

Synesthesia at Sinai

Parashat Yitro, Exodus, Chapters 19-20 | January 20, 2021

In his memoir, Rabbi Shlomo Goren describes the moment when, as Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, he accompanied the IDF into the Old City of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War. Because the Bible describes the sounding of the biblical horn as Israelites go into battle, Rabbi Goren took a shofar with him. He writes that,

As I made my way forward, I began to utter a prayer in between shofar blasts and shouted to the soldiers, “In the name of God, take action and succeed...”

The soldiers did succeed, ultimately ending up at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, as the shofar continued to sound, only now expressing Jewish jubilation. It is one of the most famous shofar blasts in Jewish history, a central feature of the most miraculous moment in the modern history of the Jewish people. Yet precisely because of its importance, I have always found Rabbi Goren’s choice of shofar somewhat curious. Anyone who knows their *shofarot* understands from photographs that the one that he brought along into Jerusalem was relatively small. Why did Rabbi Goren not bring a more impressive horn to herald the city’s liberation? That answer, I later learned, lies in a story which allows us to understand that the haunting sound of this seemingly primitive instrument is often nothing less than an echo of Sinai itself.

By the time that Israel arrives at this mountain in the desert, it has already experienced the overthrow of an empire and the splitting of a sea, and yet still we are informed that what is yet to come is singular:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Behold, I come to thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and also in thee they will believe forever...

And it came to pass on the third day, when it

was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a shofar exceedingly loud; and all the people in the camp trembled...

And when the voice of the shofar grew ever louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in a voice. (Exodus 19:9,16,19)

At the center of the Sinai revelation is a shofar, the animal horn. It is a seemingly simple instrument, but all who have heard it know of its raw, primitive power. What does its sound signify for Judaism? Why is it so central to our religion?

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, in the ancient world, the shofar was a horn of coronation, frequently used in the Bible when there was doubt as to who is the true king. When David’s son Adonijah seeks to claim the kingship, the prophet Nathan takes Solomon and sounds the shofar to signal the anointing of the legitimate king. Thus, the shofar of Sinai heralds here the arrival of the one true Monarch, the sole sovereign of humanity. For Jews to sound the shofar—in battle, in prayer, in celebration—is to acknowledge this fact.

Fascinatingly, Rabbi Goren in his memoir recounts a mysterious visit right before the 1956 war in which Israel captured the Sinai:

About six months before the Sinai Campaign, I met a man who lived in Tel Aviv and made his living from making and selling shofars. He came to visit me at my house, carrying something wrapped in rags, and told me he had had a dream that he was supposed to go to Turkey to buy a horn to make a shofar. In Turkey, there are deer whose horns are used for making shofars. In the dream, he was told to buy a very large deer horn and to make

a shofar that I would blow on Mt. Sinai. This is what he told me, about half a year before the campaign. Back then, no one imagined that we were going to capture Mt. Sinai and the whole Sinai Desert.

“Perhaps you misunderstood your dream,” I told him, “and the shofar is for blowing on the Temple Mount or at the Kotel.” He insisted, however, that the dream was about my blowing the shofar on Mt. Sinai.

Some months later, after the Sinai operation, Rabbi Goren took the shofar and ascended the mountain in the Sinai Desert that many believe was the site of the original revelation. There he blew the shofar, and

...felt a deep and overwhelming sense of being part of history. This was the second time in history that the shofar was blown on Mt. Sinai.

One can imagine why he was so moved; for it was in the shofar of Sinai that God was declared the Lord of History.

With the shofar heralding God’s sovereignty, we would have expected the Almighty to begin the Decalogue by explaining why He is the ultimate Monarch of humanity: because He created the world, because He made us in His image, because ultimately He is the Divine director of the providential plan that is history. But that is decidedly *not* what God says.

The actual words in Exodus 20:2 are: “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha asher hotzeiticha me-eretz Mitzrayim*,” “I am the Lord thy God, who took thee out of the Land of Egypt.” In the central revelational event of human history, God links himself to a particular event, and to a particular people. It is through the miraculous story of the Jewish people that we discover God; the tale of Israel itself is a miracle, is itself a source of faith, perhaps *the* source of faith.

No one argues this more eloquently than Rabbi Judah HaLevi, the great Sephardic Jewish poet who,

in his masterwork the *Kuzari*, describes a Gentile king surveying the world’s religions, looking for theological truth. The king interviews a Christian, a Muslim, and philosopher. And then, Halevi writes,

He then invited a Jewish rabbi, and asked him about his belief. The Rabbi replied: I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles.

The king is unimpressed, for he had expected the rabbi to speak of God’s universal power, not of his connection to a particular people. And so he coldly replies:

Should thou, O Jew, not have said that thou believe in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide?

To this, the Rabbi readily replies that Judaism does indeed proclaim a universal truth about a God who created the world; but it is through Israel that God will make himself known to the world. The universal God is known through the people of Israel, and the miracle that is their history. The Rabbi replies:

In the same way God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: “I am Lord your God, who has led you out of the land of Egypt,” but He did not say: “I am the Creator of the world and your Creator.” Now in the same style I spoke to thee, a Prince of the Khazars, when thou did ask me about my creed.

For Halevi, it is Israel’s memory of the Exodus that is *the* argument for the existence of God. God, in his opening statement at Sinai, is saying to Israel, and ultimately to the world, that you will find Me in the story of my people, in the Jewish story, one which is more miraculous than any other.

This, then, is what the shofar of Sinai proclaims. The universal King of Kings is to be discovered in

Jewish history. It is no coincidence that the most famous photograph in modern Jewish history was taken at the very moment when Rabbi Goren was sounding the shofar at the *Kotel*, an image of three Israeli paratroopers at the Wall, with the seemingly awed central face of a young man named Yitzhak Yifat. The writer Yossi Klein Halevi describes its allure as follows,

Perhaps the photograph continues to endure because it caught an even more profound moment in the story of Zionism—the return not only of Jewish identity but of the Jewish God. Judaism posited a daring idea: That God’s power and goodness would be revealed not only in the majesty of nature but in the messiness of history—and even more improbably, in Jewish history. The meaning of Jewish history, then, is that history has meaning.

Halevi adds that in Jerusalem in 1967, even for less religiously inclined Israelis,

History had yielded the moment of consolation that generations of believing Jews had insisted, against all logic, must come. Once again, it was possible for Jews to at least consider that the traditional Jewish view of God may be right after all. The reverence that many Jews felt toward the photograph of the paratroopers was the stunned realization—seemingly reflected in Yitzhak Yifat’s upturned face—that skeptical secularism may not be an adequate way of understanding the Jewish story, that God may be real after all.

The shofar of Sinai, then, is a clarion call not only for one moment in the wilderness, but for all time. With this in mind, we can now approach the most mystifying verse of all. The Ten Commandments are declaimed, all Israel quakes at the encounter, and then we are informed:

And all the people saw the sounds and the

lightnings and the voice of the shofar and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it they trembled and stood from afar.
(Exodus 20:18)

This is often translated as “*the people saw the thunder,*” but literally it means they “*saw the sounds.*” The people *saw* the sound of the shofar? How can a sound be seen? The great medieval commentator Rashi tells us that at Sinai sound and sight miraculously merged; the sound of Sinai was seen in some sort of spiritual synesthesia. One moving interpretation of this verse can be found in an interview with Leon Kass, who describes the emotional impact that reading this passage had on him:

Can a reader vicariously, or maybe not even vicariously, experience the awe of the Children at the mountain? I am inclined to say yes.

That’s partly in the spirit in which I like to read. I try to imagine myself along on the journey. Not, by the way, as Moses, but as one of the assembled. The commentators are at pains to say “saw” means “perceived,” but I want to say this was a phantasmagoric experience in which all the senses are simply overwhelmed.

Out of this disquieting experience, a voice from out of the text address us, if we have ears to still listen, and addresses us in ways that partly depend on us going on this journey with the ex-slaves, but partly appealing to us as individuals with minds and hearts who can be moved by what we are summoned to think and do...I’m in awe of the text. I can’t believe it; I can’t believe that it’s speaking to me, and that it’s doing to me what it’s doing to me.

The sound of Sinai is not only heard, but also seen; it is not only for ancient Israel, but also for us. To say that Israel “*saw the sounds*” is to express that these sounds are unlike all others; the voice of the shofar, the thunder, and the Divine voice itself are unlike other sounds. They

break all barriers; they call out not only to ancient Israel but to us. Deuteronomy describes the sound of Sinai as “*kol gadol velo yasaf*,” which can be rendered as “*a great voice that does not cease*.” If the Divine declamation continues to resound, and if the sound of Sinai can be not only heard but seen, then that signifies to us that the awe-inspiring presence of God can still somehow be sensed in the Jewish story, that the seemingly awestruck face of Yitzchak Yifat at the Western Wall in Jerusalem ought to be the reaction of every one of us.

Rabbi Goren appears to have treasured the enormous shofar that had been given to him by the Turkish Jew who had proclaimed that he would sound the horn on Sinai itself. When Israel went to war in 1967, Rabbi Goren took his horn with him into battle. He went initially to the Egyptian front, and there his jeep was struck by a shell, and the shofar was destroyed. The rabbi survived, and he made his way to Jerusalem. He reports that,

My shofar had been burnt on the outskirts of Gaza. Since I knew that on this day we would be liberating the Old City and reaching the Kotel, at around 4:30 in the morning I hurried to the home of my father-in-law, who had a synagogue attached to his home.

“I need your synagogue’s shofar,” I told him when he opened the door to the sound of my knocking. “We are going to liberate the Kotel!”

He became so emotional that he began to cry, but he climbed onto a table, (the shofar was tucked away high up in a cupboard), and gave me the shofar. I took it and rushed back in the direction of Rockefeller Museum, and from there I began the climb toward the Old City.

That is why the rabbi had this small shofar with him, the shofar he blew in a united Jerusalem, where he also proclaimed words heralding God’s hand in history, saying,

On behalf of the whole Jewish people, in Israel and in the Diaspora, I say this blessing with exultant joy: Blessed are You, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this day. This year in rebuilt Jerusalem!

The story’s poetic power is profound. The shofar Rabbi Goren blew at Sinai had been seemingly obliterated. The sound of Sinai had been seemingly silenced. But it was not. It endures. The original shofar of Sinai was sounded so many millennia ago, but that does not mean it is gone. “*And all the people saw the sounds.*”

To see the sound of the shofar is to perceive God’s presence in the world, and to find it first and foremost in the story of the Jewish people. Despite life’s disappointments, we live in a miraculous age when the sound of Sinai can be found in our own world. And as long as we are willing to look for it, and listen to it, then it is a sound that will never cease.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik highlights the fact that as God proclaims the Ten Commandments, he identifies himself with a particular people, on behalf of whom He acts in history. If God is a universal God, why would he wish to make himself known to the entire world through his relationship with a single nation?
2. Why choose the shofar as an instrument of coronation? We know that the Israelites has trumpets; are those not more befitting the presence of royalty? What might the shofar teach us about Judaism's approach to kingship?