The Transformative Power of Ritual:  
Reflections on the Shofar, the Avodah, and Kol Nidrei 

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Rabbi Eliezer Diamond 

The translations below are taken from the revised JPS translation of Tanakh and the Soncino translations of the Bavli and Midrash Rabbah. In some cases I have edited the translations. The translations of the passages from Mishneh Torah and Ritba's commentary are my own. Feel free to use these translations if they can be helpful to you – ED

א. רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ג.

While the obligation to sound the shofar is a scriptural decree, it is [also] meant to be a hint [for those sufficiently attentive to grasp it]. It is, so to speak, declaring, "You who sleep – awake! You who slumber – arise! Examine your actions; return to God in repentance; be mindful of your Creator."...

ב. חידושי הריטב"ה על מסכת ראש השנה דף לא עמוד א.

...As to the Rif’s [=R. Yitzḥak Alfasi] statement, “The blessing for the sounding of the shofar is recited over them”: Our master has not included the wording of this blessing. But we have a tradition received from our master Hai Gaon, the father of the people of Israel, stating that it is “to hear the sound of the shofar”. Two difficulties arise: Why is the wording not “concerning the sounding of the shofar”, as in the case of reading the Megillah, in which the blessing is recited over reading it and not over hearing it read? ... The answers are as follows. In response to the first question: In this case the essence of the mitzvah is hearing the shofar. The Torah’s intention is that one should be motivated to repent as well as seeking to find favor despite God’s stern judgment on this day.
When a ram’s horn is sounded in the town, are the people not alarmed? Can misfortune come to a town if God has not caused it?

The length of the teru’ah is equal to the length of three yebabot. But it has been taught, “The length of the teru’ah is equal to three shebarim” — Abaye said: Here, there is really a difference of opinion. It is written, “It shall be a day of teru’ah unto you” (Num 29:1), and we translate [in Aramaic], “a day of yebaba”, and it is written of the mother of Sisera, “Through the window she peered [wa-leyabāb]” (Jud 5:28). One authority thought that this means drawing a long sigh, and the other that it means uttering short piercing cries.

R. Abbahu prescribed in Caesarea that there should be a teki’ah, three shebarim, a teru’ah, and a teki’ah… If so, the reverse should also be carried out, namely, teki’ah, teru’ah, three shebarim, teki’ah, since perhaps it is [first] wailing and [then] groaning? — Ordinarily when one is in distress, one first groans and then wails.

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R. Joshua opened his discourse with the text, *Happy is the people that know the sound of the blast; they walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance* (Ps. LXXXIX, 16). R. Abbahu interpreted the verse as referring to the five elders who enter for the purpose of prolonging the year. What does the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He leaves His senate on high and, descending, confines His Presence to a narrow space among those below. The Ministering Angels exclaim: 'This Mighty One, this Mighty One! This God, this God! He of whom it is written, *A God in the great council of the holy ones* (ib.), leaves His senators and confines His Presence to a narrow space among those below! Why all this? So that if they err in a matter of law, the Holy One, blessed be He, enlightens their countenance. Hence it is written, 'They walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance.'

R. Josiah said: It is written, 'Happy is the people that know the sound of the blast.' But do not the nations of the world know how to sound the blast? What a host of horns they have! What a host of *bucinae* they have! What a host of trumpets they have! Yet you say, 'Happy is the people that know the sound of the blast!' It can only mean that they know how to win over their Creator with the blast, so that He rises from the Throne of Judgment and goes to the Throne of Mercy; He is filled with compassion towards them and changes for them the Attribute of Justice to the Attribute of Mercy. When? IN THE SEVENTH MONTH.

Now Haman said in his heart (Est. VI, 6). The wicked are (under the control of their heart, as it is stated, *And Esau said in his heart* (Gen. XXVII, 41), *And Jeroboam said in his heart* (I Kings XII, 26). The righteous, however, have their heart under their control; as it is written, *Now Hannah, she spoke upon her heart* (I Sam. I, 13), *And David said to his heart* (ib. XXVII, 1), *But Daniel purposed in his heart* (Dan. I, 8). In this respect they resemble their Creator, as it is stated, *The Lord said to His heart* (Gen. VIII, 21).

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R. Jacob b. Aha said in the name of R. Assi: Were it not for the *ma'amadot* heaven and earth could not endure, as it is said, “And he said: O Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” (Gen 15:8)? Abraham said, “Master of the Universe, should Israel sin before You will You do unto them [as You did] to the generation of the Flood and to the generation of the Dispersion?” [God] replied to him, “No”. He then said to Him, “Master of the Universe, 'Let me know whereby I shall inherit it'.” [God] answered “Take for Me a heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old etc.” (Gen 15:9 ff.). Abraham then continued: “Master of the Universe! This holds good while the Temple remains in being, but when the Temple will no longer be what will become of them?” [God] replied, “I have already long ago provided for them in the Torah the order of sacrifices. Whenever they read it I will deem it as if they had offered them before me and I will grant them pardon for all their iniquities.”

“And as He was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and He repented of his decision” (I Chronicles 21:15). What did He behold? Samuel said: He beheld the ashes of [the ram of] Isaac, as it says, “God will see–the lamb is His” (Exod. 30:16).

“...רבי חנן אמר: אופר
של יתק ראה שנאמר “אלוהים ירא—השה” (בראשית ב: ח).

“...ויעבר ויקרא פניו על“ (שמות ו, רבי חנן אמר:riel המלך שנותעך הקדוש ברךuvo כשלש צבזר, והראה על לمشاه מโหลด.
אמר ל: כל תם שישリアル חוסאי - עריס לפסד הזה, זかれ מתחל.

“And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed [the Thirteen Attributes]” (Exod. 34:6). R. Johanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing. This verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like someone leading prayers in behalf of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him, “Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.”

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