

Rosh Hashana
Getting Out of Narrowness
Hannah Ruimy - Class of 2025

We stopped at a picnic area with my family during the summer vacation.

A sign caught my eye.

It read: “You’ve soiled the place – we agree, you’re not an angel. But you would be unforgivable if you do not clean up when you leave the place.”

This resonated deeply with me. It seemed to be a spiritual call: We must accept our human condition, of brokenness and fallibility. But we must also recognize that we would be unforgivable if we did not seek to repair it.

In the Talmud, Rosh Hashanah is defined as *Yom Ha-din*, the Day of Judgment. It is a day that is dedicated to *teshuva*, an opportunity for human beings to return to their Creator.

בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברים לפניו כבני מרון (משנה ראש השנה א:ב)

“...On Rosh Hashanah, all creatures pass before Him like sheep [*b’nei maron*]”

(Mishnah Rosh Hashana 1:2)

How might we return? How can we do the work of repair? It is a process containing many steps that is described at length in the writings of our Sages. But there is also an important object dedicated particularly to this work of *teshuva*. It is the Shofar that directly influences our ability to repent, and even becomes the central *mitzvah* of this day of Rosh Hashanah.

Why?



Pesikta Rabbati, Parsha 40 states:

באילו הימים אפילו יש בכם כמה עונות אני מבערים ומזכה אתכם, ואם לא עשיתם בהם תשובה
הו יודעים שדינכם מתפסק ביום הכיפורים, ולא עשיתי בכם אלא אתם עשיתם בעצמכם, למה?
שכך התקנתי לכם שתהיו תוקעים בשופר בראש השנה (כשתהיו) [כדי שתהיו] חרדים
מתקיעת השופר להתקין עצמכם לתשובה... (פסיקתא רבתי פרשה מ, ד"ה ועשיתם עולה
לה')

In these days, even if you have made some mistakes, I will destroy them, and I will make you worthy, and if you have not done *teshuva*, know that your judgment will be fixed on the day of Yom Kippur. And I don't do it Myself, but you do it by yourself. Why? Because this is how I established a decree giving you the injunction to sound the Shofar on the day of Rosh Hashana, awakening in you a fear that will allow you to repair yourself and do *teshuva*... (Pesikta Rabbati Parsha 40)

How does the Shofar enable the intimate spiritual journey toward our Creator? How is it the instrumental representation of *teshuva*? The midrash suggests the following:

'תקעו בחודש שופר', רבנן אמרו: חדשו מעשיכם, שפרו מעשיכם, ואני מכסה בו את עונותיכם, שנאמר 'נשאת עון עמך כסית כל חטאתם סלה' (תהלים פה ג). אמר ר' ברכיה בר אבא ואמרי לה ר' ברכיה בשם ר' אבא: חדשו מעשיכם - מה השופר הזה אדם תוקע מזה ומוציא קול מזה, כך כביכול כל המקטריגים מקטרגים לפני מכם, ואני שומע מזה ומוציא מזה... (מדרש תהלים מזמור פא ד"ה [ד] תקעו בחודש).

...אמ' להן הקב"ה: בני אם שפרתם מעשיכם אני עושה לכם כשופר שמכניס בזו ומוציא בזו.
אימתי? בראש השנה... (ויקרא רבה (מרגליות) פרשה כט)

"Blow the horn on the new moon" (Psalm 81:4). Our Sages said: Renew your actions (*chad'shu*), improve your actions (*shapru*, like Shofar), and I will forgive your faults, as is said : "You will forgive Your people's iniquity, pardon all their



sins, selah" (Psalm 85: 3). Rabbi Berakhya bar Abba taught: "Renew your actions – in the same way as, for the Shofar, the sound enters on one side and leaves on the other, so it is with your accusers. Their accusations go in on one side and come out on the other instantly... (Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 81)

... Hashem said to them, "My children, if you have improved your actions, I will act like this Shofar in which we bring in breath from one side and it comes out from the other side instantly. And when? Rosh Hashana Day"... (Vayikra Rabbah (Margalioth) 29)

The particular shape of this ritual trumpet signals its use. Because the Midrash Tehillim and the Midrash Rabbah describe an object that symbolizes by its name the ability to improve and to qualitatively renew our actions.

The breath enters on one side and a sound comes out instantly on the other. But, even more, the breath that enters does not have the same intensity as the sound that comes out: the first is narrow and restricted while the second is broad and generous.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov uses a famous verse in support of this idea, also cited in the *midrashim* above, that the sound of the Shofar becomes a metaphor for our own desire for improvement. One of the verses quoted in the texts preceding the blowing of the Shofar is:

"מן המצר קראתי יה; ענני במרחב יה" (תהילים קיח:ה) שאדם תוקע בשופר מהצד הצר (מיצר) והקול יוצא מהצד הרחב (מרחב) – דבר הבא לרמז לחשיבות הגדולה של תיקון המידות, בין קטן לגדול (רבי נחמן מברסלב – ליקוטי מוהרן, חלק ראשון)

In distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and brought me relief" (Psalms 118:5), for the human blows on the narrow side (*meitsar/tsar*) of the Shofar and the sound comes out of the wide side (*merchav/rachav*). This



enlightens us in an allusive way on the importance of moral repair, moving from narrowness to expansion. (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Likutei Moharan, part I)

To offer an additional perspective, we should read together the rest of the verse quoted repeatedly:

תקעו בחדש שופר בכסה ליום חגנו: כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלהי יעקב: (תהילים פא, ד-ה)

Blow the horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our feast day ; **for it is a law for Israel, a ruling of the God of Jacob.**" (Psalms 81: 4-5)

Why must the mention of the law of the Shofar be associated with Israel, with Jacob's God? What is our patriarch Jacob doing here?

This is all the more curious because in the texts of *Musaf's* prayer that are associated with the sounds of the Shofar called "*Zikhronot*," we quote our patriarch Jacob first – though he is not the first of our patriarchs and the biblical text is usually always concerned with hierarchies. We say:

וזכרתי את-בריתי יעקוב ואף את-בריתי יצחק ואף את-בריתי אברהם אָזְכֹּר וְהֶאֱרַץ אָזְכֹּר (ויקרא כו, מב)

Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land." (Vayikra 26:42)

Perhaps Jacob is recalled first because the arc of his life story is most like a Shofar. He arguably started in a more narrow place and expanded into a larger one. After his fight with the angel – which many commentators believe was an inner fight with himself or with the forces of evil – he is renamed Israel. He left his "condition" of Jacob (meaning heel, and by extension tortuous) to assume the condition of Israel (Yashar – right, or straight). We might audaciously suggest that our patriarch began his life in the narrowness of the



opening of a Shofar (and its twists) and knew how to become Israel – the one who stands up, who recovers, who opens up to a new destiny.

Let us close with the Kli Yakar in his commentary on the verse that describes the change of name of our patriarch:

ויאמר לא יעקב עוד שמך כי אם ישראל. לשון ישראל... ובאמרו כי שרית עם אלהים עקר שם יעקב ממנו, כי יעקב מורה על עקוב הלב מכל ואנוש הוא (ירמיה יז ט) וישראל לשון מישור כמ"ש לעתיד (ישעיה מ ד) והיה העקוב למישור (כלי יקר על בראשית פרק לב, כט)

He [the Angel] said to him [Jacob]: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel [for you have striven...”] [Yisrael] comes from the term “*Yashar-El*” and by saying to him “You struggled with Elohim,” he tore the “Yaakov” aspect of his first name – because Yaacov comes from the term “*ekev*,” meaning twist: as in, “Most devious is the heart; It is perverse”(Jeremiah17). Israel though comes from the term “*mishor*” – straight/straightened – as the prophet Isaiah teaches us: “ ... Anything twisted will be straightened”(Isaiah 40:4). (Kli Yakar on Bereshit 32: 29)

I would like to conclude with the words of Theodore Reik in his book “*Des Shofar*”:

How much do these sounds signify! History and life, past and future, national and religious matters, elevations and depressions, allusions to the sublimity of God as well as to the sinfulness of human beings...now also an ancient voice may serve for a remembering, i.e., for introspection, for the rejuvenation and renewal of spiritual life and religious sincerity, a warning of eternal obligations to a sacred covenant, to serve a noble past and a sublime future.

Reik reminds us that the Shofar is the quintessential Jewish ritual object that is raised to Heaven, to the future. (The sound cannot come out correctly if it is not turned upwards)



So here we are, at the dawn of Rosh Hashana. More than the hope of broadening our horizons, of expanding our hearts, we call – like Jacob – to reshape our actions, to make them fairer, to make ourselves wider.



Hannah Ruimy was born in Paris into a Hasidic family. After a Bachelor's degree in Clinical Psychology at René Descartes University, she studied in Israel and obtained a teaching degree from the Israeli Ministry of Education. She is passionate about Jewish education. Hannah taught high school classes in Yavné Paris. For three years, she directed ENIO-Gustave Leven, a middle class school in Paris. In 2017, she headed the Jewish Studies of the School Group. She has coordinated several educational curricula, in particular, for high schools, in France. Hannah is the educational manager of the Talmud Torah of the "Ohel Avraham" Community in Paris. In 2019, she won the Biblical Contest for adults in France.