Kabbalistic Understandings Of The Shofar

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The Goal Of The Holidays

According to the Kabbalah, one of the main themes of the upcoming High Holidays is Tikun HaBrit, the rectification and renewal of the Covenant (Brit) between G-d and the Jewish People.

Kabbalists emphasize the great importance of this rectification for our times, since we are now in the Hebrew calendar's Sixth Millenium, which parallels the sefirah (Divine Radiance) of the Yesod, associated with the Brit. The Yesod is the spiritual channel that brings Divine Illumination (shefa) and blessing into the world. In the Kabbalistic blueprint that pictures man as the microcosm of the universe, the Yesod is directly associated with the male sexual organ commonly referred to as the Brit.

Our transgressions, particularly our sexual transgressions, damage this channel and cut us off from Divine bounty and goodness. When transgressions multiply, G-d forbid, this spiritual descent can clog up the channel of blessing completely, and bring about both personal and national hardship.

Furthermore, since the channel to G-d, the Yesod , has been blocked because of transgression, we are estranged from a vibrant connection to G-d, leaving our prayers unanswered. Since sexual promiscuity is so prevalent in our times, Kabbalists stress that Tikun HaBrit, the work of rectifying the Yesod, is of paramount importance. Thus, according to the secrets of Torah, one of the prime goals of the Jewish Holidays at the start of the year is to reopen the channel of Divine blessing, the Yesod, which we damaged because of our sins.

Even though the Kabbalistic secrets of these matters cannot be fully explained in an Internet article that can be accessed by readers of all ages, Torah levels, and faiths, we will see that the shofar, like the High Priest on Yom Kippur, acts to unite the Jewish People and G-d by activating the sefirah of Yesod, the spiritual channel that brings Divine blessing to our nation and to the world.

The Call of the Shofar

The Zohar, the basic work of the Kabbalah, associates the shofar with the sefirah (Divine Channel) of Yesod. According to the Zohar's author, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the sound of the shofar rises to transcendental spiritual worlds via angels, as it says, “For the birds of heaven will raise up the voice” (Kohelet, 10:20). The numerical equivalent (gematria) of “For the birds of heaven,” [Ki off hashamayim] equals that of the word shofar. In Kabbalistic terminology, the expression “birds of heaven” refers to the sefirah of Yesod (Tikunei Zohar, 131b). The Yesod influences our world by drawing down celestial blessing.

For this reason, Yosef, who provided material sustenance for the Jews in Egypt, and for all of the world, is known as Yosef HaMashbir, the provider of sustenance. The Zohar explains that he merited this status because of his exalted sexual purity in being careful not to blemish the sefirah of Yesod by refusing to have relations with Potifar’s wife who tried to seduce him (Zohar, Bereshit 197a). The blowing of the shofar comes to cleanse the Yesod, to blast away at the pollution caused by our sins, and reopen the channel, so that our prayers can ascend and awaken the flow of Divine Illumination from Above, which provides for all of our needs.

In his book, “Secret of Hashmal,” the Kabbalist scholar, Rabbi Yekutiel Zalman Zev, explains this process of spiritual rectification:

The Talmud states that all of a person’s sustenance is apportioned to him on the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana (Talmud Betza 16a). According to the Zohar, sustenance stems from the Divine Illumination that emanates from an exalted spiritual world called “ratzone,” as in the Psalms, “You open Your hand, and every living thing You satisfy its desire-ratzone” (Tehillim 145:16; Zohar, Beshalach 62a).

Because Rosh HaShana is the Day of Judgment, on this day, the attribute of strict justice reigns supreme. Based on the paucity of our deeds, we cannot depend on our merit alone to defend us when the book of our lives lays open before the Celestial Tribunal. Therefore, we need something that will allow us to transcend the level of strict justice and enable us to release the flow of shefa (Divine Illumination) that will grant us sustenance for the upcoming year. We need a spiritual battering ram that will shatter all barriers and penetrate to the exalted world of Divine ratzone that transcends the world of judgment.

This is the shofar.

Because of its power to cleanse and rectify the channel of the Yesod, its call is heard in the most exalted worlds, high above strict judgment, to the exalted sphere where G-d’s kindness and mercy reign. In this way, the shofar draws down the Divine Illumination that was blocked because of our sins. Thus we recite before blowing the shofar, “Rise Elokim (the attribute of judgment) with the truah (blast); the L-rd (attribute of mercy) with the sound of the shofar” (Tehillim, 47:5).

The Yesod and Yom Hazicharon

This “supernatural” aspect of the shofar can also be seen in the Torah and Haftorah selections of Rosh HaShana, describing Sarah and Hanna’s miraculous pregnancies. The Talmud teaches that Sarah, Rachel, and Hanna were all Divinely granted children on Rosh HaShana (Talmud Rosh HaShana 10b). Sarah didn’t even have a womb (Talmud Yevamot 64b). Their pregnancies were beyond the laws of nature.

We reach this transcendental level through the blast of the shofar in order to remind G-d of the merit of our forefathers and bring down the Divine Influx that we would otherwise be denied. Interestingly, Rabbi Zev notes that the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew words “And He remembered [Sarah],” (pakad et) (Genesis 21:1) equals the numerical value of shofar.

The outstanding feature of the Rosh HaShana prayer is the order of Malchiyot, Zichronot, and Shofarot sections. The Talmud states that we recite Zichronot, “In order that your remembrances (Zichronot) will ascend before Me for blessing. And how is this brought about? Through the shofar.” (Talmud Rosh HaShana 16a). Our verses of Zichronot rise before the Almighty and awaken the flow of Divine blessing. This comes about once again through the power of the shofar in its aspect of Yesod, the channel of Divine Illumination. The Hebrew word for remembrances, zichronot, comes from the root word, zachar, which also means “male,” a synonym for the Yesod. Thus the shofar paves the way for the zichronot to open the channel of blessing.

Shofar and The High Priest

The Talmud equates the sounding of the shofar with the service of the Kohen HaGadol (High Priest) in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur (Talmud Yoma 53b). Like the shofar, the Kohen HaGadol, the paragon of sexual purity, represents the Yesod, in his role of activating the flow of shefa from Above.

Just as the blasts of the shofar awaken the people of Israel to repentance, and draw down sustenance and blessing, so too the prayers of the Kohen HaGadol atone for the transgressions of the nation and draw down the life-sustaining blessings of rainfall and sustenance for the year. In Kabbalistic terms, both the shofar and the Kohen HaGadol bring about a yichud, or unification, between G-d and the Jewish People.

This exalted unification finds expression in the teaching of the Talmud that whenever Zichronot are recited, Malchiyot are to be recited with them (Talmud Rosh HaShana 32a). Activated by the blasts of the shofer, the Zichronot influence the male principle of Yesod to give forth its shefa to the receiving, female principle of Malchiyot, our world. This reopening of the flow of Divine Illumination also marks the renewal of the Brit on Rosh HaShana, and thus we conclude the order of Zichronot with, “Blessed are Thou, O L-rd, who remembers the Brit.”

This coming week, may the blasts of the shofar awaken Divine favor and herald the immanent coming of Mashiach (the Messiah) and the complete redemption for the Jewish People and all of the world.

First shiur