

# **Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

*Parashat Behar, Leviticus, Chapters 25-26*

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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## **Picart's Picture and the Nature of Freedom**

We begin today with an image, one which appeared in a remarkable publication. In the 1720s, a very open-minded non-Jewish engraver by the name of Bernard Picart co-published one of the most fascinating books in the history of the West. Written in French and published in Amsterdam, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World* included a series of illustrations by Picart which allowed Europeans to learn about faiths about which they knew little.

It was one of the first books to introduce non-Christian religions as a subject of interest rather than suspicion or hostility, and reflected Amsterdam's new status as a beacon of religious liberty. Many of the engraved images published in the book were depictions of faiths around the world that Picart had never seen, and were created based on eyewitness accounts, but Judaism was a religion with which he was intimately aware, because it was precisely in Amsterdam that Judaism had once again begun to flourish in Western Europe. Picart thus gives us a snapshot of what life may have looked like among some of Amsterdam's Jews.

Of course, there had been other artists in Amsterdam, such as Rembrandt, who had created sympathetic portraits of the local Jews. But those were paintings, which were owned by the buyer alone, and usually highlighted, as Rembrandt did in all his genius, the inner spirit of the individual being painted. Picart, in contrast, through the printing of this book, was able to distribute images of Jewish observance throughout Europe. That means that in a continent suffused with anti-Semitism, Picart gave Europeans pictures of Judaism as a living, vibrant faith. And for his depiction of Rosh Hashanah, Picart has given us an etching of the grand Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam during one of the most awe-inspiring rituals of the year (right).



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Let us set the scene. Picart has captured here the first moment in which the shofar is sounded on the new year. The *ba'al t'kiyah*, the one vested with the obligation of sounding the shofar, stands atop the podium. In front of him, also standing, we see the *hakham*, the spiritual leader of the congregation. Everyone else is seated as the blasts suffuse the synagogue; on the side of the *teibah*, an elevated platform known to Ashkenazim as a *bimah*, we are allowed to see them in their chairs.

This may seem an utterly unremarkable depiction, and yet it is actually fascinating, and tells a great deal. The Talmud ordained that the shofar should be sounded in synagogue on Rosh Hashanah in two separate sessions: first, preceding the *musaf* prayer, without any intervention from the cantor, and then later during the *musaf* prayer itself, with the sound of the shofar partnering with the prayer. The Talmud names these two sets of blasts “*t'kiot di-m'yushav*” and “*t'kiot di-m'umad*,” the sitting shofar blasts and the standing shofar blasts. In other words, the Talmud explained that the first 30 blasts would be heard while the congregation was seated, and the rest while the congregation was standing.

Nowadays, in most synagogues, including the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York, the entire congregation rises as one for the first set of blasts, so that no one is ever seated during the shofar ceremony. But what Picart is quite literally illustrating for us is that in Amsterdam in the late 17th and early 18th century, Jews would sit for the first set of blasts, and stand only for the second, as the Talmud seems to prescribe. Thus, this image appears to show the *t'kiot d-m'yushav*, the first set of blasts. Afterwards, the congregants would rise to recite the *musaf* prayer, during which the second series of blasts would be blown.

As we study this etching, we notice what may seem to be an artistic incongruity. If we look to the man who is sitting at the side as the shofar's *t'kiot* reverberate, we see that he appears, incongruously, to be slumbering.



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There is, in other words, a profound irony at the heart of this picture. He is situated at the center of the synagogue on this day of days. A great and awesome sound reverberates, and yet he sleepily slouches. Once we see this, we note as well that behind him, others stand slumped over.

This is not an artistic error. Picart has somehow grasped how the shofar is meant both to symbolize and to engender a process of transformation within us, from slumber to wakefulness. And we consider this ancient instrument as we ponder our *parashah*, which features a particular prominent description of all that this biblical horn is intended to represent.

*Behar* begins by describing the ritual cycle of Israelite agriculture, according to which the land is worked for six years, and all work in the field ceases in the seventh. It is on these passages that we will focus, addressing other details of the reading in our discussion of next week's *parashah* of *Bechukotai*, which most years is read together with this one. *Behar* begins:

Six years shalt thou sow thy field, and six years shalt thou prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof;

But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. (Leviticus 25:3-4)

As we discussed in Bible 365, the “Sabbath” described here is akin to the weekly Sabbath—every seventh year in the Holy Land all agricultural labor is forbidden. It is a reminder of creation, and of the Almighty’s absolute ownership of the land. Seven cycles of these seven years take place and then, in the 50th year, a Jubilee occurs, during which all indentured servants are freed, and Israelites who had sold their ancestral lands return to them:

And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. (Leviticus 25:10)

It was not by word of mouth or the ringing of a bell that liberty was proclaimed. Instead, a shofar takes central stage:

Then shalt thou cause the shofar of the jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the day of atonement shall ye make the shofar sound throughout all your land. (Leviticus 25:9)

It was through the sounding of the shofar on the Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year that liberty was proclaimed. The Hebrew word for Jubilee, “*yovel*,” itself means “horn,” indicating that the cry of this ancient instrument somehow itself summons us to freedom. It is specifically on Yom Kippur of the 50th year that freedom is declared, specifically on the Day of Atonement that the shofar is sounded, somehow indicating that liberty and repentance go hand in hand, that achieving our spiritual potential is bound up with freedom.

But what does the shofar teach us?



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Though many communities now stand for the entirety of the shofar ritual, perhaps the rabbis ordained originally that the shofar be heard sitting, and then suddenly standing, to include the audience in a symbolic enactment of the shofar's purpose. Sitting, slumped over, somnolent—that is the way we are throughout much of our lives. Then, after we have allowed the sounds that echo throughout the generations to wash over us, suddenly we are transformed, and then, in the next set of shofar blasts, we rise, we stand at attention—suddenly exquisitely aware of our moral capacity. As the shofar begins to sound at first, we are spiritually asleep; but suddenly we rise, responding to the call of God to discover our inner selves. Picart, in other words, has given us a visual representation of what Maimonides has written:

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that forget the truth because of the vanities of the times, who err all of their years by pursuing vanity and idleness, . . . let each one of you abandon his evil path and his thought which is not pure!"

The shofar, for Maimonides, is a wake-up call, an alarm. What he means by being asleep is that we are often ignorant of our true worth, of our true capacity that God has bequeathed to us to make our mark upon the world. This spiritual slumber is the source of moral inadequacy. But the correct response is not despair, nor a mere acknowledgement and embrace of our ineptitude; it is just the opposite. If our failures are compared to sleep, then the solution is waking up, approaching our own selves with a renewed appreciation, and life with an inspired alacrity, driven by the knowledge of the moral and spiritual worth with which every human being is endowed.

Rightly understood, this is part of what we celebrate on the New Year. Rosh Hashanah is observed, according to the Talmud, as the anniversary of the creation of the world, and in particular the creation of man in the image of God. But what does it mean to be created in God's image? As Rabbi Obadiah Sforno explains, unlike the rest of creation, unlike animal or angel,

man alone is akin to the Almighty, for he is able to choose the course he takes. He is granted free will.

It is our own sudden sensitivity to our freedom that is the essence of waking up—we become suddenly aware of the essence of our humanity. In showing some worshipping Jews asleep as the blasts begin, Picart has captured the larger purpose of the shofar itself—to wake us up, reminding us that we have a choice. We can choose to live freely or to act as automatons, to allow the zeitgeist to control our every hour. The Talmud, in a striking image, states that we would once sit for the sounding of the shofar and then suddenly stand, "in order to confuse the Satan." What this might mean is that throughout the year, and even at the beginning of the shofar ritual, we sit passively, seemingly unappreciative of our freedom. We are apparently undeserving of a merciful judgment. But

Notwithstanding that the blowing of the ram's horn trumpet on Rosh Hashanah is a Scriptural statute, its blast is symbolic, as if saying: "Ye that sleep, bestir yourselves from your sleep, and ye slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator! They



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then, when those who accuse us may least expect it, we abruptly rise, and let loose another series of shofar blasts, all of a sudden awake to our potential.

Thus to return to Picart's picture is to be reminded that throughout life we often act like objects, like the man who sits slumped as the shofar sounds; but the goal is to allow the wake-up call of God to inspire us to change how we see ourselves, so that we live life not like the slumberer, but like those who stand ramrod straight, so that we *live* life.

We are now able to understand how Rosh Hashanah's shofar call to repentance is not dissimilar from the shofar proclaiming liberty on the Yom Kippur Jubilee. Indeed, according to some, the shofar sounded every year at the conclusion of Yom Kippur is a remembrance of this Jubilee call of freedom. The shofar of the 50th year, the shofar of liberty, also seeks to wake us up, to inspire a fuller appreciation of the freedom, the capacity, the image of God that lies within us. But unlike Rosh Hashanah, in the Jubilee year, the wake-up call is not only directed toward each individual, but also to society. The shofar on Rosh Hashanah wakes up each person to think about how he sees himself; the shofar of the Jubilee is meant to shape how members of society see, and treat, each other: "proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof . . ."

It is with this in mind that we can understand the significance of the fact that the word used here by the Torah for "liberty" is unique; whereas the standard biblical term for "free" is "*hofshi*," here the Hebrew word rendered "freedom" is "*d'ror*." This word also appears in the Torah in an entirely different context. One of the ingredients of the incense is described as "*mor d'ror*," "myrrh that is pure." As Moses Nahmanides explains, myrrh was often sold in a low-quality form, with other ingredients mixed in, and the Torah obligates us to ensure that the myrrh in the incense not be counterfeit. In a similar sense, he writes, liberty in the Torah refers to the freedom to become whom we are called to be:

It therefore states "myrrh that is *d'ror*," meaning that it should be free from fraud, for it is often counterfeited. And it would seem that the word *d'ror* refers to *n'kiyut* [purity], and similarly "You shall proclaim *d'ror* throughout the land."

Genuine freedom, in other words, is becoming whom God has called us to be; if we remain stuck in spiritual somnambulism, we become counterfeit versions of ourselves. It is in our understanding of ourselves as created in the image of God that genuine freedom begins.

This notion was particularly important to some of the American founders, and it helps explain their refusal to see the revolution in France as morally equivalent to their own American one. John Adams believed in the universality of human rights, and celebrated the proclamation of liberty everywhere; but he believed that since

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revolutionary France had installed a strict secularism, lacking the notion of human beings as created in the image of God, what would result was lawlessness and immorality:

Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this all is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in describing the contrast between these two revolutions, put it this way:

There have been four revolutions in the West in modern times: the British and American, and the French and Russian. In Britain and America the source of inspiration was the Hebrew Bible. In France and Russia it was the great alternative to the Bible, namely philosophy. The theorist of the French Revolution was Jean-Jacques Rousseau; of the Russian, Karl Marx. The contrast between them is vivid. Britain and America succeeded in creating a free society, not without civil war, but at least without tyranny and terror. The French and Russian revolutions began with a dream of utopia and ended with a nightmare of bloodshed and the suppression of human rights. . . .

Why did Britain and America succeed where France and Russia failed? The explanation is surely complex but much—perhaps all—turns on how a society answers this question: who is the ultimate sovereign, God or man? The British and Americans gave the first answer, the French and Russian revolutionaries the second. For the British and American architects of liberty, God was the supreme power. All authority was therefore subject to the transcendental demands of the moral law. . . . [W]hen human beings arrogate supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom. . . . Societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man.

In Amsterdam, a beacon of liberty, Picart gives us an image of the shofar, the original instrument of proclaiming liberty. And in the complexity of his art, he allows us to understand what liberty is all about.

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