

Rosh Hashanah 5780

Something to chew over What goes through our minds when we eat the simanim and say each yehi rotzon on the opening night of Rosh Hashanah? How is this paralleled when we sound the shofar? Where is this theme found in the zichronot of the musaf amida? In these seemingly unconnected topics, one can trace an important concept to begin our year.

Starting the year with “special” foods, and uttering short prayers over each, adds to the uniqueness of Yom Tov. But if the custom of eating simanim ends there, we will have missed the point. Yes, we have requested that our merits increase. Yes, we have asked that our mission as servants of Hashem be successful, so our enemies should be cut down. And yes, these are important parts of our re-evaluation and our prayers for Rosh Hashanah. But Chazal recognised a deeper issue. As pointed out by Rabbi I. Bernstein (in his remarkable sefer on Teshuva), the objective, when eating simanim, is to serve as a reminder of the tasks of the day. We know we need to pray; but what is our focus? By taking material food; investing it with a spiritual meaning; and then ingesting it to be part of our Yom Tov experience, we can meet a dual objective. One is to remind ourselves of our need to do teshuva and to pray that our nation’s hopes will be granted. The second is to absorb the concept that when a spiritual idea is accompanied by a physical action, there is a vastly greater impact. The thought process is the initial step; but the sight, or the sound, or the smell of a physical activity connected with that idea will multiply the effect on the mind and memory many-fold. So, as was recognised way back in Talmudic times (see Kerisos 6a) “A person should accustom himself at the beginning of the year to eat pumpkin, fenugreek, leeks, beets and dates”. Why? To accomplish this second objective.

A noted example of how a physical act can produce this memorable effect is brought in Yirmeyahu. The navi (51; 60-64) predicts, and writes in a sefer, on the fall of Babylon. He instructs his talmid, Sariah: Go to Babylon, read this book, and then tie it to a stone and cast it into the Euphrates. As it hits the water, say: “So shall Babylon sink and not rise!” Attaching the prophesy to a dramatic action adds unforgettable impact.

The spiritual energy of the blessing is harnessed into the physical world. To miss out on the deeper meaning, and focus simply on the food, is to miss an opportunity which the onset of Rosh Hashanah provides.

Tuning in To spur us into taking our opportunities, we sound the shofar. We are familiar with the comparison to a wake-up call. But most wake-up calls are designed for those who are asleep, not the fully conscious. In contrast, the shofar is directed to those who are already awake – but they have allowed their spiritual essence to be anaesthetised by the distractions of the material world. We have been blowing the shofar every morning during Ellul to prepare ourselves to absorb its message. The sound begins as a breath from the lungs of the baal tokeah. It is more than just a breath. It is channelled and focussed with mental intent to produce the sound that hits our eardrums. The first time in creation when a breath was blown occurred when

man was created. The shofar harks back to the Akeidah, when Avraham avinu and Yitzchak avinu were prepared to give up everything they lived for – to obey the command of Hashem. Matan Torah was introduced by the sound of the shofar. The coronations of our kings were accompanied by the shofar. The arrival of Moshiach will also be so heralded. The sound transcends time.

The shofar sounds its alarm. How do we react? Surely not to hit the snooze button and continue as we were for another year. We are summoned to make a conscientious attempt to absorb the message, and to endeavour to raise our game. During Ellul, we were in course of preparation. But once we experience the baal tokeah standing in readiness before everyone in shul awaiting in total silence, for that quiet to be shattered by the wordless prayer of the shofar, the effect on all present carries immense force. We start with the initial thoughts of preparation. When bind them into the physical experience, the power of that impact continues after Tishri, long into the future – so long as we tune in to its wavelength.

More than memories Where do the zichronot fit into this theme? A glimpse at the depths underlying the passages can be seen from the introductory phrase: “You remember the deeds of the world”. This is amplified by a passuk in Yirmeyahu (32.19) “Your eyes are vigilant upon the ways of man; to give each person in accordance with his ways, and the fruits of his deeds”. We understand man’s “ways”; but what is added by the expression “the fruits of his deeds”? Rabbi Bernstein brings the explanation of Rabbi Yeshoshua Heller. “Ways” concern man’s own activities. “The fruits of his deeds” addresses the reverberations and impact upon others – whether positive and inspirational, or (sadly) the reverse. And the seeds of each act can grow and ripen into fruit, which can produce new seeds in an unending force for successive generations. What we do (or what we have already done) can have an effect until the end of time. The same applies to our ancestors. (Here is a further understanding to the reference to the books of “the living and the dead”).

On this day Hashem notes every single action ever performed in the world. And not merely the actions; but the everlasting effects. Contemplate all we (and our ancestors) have done. Contemplate all that we could (or should) do in the future. Reflect upon the spiritual reverberations of each physical act. This understanding of the opening words of zichronot brings a whole new meaning to “Days of Awe”. With the simanim, food is transformed to give physical matter a spiritual dimension. The act of ingestion (with appropriate kavannah) reinforces the spiritual objective. With the shofar, the everyday acts of breathing and blowing are transformed into the spiritual message. Observing and hearing the blasts of the shofar reverberates through our consciousness creating a memorable spiritual impact. And the zichronot? They are not simply memories. They bring home how we blend the material with the spiritual and how all deeds impact into the future. In the words of Rabbi Bernstein, if we can expand our efforts to take the physical world and use it for a spiritual purpose; if we can contemplate how to absorb and act upon the messages; if we can take the opportunity heralded by the call of the shofar and connect into that soundwave with its heavenly destination, then, there is no limit to where we can go.