

The Shofar of Sinai

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The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

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Before the Shekhina (Divine Presence) descends on Har Sinai, God commands Moshe to mark off the mountain and to sanctify it, in order that no person or animal will be on the mountain at the time when the Shekhina descends:

"And you shall set bounds to the nation around saying: Guard yourselves lest you go up on the mountain or touch its edge; anyone who touches the mountain will surely die. Do not lay a hand on it for he shall surely be stoned or thrown; whether an animal or a man - he shall not live. When the horn ('yovel') sounds long, they shall ascend the mountain."
(Shemot 19:12-13)

Strangely enough, together with the repeated emphasis on setting bounds around the mountain and the prohibition of touching it, God simultaneously tells Moshe that when the "yovel" sounds, the people may ascend. This command begs clarification. All medieval commentators understand "yovel" to mean the sounding of a shofar. Rashi, for example, says: "The yovel - this is the shofar (made out) of a ram's horn. For in Arabia, a ram is called yovel" (Rashi ad loc., following the line taken by the gemara in Rosh Ha-shana 26a). The Ibn Ezra goes even further, claiming that the Yovel year (the 50th - Jubilee - year which follows seven cycles of Shemitta) is called "yovel" BECAUSE OF the shofar which is sounded (on Yom Kippur) to signify the special status of that year. The same idea arises from the only other place where the expression "when the yovel sounds" appears - in the first war fought by Yehoshua and the nation upon their entry into the land, at Yericho: "... when they make a long blast with the horn of yovel, when you hear the sound of the shofar ..." (Yehoshua 6:5).

The problem with God's command concerning the shofar blast relates first and foremost to its content. Which shofar blast is being referred to here?

During the giving of the Torah, we indeed hear the shofar growing stronger and louder:

"And it happened on the third day in the morning, there was thundering and lightning and a heavy cloud upon the mountain, and THE SOUND OF A SHOFAR WAS VERY LOUD, and the whole nation in the camp trembled ... and the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder."

Throughout this shofar blast, which is becoming increasingly louder and stronger, the Shekhina is upon the mountain. If during this time it is forbidden for the people to ascend the mountain - or even to touch its very edge - then how are we to understand God's words, "When the shofar sounds long, they shall ascend the mountain?"

In light of this problem, the Rashbam (together with the Bekhor Shor and the Chizkuni) interprets the "when the shofar sounds long" (bi-meshokh ha-yovel) as referring to when the blast ends; i.e., when the shofar ceases to be heard. Then and only then will it be permissible to ascend the mountain. This interpretation makes perfect sense in our context, since Moshe is commanded to set bounds for as long as the Shekhina is upon the mountain. The clearest demarcation of this period is the sound of the shofar while the Shekhina descends. The bounds are obviously in force until the "sounding of the shofar" ends - i.e., until the Shekhina departs.

The problem with this explanation lies in the syntax. As mentioned above, the expression "when the shofar sounds long" appears in one other place in Tanakh - in the battle of Yericho. The context there is quite unequivocal:

"And it shall be that when they make a long blast with the horn of yovel (bi-meshokh be-keren ha-yovel), when you hear the sound of the shofar, all the people will shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall straight down, and the people shall ascend, each person walking straight ahead."

It is very difficult to apply the interpretation of the Rashbam to this verse, since "when they make a long blast with the horn" is parallel to "when you hear the sound of the shofar." If the expression "bi-meshokh ha-yovel" indeed hints at the end of the blast, how can we then maintain that at that time the nation "hears the sound of the shofar?" According to the interpretation of the Rashbam, exactly the opposite would be true.

A different line of interpretation is to be found in the gemara (see Ta'anit 21b, Beitza 5b) and is followed by Rav Sa'adia Gaon, Rashi and the Ibn Ezra. The Ibn Ezra expresses the idea as follows:

"The Gaon states: When Moshe sounds the shofar then they will be permitted to ascend. And this was after Moshe descended from the mountain, on Yom Kippur, and commanded that the mishkan be built."

According to this explanation, the words "when the shofar sounds long" refer to a later shofar blast sounded by Moshe. The shofar blast which indicates permission to ascend the mountain is not the increasingly strong and loud blast of the Divine Revelation, but rather the shofar blast which Moshe will sound when he descends the mountain on Yom Kippur. This blast will indicate that the mountain's special status of holiness has departed.

A textual search for this latter shofar blast, however, leaves us empty-handed. We read of no such blast sounded by Moshe indicating the cessation of the bounds around the mountain. If in the exalted moments just prior to matan Torah we are specifically told this detail regarding the sounding of the shofar, it is certainly reasonable to expect that it will be duly mentioned when it eventually takes place.

Moreover, after reading about the expected "long blast on the shofar" we immediately go on to read about the shofar blast which signifies the descent of the Shekhina upon the mountain. Can we possibly ignore this juxtaposition, contenting ourselves with the assumption that there was another shofar blast - with exactly the opposite aim of the one mentioned explicitly in the parasha?

The juxtaposition of the two references to a shofar leads the Rashbam to find a connection between them, but this forces him to abandon the simple and most obvious interpretation of the expression "long blast" in order to make sense of the context. I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation which adopts the connection drawn by the Rashbam but nevertheless retains the literal meaning of the expression just as we encounter it in Sefer Yehoshua.

In the battle of Yericho, the long blast of the shofar was a sign to the entire nation that they were to enter the city and destroy it. Just prior to the battle we read of a strange encounter between Yehoshua and the angel:

"And it happened when Yehoshua was in Yericho that he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, a man stood facing him and his sword was drawn in his hand. And Yehoshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you with us or with the enemy?' And he said, 'No, for I am a captain of God's host now come.' And Yehoshua fell upon his face on the ground and prostrated himself, and he said to him: 'What does my lord say to his servant?' And the captain of God's host said to Yehoshua, 'Remove your shoe from your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.' And Yehoshua did so." (Yehoshua 5:13-15)

This strange encounter is immediately followed by the battle of Yericho and the great miracle of the walls collapsing. Yehoshua's encounter with the angel - especially in light of the language which the Tanakh uses - is highly reminiscent of Moshe's experience at the burning bush, where he is told - in exactly the same words as Yehoshua - to "Remove your shoe from your foot, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Shemot 3:5).

Why does the site of God's revelation in the burning bush merit the lofty appellation "holy ground," to the extent that Moshe must remove his shoes? The explanation is to be found earlier in the text: Moshe arrives with the flock in his care at "this mountain of God" (3:12). In other words, God's revelation to Moshe in the bush is at the same site where He later reveals Himself to the entire nation at Sinai. And because the Shekhina is destined to dwell upon this mountain at some point in the future, the site is already defined as "holy ground."

In light of the parallel language, it would appear that in a certain sense Yericho, too, functions as the site of a future Divine revelation. The form which the revelation takes is certainly different from that which we find at Sinai: in the words of the angel himself, "I am a captain of God's host" - this revelation is bound up with armies and war, and "a sword was drawn in his hand." Nevertheless, this still represents some type of revelation, and the angel therefore tells Yehoshua to remove his shoes since he is standing on a holy place - a place where the Shekhina is going to be revealed.

The revelation of the Shekhina in the battle of Yericho is obviously related to the miraculous nature of that battle - the first war fought by Israel immediately after their entry into the land. The Shekhina, which plays an active role in this battle, comes to teach the nation that even though the conquest and settlement of Eretz Yisrael will be accomplished by natural means unlike life in the desert (when the manna descended from the heavens and when Moshe's arms raised heavenward brought them victory against Amalek), God continues to personally accompany and guide the nation, to guard over them and to take care of their safety and success.

In order that the Shekhina would in fact be revealed in Yericho and prevail over Israel's enemies, there was a need to sound the shofar, just as the Shekhina descended on Har Sinai amidst shofar blasts. For this very reason it was forbidden to take of the spoils of Yericho, for the contents of the city were "consecrated" to God!

The war of Yericho deserves scrutiny in its own right, but this lies far beyond the scope of this shiur. I merely wish to draw a parallel between the meaning of the expression which appears only in these two places. In other words, just as the nation was commanded that when they heard the sound of the shofar they were to ascend and enter Yericho, the seat of Shekhina, the same applied at Har Sinai: the function of the long shofar blast was to signify to the nation that they were to ASCEND THE MOUNTAIN AND MEET GOD, whose Presence was already there!

True, at first, while God's Presence was descending onto the mountain, all contact with the mountain was to be avoided and it was to be cordoned off and sanctified - just as for seven days the nation was to walk around the city of Yericho but not to enter it. "When the shofar sounds long they shall ascend the mountain" - at the moment when the nation hears the shofar blast, it is a sign that God is already upon the mountain, and they are now to ascend, to hear His words and to receive the Torah. This parallels exactly what they did in Yericho when they heard the long shofar blast.

If this thesis is correct, why did the nation not in fact ascend the mountain and make a covenant with God "face to face?"

The explanation given for this is quite explicit:

"And the whole nation saw the sounds and the lightning and the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain, and the nation was afraid and they were shaken, and stood far off. And they said to Moshe, 'You speak with us and we shall hear; let God not speak with us lest we die.' And Moshe said to the nation, 'Do not be afraid, for God has come in order to test you and in order that the fear of Him be upon your faces, in order that you will not sin.' And the nation stood far off, and Moshe approached the cloud where God was."

The nation is fearful of the shofar blasts and the fire, and therefore they move away from the site. At the same time they ask Moshe to intercede between God and themselves. The clear assumption underlying this description is that originally the intention had been for the nation to approach the mountain and God's Presence and to hear God's words directly, despite the lightning and the fire. In other words, during the long blast of the shofar the nation was indeed supposed to ascend the mountain and hear God's words directly, but because of their fright at the loud noise and great fire, Moshe alone ended up ascending alone to "the cloud where God was."

God regarded this fear in a positive light: "In order that His fear be upon your faces, so that you will not sin." But clearly there is also some danger that because the intended encounter between the entire nation and God never took place, there is a certain lack of clarity with regard to the source of the Torah. Ultimately, the nation hears Moshe and not God Himself. Therefore, immediately following the explanation of why the nation failed to ascend the mountain, as was originally intended, God emphasizes:

"And God said to Moshe: So shall you say to the children of Israel, 'You have seen that I have spoken to you from the heavens. Do not make with me gods of silver, and do not make yourselves gods of gold.'"

This danger arises particularly because of the lack of direct encounter between the nation and God atop Har Sinai, and therefore it is repeated in this context, despite the explicit prohibition of creating a likeness which has already appeared in the Ten Commandments. Without becoming involved in a detailed analysis of the episode of the golden calf, it is important to note that this is specifically the sin which the nation now commits. As Moshe himself defines it: "This nation has sinned a great sin and they have made for themselves GODS OF GOLD." Perhaps if the unmediated encounter had in fact taken place, this sin would never have been committed.

This explanation views God's words, "when the shofar sounds long they shall ascend the mountain" as an actual instruction, rather than just permission for anyone who is interested in doing so. It is indeed a surprising interpretation, but it would appear that this is how Moshe himself understands it. This is the impression that we receive from Moshe's words at the end of Sefer Devarim (5:1-5):

"And Moshe called to all of Israel and said to them, Hear O Israel the statutes and the judgments which I speak in your ears today, and you shall study them and you shall guard them to fulfill them. The Lord our God sealed a covenant with us at Chorev. It was not with our fathers that God made this covenant but rather with us; we who are here today, all living. Face to face God spoke with you on the mountain from amidst the fire. I stood between God and you at that time, to tell you God's words, for you were fearful of the fire and DID NOT ASCEND THE MOUNTAIN."

These words serve as the introduction to the reiteration of the Ten Commandments, i.e., the content of the covenant which the nation made with God. Before mentioning the content of the covenant Moshe speaks about the setting in which it was made, and emphasizes that "face to face God spoke with you." As becomes immediately apparent, this is a general statement describing the experience of the entire nation, which by force of circumstance ended up being realized in a slightly different way: "I stood between God and you." Now Moshe declares more explicitly that the fact of his serving as intermediary was a result of the nation's fear: "For you were fearful of the fire and did not ascend the mountain."

The nation ideally was supposed to ascend the mountain ("When the shofar sounds long they shall ascend the mountain"), but because of their fear Moshe was forced to serve as the intermediary between the two parties to the covenant. Sefer Devarim, too, appears to view the nation's fear of ascent in a positive light and as something which should be preserved: "If only they would have this heart to fear Me and to keep all My commandments always!" (5:26). But alongside the educational value of the great fear, there is of course the price which had to be paid, and ultimately Am Yisrael never underwent the collective experience of a direct encounter with the Shekhina. Rather, the revelation was experienced through an intermediary - Moshe.

We can only imagine what our Jewish religious consciousness would have been like had it based on ascent to the mountain and a direct meeting with the Shekhina, without any intermediary transmiGod's words.

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