



Waking Up

By Rabbi David Silverberg

Among the most famous passages in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* is his explanation for the symbolic meaning underlying the obligation of *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashanah:

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.

While emphasizing that this *mitzva* – like all *mitzvot* – constitutes a “Scriptural decree” which we must observe regardless of whether or not we can understand its underlying reasoning, Maimonides suggests that the *shofar* is intended to serve as a “siren” of sorts. People are, by nature, prone to conduct their lives in a state of spiritual “slumber,” paying little or no attention to their responsibilities as human beings and as Jews. We are drawn after the “vanity and vacuity” of the world, pursuing pleasure, luxury and honor, without giving any thought to the higher purpose for which we were created. The *shofar* symbolizes the need to “awaken” from this “slumber,” to take stock of our lives and determine whether or not we are indeed fulfilling the purpose for which God placed us on His earth.

To gain further insight into the “slumber” of which Maimonides speaks in this passage, let us consider the context in which it appears. Maimonides inserts these comments parenthetically amidst his comments concerning divine judgment. In this chapter, he establishes the fact that God judges each individual at the time of his death, and each year on Rosh Hashanah. A person whose sins outweigh his merits is sentenced to death, whereas a person whose merits exceed his wrongdoing is sentenced to life. The *beinonim*, those whose merits and sins are balanced, have their sentence held in abeyance until Yom Kippur. In this context, Maimonides adds his remarks regarding the symbolism of the *shofar*. As Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment, the Torah required sounding the *shofar* to symbolize the need to “awaken” on this day.

It thus emerges that when Maimonides speaks of awakening from our “slumber,” he refers to the slumber of blissful spiritual apathy. People prefer the convenience of turning a blind eye to their accountability, and to the eventuality of judgment, over a life

of conscience and discipline. It is easier to “sleep,” to ignore our accountability, than to live with the burden of responsibility. The purpose of Rosh Hashanah, as the Torah describes (Vayikra 23:24), is to serve as a “*zikhron teru'a*,” as a reminder – through the symbolism of the *shofar* – that we have been created to serve the Almighty and are held accountable for our fulfillment or neglect of this purpose. This is a day to recommit ourselves, first and foremost, to living with a sense of responsibility and obligation, and to not allow ourselves to fall into the “slumber” of carefree apathy and indifference.