been trapped by the words of your own mouth” (Proverbs 6:1, 2); *teRUAh* is the aspect of speech, the aspect of “The tzaddik's lips *yiRAU* (provide sustenance) for many” (*ibid.* 10:21). *SheVaRim* is the aspect of trust, the aspect of “*SiVRo* (his hope) is in God, his Lord” (Psalms 146:5) ; which is the aspect of the reproductive organs, as it is written (Isaiah 66:9), “Shall I *aShBiR* (bring on labor) and not bring on birth?”

Ok, I bet that without context or explanation, this has you scratching your head. Let me clarify—first of all, remember that the RaMBaM [Moses Maimonides, who lived in Spain in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century] wrote that the sounds of the Shofar are like a wake-up call or an alarm clock to arouse us that slumber to reclaim the spiritual essence of Jewish living. 600+ years later, Rabbi Nachman added to this as a reminder for us to bring on *Tikun Olam*, a repairing of the world. Each of the notes inspire a step-by-step way of doing so,

then it falls off at the end as our active intellect must be utilized to figure out the next steps which are specific to our place and our time and our communal needs.

According to Rabbi Nachman, *Tekiah* is a reminder of a line from Proverbs where to grasp the hands of another; attaching ourselves for sacred service. No words need to be uttered; it is a shared sacred endeavor. A few short years after Rabbi Nachman died, another Chasidic master, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Tszanz told a parable that illustrated this: 2 men were walking in the forest. Both men were lost. When they saw each other, they greeted and then one of them said: “Can you help me find the way from the forest?” The other Chasid sighed and confessed that he too was lost. But he said that they should join hands and search for the way together.

The first sound from the shofar reminds us that we are lost but not alone. By being in community or in *chavruta* [that is Hebrew term for a study partner], we can begin to search for the way together.

The second note is *Teruah* which is a way of speaking in order to uplift or provide substance. Study with another or learning in a community setting brings words from the living God into us. We are thirsty for knowledge; the words taught by another in God’s name is like water that can quench such a thirst.

The first notes bring us together. The second notes remind us to share words of Torah. The third notes are reenforcing a trust we must have with God to survive. *Shevarim* is like a subtle reminder of *Shevaro* [His hope] for our future.

But, Rabbi Nachman teaches, that is only part of the journey. The Chasidic master speaks with a degree of theistic finitism. The next steps are ours alone. Like a pregnant woman, God can bring on labor but the final push belongs to the mother! That’s right—after the last of the notes is sounded; it becomes our responsibility to be God’s junior partners in the on-going work of creation. We are the ones who have to do the work that will bring justice to our society, food to the hungry, liberation to the oppressed, dignity to the disenfranchised, etc. The shofar calls to make it happen as we read in Deuteronomy, “Justice, justice shall you pursue.”

Rabbi Nachman understood something that many of us might have forgotten. The shofar's sounds are a call to action. Like troops waiting to be summoned into battle, the shofar is the notification for us to be mobilized into being. Though Neil Golub does an amazing job to make those notes come alive, we cannot view it as a concert! Rather our souls should be stirred—grab onto another, make real the words of our tradition and make the world a better place!!