

Now, did the hands of Moshe make or break the battle?

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There is no doubt that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi made a considerable effort in editing the Mishnah. Indeed, the order and wording of its chapters are nothing short of a masterpiece.

However, towards the end of the third chapter of Tractate Rosh Hashanah, a seemingly unrelated passage appears between Mishnahs 7 and 8 that concern blowing the shofar. Mishnah 7 says: *“One who blows into a cistern, or into a cellar or into a barrel; if he heard the sound of the shofar, he has fulfilled [his obligation]; if he heard the sound of an echo, he has not fulfilled [his obligation]. And so [too], he who was passing behind a synagogue, or whose house was adjacent to a synagogue, and heard the sound of a shofar or the sound of [someone reading the] scroll [of Esther, on Purim]; if he [had intention for the commandment], he has fulfilled [his obligation], but if not, he has not fulfilled [his obligation]. Even though this one heard and that one heard, this one [had intention], and that one did not [have intention].”* Another rule appears at the end of Mishnah 8 ending the chapter: *“A deaf-mute person, or a shoteh, or a minor, cannot relieve others from their obligation [for hearing the shofar they blew the shofar for them]. This is the general rule: all those who are not obligated to carry out a particular action, cannot release [others] from their obligation.”* Between these two rules appears a seemingly unrelated “aggadic” passage: *“And so it was, when Moshe raised his hand, Israel prevailed...”* (Exodus 17:11). And is it Moshe’s hands that make [success in] war or break [success in] war? Rather, [this comes to] tell you, [that] whenever Israel would look upward and subjugate their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would prevail; and if not, they would fall. Similar to this matter, you [can] say concerning the verse; *“Make a [graven] snake and place it on a pole, and everyone bitten who sees it will live”* (Numbers 21:8): And is it the snake that kills or [is it] the snake that [revives]? Rather, whenever Israel would look upward and subjugate their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they would be harmed.”

What does this have to do with the obligation to hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah?

Rabbi Menachem Ben Shlomo Hameiri (Perpignan, 1249-1315), in his commentary on Tractate Rosh Hashanah, proposes an explanation for the proximity of the “aggadic” passage to the previous Mishna and explains: *“The issue at hand is intention of the heart, and therefore this passage was brought in order to say that everything depends on intention.”* And in the version of the Mishnah that he had before him, like in other manuscripts, it even says with emphasis: *“Whenever Israel would look upward and aim [not subjugate] their hearts.”* Read literally, this explains the connection between halachic rules about intentions, and an aggadic passage that emphasizes the power of such intention in war and healing. It is possible that when taking a deeper look at Hameiri’s comments we will find more than meets the eye.

The statement commenting on the versus in Exodus 17 (the Amalekite war) and Numbers 21 (the bronze snake) presents a worldview that opposes magical thinking and tells us that there is no magical power either in Moses’s hands or in the the bronze

snake, as could have been implied by reading the text literally, but it is only man's moral and spiritual power of decision that can defeat Amalek, or the attacking snake, as a result of spiritual languidness (*"and the soul of the people became impatient because of the way"*). This attitude by Our Sages is expressed in many Midrashes (including Mekhilta on Parashat Beshalach), which emphasize the spiritual aspect of the Amalek war.

Perhaps Amalek and "the snake" metaphorically represent two models of danger that must be overcome: Amalek represents the temptation of relying on force and taking advantage of man's power in order to harm those who are weaker than him.

"The snake," or the impatience for which the people are punished by "the venomous snakes," represents the feeling of loss of way, despair and loss of meaning. The people do not understand the meaning of Exodus from slavery to liberty and long for the days of slavery.

These two dangers, the temptation of power intoxication and its exercise against the weak, and loss of way, face man at all times. In every personal or national process of growth, liberation and redemption, there are ups and downs. Every ideology, as lofty as it may be, may degenerate and no people in human history has ever been fully successful at overcoming the temptation of abusing its power.

The homily in the Mishnah, according to Hameiri's reading, teaches us that the only way to successfully contend with these dangers, against which no person or people is immune, and to even overcome them, is by "intentions of the heart," which is to say awareness of those dangers and recognition of a moral and spiritual commitment to "our Father in heaven," who redeemed us from Egypt and commanded us to remember that we were strangers in Egypt and therefore we are commanded to recognize the vulnerability of the stranger and the weak. *"Thou shalt not pervert the justice due to the stranger, or to the fatherless; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge. But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee thence; therefore I command thee to do this thing"* (Deuteronomy, 24:17-18).

The intention of the heart required here means awareness of the redemption and the obligation it implies, which is what gives it meaning and the right to exist.

What, then, is the possible connection between these lofty ideas and the halacha that appears at the end of Mishnah 8 (a deaf-mute person, or a mentally irresponsible person, or a minor, cannot relieve others from their obligation)?

Maybe the halachic rule that appears at the end of the Mishnah – those who are not obligated to do something cannot relieve others from their obligation – gives us the key to understand the significance of this connection: the deciding principal in fulfilling the mitzvah and creating a covenant between the prayer leader and the public, and his ability to "relieve" the public, to act on behalf of the public and represent it, is the ability of the prayer leader to take upon himself a personal commitment, which is twofold: on the one hand it is connected to the "intention of the heart," which requires an awareness of liberation and redemption, and an awareness of the moral and spiritual meaning of that liberation. And on the other hand, to that

person's objective and subjective ability to communicate with the public and be perceived by it as praying with intention.

In this connotation we might understand the halacha that does not allow “a deaf-mute person, or a shoteh, or a minor,” who are not capable, at least as things were perceived in the days of Our Sages (the concepts of deafness have changed over the years and have even caused halachic decisors to review the halachic status of the deaf) – to take upon themselves an obligation out of a full intention of the heart to be emissaries of the public in blowing the shofar, as the mitzvah of blowing the shofar requires special intention, as said Rambam in Hilchot Shofar 2:4: “*Rather, both the person hearing and the one allowing him to hear must have the [proper] intention.*” Which is to say the utmost capacity to have awareness and intention and effective communication that will allow the public to trust the prayer leader who was appointed to do his mission faithfully, and the prayer leader must know that the public is with him.

The sound of the shofar, just like the hands of Moses and the bronze snake, does not have magical powers. The meaning of the sound, which is neutral and meaningless in itself, is given to it by those who perform the mitzvah, those who hear the shofar and those who make its sound and allow it to be heard.

Beyond the personal meaning that each person may find in the sounds emanating from the shofar, which might call him to reflection and repentance, we accept certain halachic assertions that characterize these sounds, including:

The sound that is heard must be authentic, original, and not the echo of another sound (“*if he heard the sound of an echo, he has not fulfilled [his obligation]*”), along with the assertion that “*all sounds are legitimate from the shofar,*” which assumes the legitimate existence of different authentic sounds from different shofars or different blowers.

We distinguish between the sounds of “tekiah” (blast), “teruah” (alarm) and “shevarim” (stacatto).

Both in the Talmud and in Rambam “tekiah” is understood as a simple note that appears in the context of redemption and victory and important events such as “*And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great horn shall be blown*” (Isaiah 27:13).

As for Teruah, writes Rambam (Hilchot Shofar 3:2):

“Due to the great passage of time and the extended exile, we are no longer sure as to the nature of the teruah mentioned in the Torah. We do not know whether it is similar to the wailing of weeping women; or the slow, deep sobbing of someone heavily burdened; or whether it is like a sobbing which naturally turns into a wailing. Therefore, we perform all three variations.”

It is equally interesting to inquire from whence the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah, 33b) derives the meaning of teruah, as follows:

“It is written, It shall be a day of teruah unto you, and we translate [in Aramaic], a day of yebaba, and it is written of the mother of Sisera, Through the window she

looked forth and weeped. One authority thought that this means drawing a long sigh, and the other that it means uttering short piercing cries.”

It is possible therefore that even in the sounds of the shofar the Mishnah speaks of two aspects:

The sound “tekiah” of the shofar requires us to be introspective and to believe in a general process of liberation and redemption without losing hope, along with the teruah and yebaba, weeping, which teach us not to lose our sensitivity to the suffering of the others, even when we are fighting against them, because even Sisera has a mother who is worried and suffering.