

Mishnah Berurah Digest

Based on the Sunday morning shiur
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NUMBER 7

Introductory thoughts on הלכות ראש השנה

In תיקיעת שופר we are taught, regarding ש"ע א"ח סימן תקפ"ט ס' ג that, "אשה פטורה משום דהוי מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא," ~ "Women are exempt [from the mitzvah of shofar] because it is a 'positive, time-bound mitzvah.'" A woman is not obliged to hear תיקיעת שופר. Therefore, she is also not able to discharge a man of his obligation. While she may take part in the מצוה and, indeed, will fulfill a מצוה for doing so, she does not have an a priori חיוב as does a man and so can not blow a shofar on a man's behalf.

In connection with this הלכה, Dayan Abraham declared that the following is one of his favourite ideas relating to תיקיעת שופר. He noted that תיקיעת שופר is considered a wonderful, powerful מצוה. It's blasts effect a profound התעוררות, stirring us, awakening us and arousing us to תשובה. Sounding the שופר can lead to our תפילות being answered, and upon 'hearing' the שופר the Al-mighty moves from His position of דין, judgement, to a position of רחמים, mercy. This latter idea is expressed in the תפילה we say seven times before hearing the shofar: למנצח לבני קורח מזמור: "עלה אלקים בתרועה, ה' בקול שופר," ~ "G-d has ascended with a blast; Hashem, with the sound of the שופר." Hashem moves in this פסוק from אלקים, מדת הדין (His attribute of judgement) to ה' (His attribute of mercy), and that transition is effected by the sounding of the shofar.

We can add to this the words of the ספר החינוך, who writes that every person must awaken himself to petition for mercy for his sins from הרחמים, and he continues: "וקול שופר מעורר תרבה לב," ~ "and the sound of the shofar greatly awakens the hearts of all who hear it." (פרשת פינחס, מצוה ת"ה)

The sounding of the shofar, proclaimed Dayan Abraham, and the תשובה that it arouses, is "the seamless, timeless thread of connection from generation to generation," then added, "and women are exempt." It seems from here, the Dayan concluded, that attending to the cry of her child is more powerful to achieve the same ends than to hear תיקיעת שופר. The cry of a child is more powerful, more potent, than the call of the shofar. Yes, if a woman's circumstances enable her to hear the shofar then she should certainly make an effort to do so, but a mother must know that taking care of her family is the clear priority. Moreover, the הלכה recognises the enormous demands that raising a family makes on the mother in particular, and exempts her, releases her, from time-bound positive מצוות for that reason. Our children are the continuity of ישראל, it is a great privilege to be entrusted with their care, and the Torah legislates in a most sensitive way to enable child-rearing to take place unhindered by numerous מצוות that would otherwise place too many demands on a busy mother.

On the same theme, Dayan Abraham often likes to offer the following powerful thought. Imagine a mother davening and a child begins to tug at her dress. She can either feel agitated and frustrated at the unremitting disruption of her תפילה, or she can seize a valuable opportunity to infuse her תפילות with uniquely personal and poignant פניות. It is common, and it is a great סגולה, for people at a ברית מילה to offer important personal prayers as the baby cries, asking that their voices ascend and be heard together with that of the pure, newborn child. The Dayan extends this notion and suggests that the mother in our example complete her תפילות, if she can, but enrich them with thoughts relating to her predicament. The very fact that she is being distracted can enable her to enhance her בונה: "Please, Hashem, I'm trying so hard to concentrate, but this child that You gave me is distracting my attention. Thank You for our children. Please help us to raise them well, בדרך התורה."

Dayan Abraham wanted to point out that a "Shulchan Aruch wide" מחלוקת over whether women should say ברכות on performing מצוות עשה שהזמן גרמא is evident in תקפ"ט. The ש"ע rules that women should not say ברכה on hearing the shofar and a ברכה should not be made on a woman's behalf. The רמ"א, however, states that the מנהג is that women do say ברכות on מצוות עשה שהזמן גרמא and therefore a woman should recite a ברכה for herself on hearing the shofar. The Dayan noted that this opinion of the רמ"א is the predominant custom amongst Ashkenazic Jewry, and is based on the notion that the word 'וצונו' ~ 'and commanded us' ~ can be understood as referring to כלל ישראל in general, rather than to women in particular.

On an entirely different note, Dayan Abraham cited a beautiful and profound משך חכמה that explains away any difficulty we might express regarding the absence of תיקיעת שופר. How can a concern that a person might carry his shofar through the street on שבת deprive us of all the great powers and benefits of this great מצוה? The משך חכמה explains that, in fact, the message of shofar is actually reinforced by not blowing it on שבת. Normally, our challenge to the שטן is our willingness to put our life on the line, and the very future of our People, in order to serve ה', as demonstrated by יצחק אבינו and אברהם אבינו and as symbolized by שטן's gibes is our willingness to put aside this great מצוה in honour of the sanctity of שבת. We put away the זכות of the עקדה and make ourselves vulnerable, because, in truth, קדושת שבת is the greatest answer to the שטן.

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