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The Mitzvah of Shofar

In his presentation of the laws of *shofar* (3:10), Maimonides writes that before sounding the *shofar* one recites the *berakha*, “*Barukh Ata... ve-tzivanu li-shmo’a kol shofar.*” This text of the *berakha* speaks of the *mitzva* as an obligation “to hear the sound of the *shofar.*” According to Maimonides, the Torah requires one to hear the *shofar* sound, and the act of blowing serves merely to facilitate the hearing. This is in contrast to the view of Rabbenu Tam, cited by the Rosh (Rosh Hashanah 4:10), who held that the proper text of the *berakha* is “*Barukh Ata... ve-tzivanu al teki’at shofar.*” This text describes the *mitzva* as an obligation to blow the *shofar*, rather than to hear the *shofar* sound.

In one of his printed responsa, Maimonides draws proof from his position from the fact that *Halakha* allows one to fulfill the *shofar* obligation by hearing somebody else sound the *shofar*. It is not necessary for each individual to personally blow the *shofar*; one person blows the *shofar* in the synagogue, and everyone fulfills the *mitzva* by listening to the *shofar*. Had the *mitzva* been defined as an obligation to blow the *shofar*, Maimonides argued, then each person would have been required to blow the *shofar* individually, and it would not have sufficed to hear somebody else blow.

Rabbenu Tam, presumably, would respond by invoking the principle of *shomei’a ke-oneh*, or “listening is like reciting.” Generally, when *Halakha* requires reciting a certain text, such as prayer or *kiddush*, one who listens to somebody else’s recitation is considered to have personally recited the text, and thus fulfills his obligation in this manner. For example, one may, strictly speaking, fulfill his obligation of *tefila* by listening to the *chazan*’s recitation of the *amida*. (In practice this is not done because of the concern that one will be unable to sustain the required level of concentration throughout the *amida*.) Likewise, it is common for one person to recite *kiddush* on Shabbat on behalf of everybody assembled. According to Rabbenu Tam, then, one may fulfill the obligation to sound the *shofar* by listening to somebody else blow the *shofar*, just as one who listens to *kiddush* is considered to have personally recited it.

It has been suggested that this debate between Maimonides and Rabbenu Tam essentially hinges on the question of whether we should view *shofar* blowing as an act of prayer. Rabbenu Tam applies to *shofar* blowing the principle of *shomei’a ke-oneh* because he views it as a kind of “wordless” prayer. Whereas generally one prays by reciting a text, in this instance the Torah requires praying by sounding the *shofar*. Therefore, we can apply to *shofar* blowing the same mechanisms that *Halakha* provides in the context of prayer. For Maimonides, however, *shofar* has nothing at all to do with prayer. The Torah wants us to listen to the *shofar* sound and react to it, as he famously writes in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (3:4):

Even though sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a Scriptural decree, it [also] contains an allusion, as if to say: Awaken, those who sleep, from your sleep, and arise, those who slumber, from your slumber; inspect your deeds and perform repentance, and remember your Creator, those who forget the truth

amidst the vanities of the time, and waste the entire year in vanity and vacuity which can neither yield benefit or rescue. Look into yourselves and improve your paths and deeds; let each of you return from his evil way, and [from] his improper thoughts.

According to Maimonides, the *shofar* is not a prayer, but rather a call to repentance, a means of stirring the soul and awakening a person from his mindless routine of pursuing physical gratification and material success.

Maimonides' position in this regard might perhaps relate to his understanding of the fundamental nature of *tefila*. Possibly, Maimonides could not conceive of the possibility of viewing *shofar* blowing as prayer because words are too integral to the act of prayer. Although prayer is defined as an *avoda she-be-lev* – “service of the heart,” an exercise of mind and emotion, it also requires the verbalization and articulation of words. Part of the definition of prayer is concretizing one's feelings through the recitation of a text. For this reason, perhaps, Maimonides could not entertain the notion of prayer through sounding the *shofar*. A wordless prayer cannot be a halakhic prayer, because part of the inherent definition of prayer is the process of precisely formulating one's thoughts and emotions in a proper text, as opposed to a free, spontaneous expression of raw emotion.