

(Auxilliary Services)

"THE SHOFAR: A DUAL SYMBOL"

The meaning of Shofar was once explained by the great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in a parable as beautiful as it is simple. I especially recall this parable with affection and fondness, because I used to hear it recited by the Hasidic Rabbi in whose synagogue I prayed for many years during my youth, repeated every year, word for word, with every nuance intact. The parable is as follows:

There once was a king who went into a great forest, to hunt and explore. After a while, the king discovered to his dismay that he was lost. He noticed, in the forest, a number of peasants, but none of them either recognized him as the king or could tell him how to reach the highway to return home. Close to the point of despair, the king suddenly chanced upon another villager who obviously was wiser and more sensitive than the others. The wise villager recognized that this man must be the king, and was overcome by reverence and respect for him. When the king asked him to show him the highway, the wise peasant revealed that he was not as provincial as his fellow peasants, and he not only showed the king the right way, but took him by the hand and accompanied him to his palace, to his very throne room. The king was grateful to the villager; he also recognized in him a man of great wisdom and understanding. He therefore appointed him as one of his ministers.

In the course of time he became his chief minister. The king ordered that his coarse peasant clothing be taken from him and put into storage; and instead he dressed him as befits a royal minister, to stand in the presence of the king in the royal palace.

But it happened, after some years, that the wise villager, now Prime Minister, sinned against the king; he betrayed him. The king was filled with anger and wrath, and he commanded his guards to put the Prime Minister on trial for treason.

The minister was sorely troubled, for he knew that the trial must end in a guilty verdict, for he had indeed sinned against the king. He knew, too, that this would mean the end of his life. He therefore appealed to the king and, weeping before him with bitter tears, asked that before he issues his verdict he allow him only one request: that he appear before the king, on the day of his trial, dressed not as a royal minister, but in the same garments which he wore when the king first met him and was saved by him.

And so it happened, that when the king was about to issue his decision, he saw his Prime Minister standing before him dressed in the garments of the wise peasant who saved his life. The king suddenly remembered the graciousness and the kindness, the reverence and the respect, that the villager had shown him. He recalled that not only had he recognized the king, and that not only had he told him ~~where to find the highway~~ ^{where to find the highway}, but that he had personally taken him by the hand and led him to his palace and placed him on his royal throne. The king was therefore filled with

compassion and mercy and tenderness, and he forgave the villager. He pardoned him and allowed him to resume his royal duties as his Chief Minister.

This, the Rabbi of Berdichev said, is the meaning of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana^h. God is the King, the other nations are the peasants, Israel is the wise villager, the Shofar is the old garment, and Rosh Hashanah is the day of the trial. The Talmud teaches that the Almighty offered the Torah to every people and every nation asking them if they would accept this Torah, but all refused; each nation found some pretext for declining. Like the king in the story, God was -- as it were -- lost in the forest of mankind, with none who knew the right way, with no one who was willing to place God on the throne to declare Him the rightful King and Sovereign of the universe. Then he offered the Torah to the Children of Israel and we, despite the fact that we too were spiritually provincial, were sufficiently wise and sensitive to acknowledge the great God who had approached us. In reverence and in respect, in joy and in gladness, we proclaimed Him as our God; we said naaseh ve'nishma, we will obey and we will understand. To the sound of the Shofar on Mt. Sinai we declared Him King over ourselves and over the world, and adopted His Torah as our constitution. And so God chose us and made us the religious Prime Minister of the universe. We were His chosen people, His elected folk. But -- we were foolish, we strayed from the right path, we were not loyal to our King. We sinned, ^{we} forgot God, we betrayed Him. Now we are

brought to trial for treason: Rosh Hashanah is the Yom Ha-Din, the day of judgement. We are frightened as we stand before the Divine Court, for we know that if we are to be judged strictly, then the verdict can only be disastrous. Therefore, we produce on this day, before the Divine edict is issued, a symbol of our past which God will recognize. We sound the Shofar -- the equivalent of the peasant clothing; for it was the Shofar which was heard at Mt. Sinai when God gave the Torah and Israel proclaimed Him King of the universe. The Shofar recalls to the Almighty the fact that when no other people was willing to hear Him or of Him, it was we who proclaimed "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." When God takes notice of the sound of the Shofar, he remembers His people Israel, He recalls with tenderness our ancient merits and instead of declaring us guilty, pardons us and decrees for us a new life of health and peace.

This is the beautiful and heartwarming parable related by the Rabbi of Berditchev. But at the risk of detracting from its charm and its simplicity, let us subject it to deeper analysis.

Granted, the King felt moved to forgive his Minister when he observed the token of his former kindness to the King. But what of the wise man, the one-time peasant whom the King had raised to noble rank: how did he feel? How did he react inwardly to his own dramatic endeavor? What did he experience in the depths of his own soul when he produced his peasant's cloak before the King?

Remember, that according to the parable, the Minister is fundamentally a sensitive, benevolent, good and wise man, who was suddenly elevated and then went astray. No doubt, the effect upon him was, unintentionally, as powerful as the impression he sought to make upon his king.

I imagine that when he produced his old and tattered peasant garments, and noticed how different they were from the royal, shining uniform which he now wore, that that contrast shocked and startled him. How poor I once was, and how influential I then became! And, yes, how much wiser I once was, and how foolish I have since become! At that time, poor and unknown and bedraggled, I was wise enough to recognize my King and express my loyalty to him. Now that he has so elevated me, and bestowed every kindness upon me, I have become an ingrate, I have turned disloyal, and I have betrayed the very man responsible for my good fortune! How I despise myself! How ashamed I am of myself!

It is these and similar thoughts, I suggest, that Shofar ought to inspire within us. Only then will the experience of hearing Shofar remain meaningful for us for the whole year. True, it is a memorable symbol for God Himself. But it should mean even more to us. It ought to arouse us from our spiritual slumber, to remind us of how foolish we have become. Indeed this is how Maimonides interprets the Shofar: It is a symbol for the slumberer to wake up, to bestir himself, and to rid himself of the havlei ha-zeman, the vanities of the times.

How ashamed we ought to be! ~~What~~ What has become of us, the people of the Torah, that ancient nation that over 3,000 years ago was able, to the accompaniment of the sound of the Shofar, to emerge from a benighted world and rise to the most sublime heights of human history, to receive the Torah and proclaim that there was one God, invisible and supreme, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, and Lord of mankind?

The sound of the Shofar should remind us that we are the people of the Torah. An Arab prophet has called us "the People of the Book"; and so have we been known. But what has happened to his People of the Book, which we became at the moment at Sinai when the Shofar was sounded? We have become the people ~~of~~ the best-sellers, the people of the cheap paper-backs, the people of the movies and Broadway, the people of radio and television. How many sacred books does the average Jew have in his home? When a holy book falls to the ground, we lift it and kiss it tenderly; how many books do each of us own to which we would feel justified in doing that?

In the great wilderness of Sinai, God commanded ~~for~~ us to build a Tabernacle, a House of God. To this Temple the peoples of Israel streamed, and in it were accepted the offerings of the devout of all peoples. It was the center for the teaching of peace and justice for all of mankind. When the Jewish Prime Minister of England, Benjamin Disraeli, was taunted by an anti-Semitic Member of Parliament, he replied: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors

of the right honourable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown Island, mine were Priests in a Temple of Solomon⁷. But what has happened today? How many of us pay any attention to the House of God? How many of us think that when they pay three-day-a-year visits to the synagogue we have fulfilled our obligations? How many of us have sunk from the greatness symbolized by the Shofar to the level of the heathen ancestors of ^{the} anti-Semites of whom Disraeli spoke with such contempt?

At Sinai we were commanded u-vo tidbakun, that we were to cleave to God. The Rabbis asked: How is that possible? Is He not an esh okhlah, a consuming fire? How can one attach one^{self} to the infinite and holy God? And they answered: One can cleave to God by associating with talmidei hakahmim, scholars and people of high moral and intellectual attainment, who study and practice the word of God. The Jew was expected to express ~~his~~ his commitment to God by aspiring to the company of scholars of God's Torah; by looking forward to the edification and delight and pleasure of being with them. A young girl's highest ambition was to marry a talmid hakham; and a young man aspired to marry the daughter of a talmid hakham. Is that our aim today? Does not the Shofar make us tremble at how our values have degenerated, how our standards have fallen? Whose company do we favor and seek -- those of Jewish scholars, or Jewish snobs? Whom do we try to emulate -- people of moral and intellectual distinction, or those whose marital exploits are celebrated in Hollywood and

and television? Whom do young men and young women aspire to marry -- Jewishly knowledgeable people, from devout Jewish families, or the best possible combination of glamour and wealth?

The Shofar reminds us of the Ten Commandments that were given at Mt. Sinai. How have we fared some thirty-five hundred years later? Let us sample only a few of them:

When, to the sound of Shofar at Sinai, we were given the Torah and declared God's elected people, we were filled with Thanksgiving, with pride in our great mission in the world. How fortunate the Jew has always felt for his Jewishness, One of our greatest blessings is asher bahar banu -- that God chose us as His elect people. Compare that now to the self-hate that cripples the Jewish spirit today. Only last week a non-Jewish company in Kansas City, Mo., as a gesture of friendship to the Jewish community, set up about ten signs in the prominent places throughout the city containing the Hebrew words, Le'shanah Tovah. They have since removed those signs -- because of protest from Jews who felt self-conscious about Hebrew words in a public place! To what depths of depraved and dispicable self-degradation have we fallen! And is this not in some way typical of so many other Jews? What pangs of conscience the Shofar ought to cause us!

We were commanded on Sinai, "Honor ^{thy} father and they mother." How many of us indeed honor our parents? How many times do we visit them or call them? Forget the innane cermoniousness of Mother's Day or Father's Day, those symptoms of social sickness

which seek to justify our ignoring them during the rest of the year! How many of us keep our parents in homes -- our own homes, ~~no~~ homes for the aged -- when they are aged and infirm? Remember that only a generation ago there was not a Jewish home which did not boast of a grandfather or grandmother living in it. How loyal are we after their death to their memories, to their way of life?

We were commanded to observe the Sabbath. Have we not made of it a day of shopping and tinkering, of fixing and entertaining? Have we not abandoned its kedushah or holiness?

We were commanded not to give false witness and the Prophets told us that atem edai, you are My witnesses saith the Lord. Have we testified to God's presence in the world? Do we not bear false ~~witness~~ witness when we flauntingly disregard kashruth? -- when we deny our children a Jewish education? -- when we are ashamed of Jewishness being too obvious in the circles in which we travel?

We were told not to lust and not to covet. The Shofar we shall soon hear ought to remind us how we have fared in this regard! We cherish as our major ambition to outdo our neighbors. We live in a state of constant tension and perpetual misery because we are not as rich and influential and powerful and socially acceptable as the people next door.

This is what Shofar ought to mean to us -- a study in contrast of what we once were, and what has become of us now. What shame! What embarrassment! What a failure! How we have disappointed and ~~betrayed~~ betrayed the God with Whom we formed the bond of friendship and loyalty

at Sinai to the sound of the Shofar!

The King in the parable was not a sentimental old man, but a wise and understanding sovereign. He knew that his subject wanted to impress him and, in the process, was himself moved even more. He knew that the symbol which aroused in him an old love, stirred in his prodigal subject feelings of regret and chagrin and repentance.

So it is with the Shofar. We sound the Shofar to remind God of our ancient friendship that began at Sinai. But indeed God does not really need a reminder. We do.

As we sound the Shofar, the same Shofar that accompanied our coronation of God at Sinai, and the symbol of Jewish destiny, and holiness, we agonize within as we feel keenly the sharp edge of our spiritual failure. And it is ~~in~~ this embarrassment, this bushah, this awareness of the gap between our potentiality and our reality, our ideal and our real, our illustrious past and our pedestrian present, that is the context from which ~~they~~ arise ^s teshuvah, the repentance that so appeals to God, and that is the real reason for His compassion and love for us on this Yom Ha-din.

The Shofar is our wordless prayer to God to remember our love for Him of yore. But this token, this symbol, is effective in stirring God's compassion towards us for this coming year, only as we allow it to affect our own inward feelings. When we turn with regret to view our year just past, and determine with high resolve that this coming year we shall return to God and never betray Him

again, then the Shofar will remind the Almighty King of the universe that we indeed are His beloved people in Israel.

In that spirit, may Almighty God grant us, all Israel, and all the world a year of lasting peace, of health and of happiness; a year of pride in our Jewishness, and without shame or embarrassment, filled with joy and gladness.