The Shofar at Mt. Sinai: Thoughts on Parashat Yitro, February 6, 2010

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The great Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, taught: There are those who hear the Shofar on Rosh HaShana, and then continue to hear the Shofar every day of the year. But there are those, on an even higher level, who heard the Shofar at the Revelation at Mt. Sinai, and who continue to hear that Shofar every day of their lives.

People hear the Shofar on Rosh HaShana and are supposed to awaken from their spiritual slumber. The Shofar jars them, inspires them to re-evaluate their lives and improve themselves. Most people, though, do not carry the sound of the Shofar with them for too long a time--some have already forgotten about it by the time they return home for lunch! For those who are more spiritually sensitive, the sound of the Shofar continues to inspire them every day of the year. When they feel themselves falling into a spiritual rut, when they feel that they're losing their spiritual direction--they hear the Shofar within their minds. It challenges them to re-energize themselves, to refocus on their goals. The inner Shofar keeps them alert.

According to rabbinic tradition, the souls of all Jews and all who would convert to Judaism were present at the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. When God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, we all heard the sounds of the Shofar and we experienced the lightning and the thunder. The Shofar at Mt. Sinai was a call to us to become a holy nation, a righteous people, a light unto humanity. Most people forget about the sound of the Sinaitic Shofar--they become involved in the day to day struggles of life and don't hear that eternal Shofar calling to them. But there are spiritually gifted people who do hear that Shofar every day of their lives. The Shofar reminds them: God is calling, the teachings of the Torah are calling, be alert, be spiritually alive.

That inner Shofar shakes us from our slumber. It challenges to live in the context of God and Torah--to deepen ourselves religiously, to act with righteousness and courage. To hear that Sinaitic Shofar every day of our lives is a unique gift that imbues life with profundity and meaning.

When the Torah records the Ten Commandments, the verses are presented in the singular form. God addressed Himself to each Israelite individually. We are each supposed to hear God's voice as though it were addressed specifically and directly to us. It is a personal challenge and privilege.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev was teaching us that the sound of the Shofar also needs to be taken personally by each of us. We need to tune in to that inner Shofar, and carry it with us each day of our lives. We need to rise to that spiritual level in which our relationship with the Almighty is ever-present and ever-dynamic. The Sinaitic Shofar that we hear each day inspires us to do that which is right and that which is good in the eyes of God and humanity.

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