



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY AUGUST 31ST / כ"א אלול

PARSHA:

NITZAVIM VAYELECH / ניצבים וילך

SERMON TITLE:

Kvetch & Krechtz of the Shofar

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Nitzavim-Vayelech

Kvetch & Krechtz of the Shofar

It's been quite a few months over which President Barack Obama has been pressuring Israel to freeze settlement building on the other side of the Green Line. While things seems to have gotten better with his most recent meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israelis and American Jews alike are watching the developments.

But while Obama has been pressuring Israel, the Israeli government, for its part, has specifically insisted on continuing with building in the liberated territories.

But Netanyahu and Obama are not the first people in Jewish history to get into a disagreement that didn't seem to have a solution.

In Judaism, there is no shortage of arguments—and that's why the Jewish Nation has a lot of experience in making compromises.

We're now standing just a few days before Rosh Hashanah. Now, the primary mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is the blowing of the shofar. But even when it comes to this mitzvah, there were disputes in Jewish history.

To preface: Everyone who listens to the shofar hears all different kinds of sounds. At first, one hears a long single note. Then, one hears short blasts.

But if you listen carefully, you'll notice that between the long blast and the short blast, you'll hear three medium blasts.

But what exactly is this whole jumble all about?

Some say that this mix of notes is sounded so that people don't get bored listening to the shofar. In other words, if it were just one straight solid note, it wouldn't be particularly interesting. As a matter of fact, the Talmud has many long discussions on this issue. We'll get to some of those shortly.

The mitzvah of blowing the shofar starts with the Torah. In the book of Bamidbar, Numbers, Chapter 29, verse 1, the Torah tells us that Rosh Hashanah is "a day of teruah," which means "blasting" or "shofar-sounding."

However, the commentators tell us that the intent of the word teruah, at least when it comes to Rosh Hashanah, is "wailing" or "sobbing." This is because the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is supposed to move you—the sound of the shofar symbolizes the primal inner voice of the soul as she cries out to G-d.

So here's the dilemma: What type of note or sound from the shofar best expresses this spiritual wailing or sobbing? Is it the classic, traditional Jewish kvetch or krechtz we all know from our grandmothers—meaning, the sigh one sighs out of great pain? You've all seen those classic melodramas where something terrible happens and the lead actor in the movie cries out, "Noooooooooooooooooooo!" Is that what the sound of the shofar is supposed to be—a long, stretched-out cry of anguish? Or is the "wailing" or "sobbing" of the shofar more like crying, in which case it should sound like crying, with a lot of short notes with a lot of short breaths in between?

In Jewish history, there were two customs. There were those who would blow three medium notes on the shofar, three krechtzes. These were called the shevarim notes. But there were also those who would blow crying sounds, which are referred to as teruah notes.

In the Talmudic era, about 1,700 years ago, the Holy Land was divided into two areas. One was called the Galil, or Galilee, and the other was called Yehudah, names which remain to this day. They are north and south of each other.

In the northern region of the Galil, the Galilee, where the Mishnah was written, the Jewish residents were more like your grandmother, more traditional—so they krechtzed more, sighing the longer, broken sighs that every Jew loves to sigh.

In the Holy Land's south, however, they were accustomed to crying in a more modern way. (Maybe they watched the same movies we watch.) They would cry with short cries and short breaths. So in Yehudah, they would blow teruah blasts when it came to blowing the shofar at Rosh Hashanah.

And then along came Rabbi Abahu.

Who was Rabbi Abahu? He lived in the 4th Century CE, during the period in which the Romans ruled the Holy Land. He was a leader universally accepted by all parts of the Jewish nation. He was one of those leaders who had it all: Torah scholarship, command of the secular arts and sciences, fluency in several languages, and fame for his sharp mind.

On top of that, he was a rich and strikingly handsome man. He had charisma to the point that the Talmud (tractate Bava Metzia 84a) tells us that he was almost as charming as the Patriarch Jacob himself. He was a scholar in the fullest sense of the word.

And he deployed all his qualities for the good of the Jewish Nation.

For starters, he moved to Caesaria, which at the time was the regional capital of the Roman Empire in the Holy Land. There, he forged strong connections with the Roman government—and he used these connections to protect the Jews living in the Holy Land then who suffered greatly under Roman domination.

Now, Rabbi Abahu decided that he needed to unite the Jewish Nation, and not just in general, but with regards to the blowing of the shofar too. He wanted to establish one custom that all Jews would observe throughout the country.

So the Talmud (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 35a) tells us, "In Caesaria, Rabbi Abahu established [a pattern of] tekiah, three shevarims, teruah, [and then another] tekiah." In other words, he came along and said, "Let's merge both customs so that nobody is offended." So he established the shevarim like the Galil custom and the teruah like the southern custom. As the Talmud concludes: "Let it be like this and like that."

It was specifically Rabbi Abahu, living in Caesaria between the north and south, who was in the position to merge the two customs.

However, Jews don't depart from their fathers' ways so quickly. When Jews hear about a new custom, even if it's filled with the best of intentions, they still want to keep the old custom exactly the way it was kept until now.

And so, the people of the north continued their fathers' custom—they just added Rabbi Abahu's amendment. And the people of the south continued to blow the shofar like their fathers did—they just also added Rabbi Abahu's amendment.

What resulted was that to this day, we blow the shofar according to the Galil custom—tekiah, shevarim and tekiah—and also like they blew it in the south: tekiah, teruah, tekiah. Of course, we also do it Rabbi Abahu's way: tekiah, shevarim, teruah, tekiah.

My friends, what is the moral of this?

What we learn from this episode in Jewish history is that compromise does not mean that you give up a little bit of your custom and the other gives up a little bit of his custom. If we were to do that, we'd end up creating something totally new altogether that wouldn't last at all. Rather, compromise means that I continue doing my custom—and as an amendment, in order to make peace, I also add on your custom.

Today, we read two Torah portions in the Torah: Nitzavim and Vayeilech.

In general, we can learn a lesson for daily life from the name of a Torah portion itself. But this week, however, we have a problem: the names of these two Torah portions contradict each other. "Nitzavim" literally means "standing," which teaches us to stand fast, to stand strong and not to budge when it comes to our core beliefs. "Vayeilech," on the other hand, literally means "And he walked," which teaches us that we must always be moving forward, proceeding and progressing.

So now you're thinking, "Come on, rabbi, make up your mind! Either we stay in one place, or we move forward! Which one will it be?" Along comes the Rebbe and says that we need both.

Before anything else, a person needs to take a stand. When it comes to matters of Judaism, a Jew needs to stand strong—not to fold and not to compromise. But that's not enough. In Jewish life, a person needs to progress, to forge ahead. He or she cannot be satisfied with last year's achievements—he or she needs to grow, to open new doors and to go from strength to strength.

Rabbi Abahu knew in his great wisdom that the best way to bring both factions of the Jewish Nation together was not to do it this way or that way, but to do it both ways.

And the lesson we learn from our Torah portion is that we shouldn't only freeze in one position, or only keep charging ahead, changing our positions from day to day. We should do both. We should stand strong on who and what we are—and keep progressing in becoming better and better people.

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.