

* 1.4 | Getting Out Of Your Self

The Hint of the Shofar

On *Rosh HaShanah*, we have a *mitzvah* to blow *shofar*. A *shofar* is designed in a way that one side of its opening is narrow, and the other opening is wide. The sound of the *shofar* comes out from a narrow opening, but it is heard on the wide end of the opening.

The *Gemara* states that the sound of the *shofar* sounds like someone crying. That is why we blow different sounds that resemble crying (*shevarim* and *teruah*). These are two kinds of crying that a person exhibits. When does a person cry? When he is in pain. When a person feels confined by something, and he wants Hashem to release him from his confined state, he blows (and hears) the *shofar* in order to come out of his “confines” and reveal instead an “expansion”.

The purpose of the *shofar* is not just the sounds that come out from it. The *shofar* is an expression of our soul’s mission during these days: “*Shapru maaseichem*”, “Beautify your deeds.” The Rambam²¹ writes that the *shofar* comes to awaken those who are slumbering.

The *shofar* is narrow in the place where the sound comes from, and it is wide in the opening that the sound escapes from. This reflects what a person’s *Avodah* is during these days: to come out of his “narrowness” and expand from his “confines”. What do we mean by this?

In the physical world, we can understand well what a confine is and what an expansion is. When a person’s monthly income isn’t enough to cover his expenses, this feels like he is confined. When he has adequate livelihood, *Baruch Hashem*, he feels widened from his confines. A person wants to escape the confines of having to live so frugally and instead to live comfortably, without having to worry so much about every penny he spends. People like to be free from any confines.

The lesson of the *shofar*, though, is not just about escaping your confines when it comes to the physical. It is a lesson about escaping confines *within our own soul*, and it is upon us to understand how we can leave our “confines”.

There are many ways how we leave our confines, and we will try to go through each of them.

Leaving Your Narrowed State

Every person worries for himself. There is no such person who can say about himself that he doesn’t worry about himself. On the other hand, every person also has some caring for others. There is no person who only cares for himself his entire life and never worried about another person.

²¹ Rambam *Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:4

The higher level a person is on, the less he worries for himself, and the more he worries for others. The less of a level he is on, the more self-absorbed he is, and he is less worried for others.

To come out of your "confines" means to come out of your narrowness and instead expand beyond yourself. A person has to leave his private little life and look at the world with a widened view, thinking: "There is such thing as the Jewish people, and there are 600,000 souls who are one collective essence. My existence is only one out of these 600,000."

When a person leaves his self-absorption in this way, it's like experiencing redemption in his own soul.

Rosh HaShanah is the Day of Judgment. Hashem writes for each person on this day how much income he will make this year, what his health will be like, and all the rest of his needs. We want to have comfort in all these areas. But if we want to take care of our body's needs, we need to understand that it depends on a healthy soul. If our soul is stuck in a narrow confine, this narrowness will also manifest itself in our body. So if a person wants to be comfortable, he has to make sure his soul is comfortable – in other words, he has to make sure that his soul is not stuck in a narrow confine. If a person succeeds in that, his body's needs will be affected as well by this, and he will have all his physical comforts.

A person expands beyond himself starting by expanding his internal world, and this slowly spreads outward onto his physical body.

A husband and wife can live together in a house, but it can be like a narrow confine – when each of them is living for themselves. If a person only thinks about himself and only worries for himself, that is a confine. When a person understands and feels that there is another person living with him in his house, and he is involved with giving to that other person – he has left the narrow confines.

A person comes to *Rosh HaShanah*, the Day of Judgment. He is thinking about himself and he wants to merit a good judgment. Is he only preparing with himself for *Rosh HaShanah*, or is he thinking about others too, about how he can help them come properly into the Yom Tov? Is he concerned for anyone either for their physical needs or their spiritual needs?

If a person comes to *Rosh HaShanah* only thinking about himself, he has basically already signed for himself his decree....

"Every person signs with his hand on it." Every person seals his fate on this day. How do you seal your own decree? Aren't we on this physical world, while the decree is being made in Heaven? Don't we need to ascend to Heaven to sign a decree?

The simple answer to this is that our soul goes to Heaven at night when we sleep, and then it signs the decree. But the depth of this matter is as the Maggid of Mezritch *z"l* explained: the way a person lives is what signs the decree. Everyone signs his own decree! How? If a person has left his "confines" and he has expanded beyond himself, he has signed for himself a decree that he has left his confines. If a person still remains in his own personal confines, it is as if he never heard the *shofar* from an inner perspective.

If a person blows *shofar* and one of the openings is closed, he hasn't fulfilled his obligation of *shofar*. The *mitzvah* is only fulfilled when you blow from the narrow opening and it comes out of the wide opening. In terms of our own soul, we need to come out of our narrowness and expand beyond ourselves.

But if a person comes to *Rosh HaShanah* and he only thinks about himself, from an inner perspective, he has not performed the purpose of the *mitzvah*.

There is a well-known story that Reb Yisrael Salanter was walking on the street on Erev *Yom Kippur*, when a certain pious individual walked by him. Reb Yisrael Salanter gave him a blessing, but the person looked so serious about the *Yom HaDin* that he failed to respond "*Shalom*." Reb Yisrael Salanter remarked about this, "This is not righteousness. True righteousness is when a person leaves his confines and expands beyond himself, and he isn't self-absorbed and only worrying for his private life. If it is Erev *Yom Kippur* and he is so absorbed in himself that he can't greet me with a *Shalom Aleichem*, he is missing the whole point."

Every person signs his own decree. The narrower a person is, the narrower his income, health and happiness will be. The more a person expands beyond himself, the wider his blessings will be – he will widen his life, his marriage, his income and all other areas.

Inner Redemption by Nullifying Your Private Life

How can a person expand beyond himself? He has to realize that there is no such thing as a "private" life.

Reb Zusha of Anipoli *zt"l* merited to see Eliyahu HaNavi, who told him the following: *Chazal* state that *Moshiach* will not come until all the *peratios* (coins) from every wallet will be used up. *Peratios* can also mean "private." The real depth behind why *Moshiach* hasn't come yet is because every person is worrying only for himself!

People will for sure react with a question: "Is this the only reason that *Moshiach* hasn't come yet?! He hasn't come because there are still many people who aren't keeping *mitzvos*, and even those who fulfill the *mitzvos* aren't doing so perfectly. We can make a long list of all the problems in this generation."

But if a person wouldn't be thinking only of himself, he would be serving Hashem perfectly.

A person commits a sin not because he wants to do something good for others, but because he only cared for himself at the moment. He cheated in business to make a good deal – why? He only cared about himself at the moment. He might pat himself on the back that he gives *maaser* up until a fifth of his money, and he might even give half of his money to *tzedakah*, but that still doesn't erase his sin of stealing. The reason why he sinned was because he only worried for himself and thus he wanted some pleasure.

If a person erases his private life, he wouldn't come to commit a sin. A person only sins because his *yetzer hora* convinced him that it will be good for him to do so. In other words: "Just worry about yourself...."

It seems simply that to get rid of our private life means to have a positive attitude toward others and to give more *tzedakah*, but really, it means much more than that.

If a person reflects about his life in a true and deep way, he will conclude with absolute, simple clarity: **The root of all problems is when a person only thinks and worries about himself.** Sometimes a person isn't necessarily having a forbidden thought, but sometimes a person commits a sin simply because all he thought about was himself.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* writes in the introduction: "A person was not created except to help others." If that would be a person's perspective in whatever he does, he would ask himself each time: Is what I'm doing now for myself, or in order to help others?

When a person eats something with a questionable *hechsher* (a kosher certification), what is the real reason that he did so? If he thinks about it a little, he will discover that it was because he only worried about himself at the time.

Donating Some of Your Learning

If we would succeed in uprooting our self-absorption, we wouldn't even come to one sin. "There is no righteous person on the earth who only does good and never sins." It is impossible for a person to totally get rid of his self-absorption, but he still must try to balance his needs with others' needs. The *Gemara*²² says that one should combine *shelo lishmah* (ulterior motives) with *lishmah* (pure motives).

It is a person's job to examine his deeds and make sure that he's not only acting for his own concerns. We will give a few examples.

A person goes to a *shiur*. Why did he come to the *shiur*? We are not speaking about someone who is bored in his house, so he comes to a *shiur*. We are speaking about someone who comes to a *shiur* because he really wants to learn Torah. Why, indeed, does he want to learn Torah? He knows that *Chazal* say that if a person doesn't learn Torah, he won't be resurrected from the dead in the future. A person wants to live forever, and he knows that in order for this to happen, he has to learn Torah. It seems like such a simple reason.

Is he coming to learn only for his own survival, or because he is also worried for others? If he's only concerned for himself, he will still get rewarded for his *mitzvah* in learning Torah, but he has taken the holiest thing in Creation, the Torah, and he has used it all for himself.

We can compare this to a guest who visits the king's palace, and he takes the king's crown off his head and wears it. Such a person is really rebelling against the king and deserves the death penalty. If

²² *Pesachim 50b*

a person is coming to a shiur to learn Torah only because he is concerned about his future, he is taking the most precious thing in Creation – the holy Torah – and using it all for himself.

A deeper kind of person not only worries for his own learning, but he worries that others should learn too. Even if he doesn't get another person to come to a shiur, he can decide before the shiur that he will give a percentage of his reward to other Jews.

How many Jews unfortunately haven't been worthy to have the Torah in their life! How will they get up by *techiyas hameisim*? What will be with them?! But if certain righteous individuals give them a percentage of their reward for learning, they will merit to be revived.

If a person gives away some of his reward for learning to other Jews, first of all, he might very well bring other Jews to complete *Teshuvah*, in the merit of the Torah that he has given to them which can awaken their inner world. On a deeper note, a person like this can help other Jews merit eternity!

The *Gemara* states that ignoramuses who don't learn Torah still have hope. If someone benefits a Torah scholar from his assets, it is considered as if he clings to the *Shechinah*. But many people, besides for not learning any Torah, don't even help a Torah scholar. They give charity, but not for Torah causes. What will be with them? How will they get up by *techiyas hameisim*?!

There are millions of Jews all over the world who have no Torah in their life, and they have never even said *Shema* once in their life. If a person wants to care about any of these Jews, what can he do? People usually don't have the strength to open up a new *kiruv* organization, and they aren't interested in going around raising money. So what can a person do if he wants to help all these Jews?

There is something you can do. You can sit in the *beis midrash* and hear a *shiur*, and as you listen to the *shiur*, you can be giving merits to the whole world. How? By giving away part of your reward to those who haven't merited to learn Torah yet in their life.

The point of meriting the public (*mezakeh es harabim*) is to leave one's private life.

Donating A Building...For Who?

A person donates a building to become a *shul*. He gets his name plastered on the entrance so everyone should see his name, and he gets the rights to the first *Mi Shebeirach* every Shabbos. He has all kinds of demands.

Now, if he would donate the building so that it should be a place of learning and closeness to Hashem, why would he need to donate the building in his name? Does Hashem not know who donated the building? Hashem knows every private thought; He surely knows that someone donated a million-dollar building.

But the donor is thinking about himself. He wants the whole neighborhood to know that it was him who donated the building, and he wants to be in all the newspapers. Even though much Torah will be learned in this building due to his charity, all he thought about was himself.

If a person would really search to live a true kind of life, and he wants to donate a shul or beis midrash, I am not saying he has to do this purely for the sake of Heaven, but at least he should be ready to give up some of his reward to others who have no Torah or *mitzvos* in their life. Is he prepared to do this, or is he just thinking the whole time: "I donated it, I'm the boss over here, It's all about my name...!"

The Root of Arguments – Thinking Only About Yourself

If we reflect, we can see that this point affects all areas of life.

Most marriage problems are not because a person has a bad heart and is mean to his wife. There are many husbands who are wonderful, nice people – yet they still have serious problems in their marriage. Why? It is because people are simply absorbed in themselves and only worry about themselves.

When a person lives with the goal of how he can nourish others, and *Baruch Hashem* he gets married, he sits for at least two minutes a day and thinks: "How can I give more to my wife? How can I help her more?"

There are some people who think all day about how they can get more out of people, but there are others who think: How can I give to others?

When a person gets into a fight in shul about certain honors and privileges that he feels should go to him, or when people are involved in strife and heated arguments, the root of this all is because each person is thinking only for himself.

This is an internal kind of question: How does a person look at his life? Is he looking to unify with others by giving to them (which is what Hashem intended the world to be like when He created it), or is he just living life as he naturally does, worrying only for himself since the time he was a little child? When a person only cares for himself in his life, he thinks that everything is about him, and he resembles someone who lived in the Generation of the Flood, who were erased from existence due to their selfish lifestyle.

Giving Must Be Truthful

Many people are careful to give *maaser*, yet it doesn't necessarily make them into better people. Why is this so? It is because although they are involved with giving, they are not doing so out of concern for others, but simply because they know that *Chazal* say that giving *maaser* makes one wealthy...

We can see that many people give *tzedakah*, yet their money isn't going to the right places. *Chazal* indeed say that a person has to be worthy of his *tzedakah* going to the right places. A person donates a new *shul*, and they can barely get a *minyan* to come....

Why do these things happen? It is because when the person gave the money, he didn't give it with the intention of helping others – he did it all for his own merits. If that his intention, his money won't end up in the right places.

But if a person gives something to another with his heart, he is truly giving, and Hashem helps such a person's money go to the right destination.

How This Affects Your Own Spiritual Situation

If a person looks at life with this proper attitude, he will find himself not only improving his interpersonal relationships, but even his relationship with Hashem will improve.

“What you don't want done to you, do not do to others.” Hillel said that this is point is the entire Torah. How can this be the whole Torah? How can interpersonal relationships be everything? What about one's relationship with Hashem?

There are many answers to this, but along the lines of our discussion, the answer is because our issues with Hashem and our issues we have with people are all the same issue: that a person is thinking only about himself, lives for himself and worries only for himself.

But when a person gets used to giving to others with the right kind of attitude – because he has a desire to bestow good upon others – he is fulfilling the purpose of creation, which is to help others. He will also find that he has an easier time when it comes to holding back from a sin.

The root of sinning is because a person is used to thinking and worrying only a about himself.

When a person slowly gets used to giving to others, he leaves his selfish mindset that everything is all about him. If a certain evil desire comes to him, it will be easier for him to control himself from giving in to the *yetzer hora*, because he has already gotten used to the idea of not only worrying about what's in it for himself.

If a person doesn't get used to giving up something for someone else, then when is faced with a sin, it will be hard for him to have self-control, because he is so used to always fulfilling what he wants.

But if he has gotten used to nullifying his desires for other people, this will weaken his selfishness, and when he faces a temptation to sin, he has given himself more tools to deal with it. He has learned how to not give in to something he wants, and with Hashem's help, he will be able to overpower his evil desire.