

"Halacha Sources" Highlights - Starting Shofar-Blowing in Elul

Question: Exactly when should the blowing of the shofar begin, in the month of Elul?

Answer: The basic approach to this can be divided into three steps:

- (1) the relationship between our shofar-blowing and "the first Elul in the desert",
- (2) fine points regarding the calendar dates of "the first Elul in the desert",
- (3) applying the above to the question of when to start blowing

Part 1: The Relationship Between Our Shofar-Blowing and "The First Elul of the Jews in the Desert"

Of course, the Torah-mandated Mitzvah to blow shofar is not until *Rosh HaShanah* itself. Still, the authorities discuss an earlier shofar-blowing, based on the following Midrash (*Pirkei d'R' Eliezer* 45):

[During the Jews' first year in the desert,] they received the [Ten] Commandments on the sixth of the month [of Sivan], [and then] Moshe forty days on the mountain studying, [and then] on the seventeenth of [the month of] Tammuz he came down and broke the Tablets. [Forty days later] on Rosh Chodesh Elul, HaKadosh Baruch Hu said to him "Come up to Me on the mountain" (Devarim 10:1), and an [announcement through blowing] shofar was spread throughout the camp, [saying] that "Moshe has gone up on the mountain!" - so that they would not be [led] astray after strange worship [once] again, and [the honor of] HaKadosh Baruch Hu was uplifted through that shofar [blowing], as it says (Tehillim 47:6) "G-d rises up at [the blowing of] the shofar." Accordingly, the Sages instituted that shofar be blown each and every year on Rosh Chodesh Elul [the authorities' text - unlike ours which says "Tishrei" (from here on are the words of the Tur and the Rosh - possibly their text to the Midrash itself)] and [throughout] the entire month, in order to urge Israel that they do teshuvah [i.e. "return to Hashem" (repent)], as it says (Amos 3:6), "If a shofar shall be blown in a city [can it be that the inhabitants will not be shaken?], and in order to confuse the Satan [i.e. angel of Heavenly prosecution].

The above-cited Rosh [*Rabbeinu Asher ben Yechiel*, Germany and Spain, ~1250 - 1327, rulings at the end of tractate *Rosh HaShanah*] concludes: "[Indeed,] it is the Ashkenazi *minhag* to blow [shofar] throughout the month of Elul, morning and evening, after the prayer [services]." [The above-cited Tur (*Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher*, Spain, ~1280 - ~1345) is in *Orach Chayim* 581 (as are all Tur-order-based sources cited below, unless otherwise indicated).] The *Rema* (*se'if* 1) brings a variation - blowing only after *Shacharis* - and this is what the *Mishnah Berurah* (n3) confirms [as the accepted *minhag*].

Part 2: Fine Points Regarding the Calendar Dates of "The First Elul of the Jews in the Desert"

In the above parallel, between our shofar-blowing starting *Rosh Chodesh Elul* (and throughout the month) and the corresponding "awakening" of "the first Elul of the Jews in the desert", the focus is clearly on when to *start*. As for when to finish, in the desert the "awakening" presumably continued until the tenth of Tishrei, when Moshe came down with the second Tablets and Hashem's forgiveness (and which we were subsequently commanded to observe as *Yom Kippur*). We, on the other hand, blow shofar only in the month of Elul. [It seems that once *Rosh HaShanah* has been observed, no more shofar-blowing is called for.] The above-cited Midrash notes the timing of Moshe's coming down, pointing out that this was after being on the mountain for forty days *again* (as explicit in *Sh'mos* 34:28 and *Devarim* 10:10) [i.e. a *third* set of forty days].

The *Magen Avraham* [R. Avraham HaLevi (Avli) Gombiner, Poland, ~1637 - 1683, n2] points out that there are only two ways that something beginning on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and ending on the tenth of Tishrei can extend over forty days: (1) The month of Elul can be a full thirty days long. However, that is not normally the case. Therefore, the more straightforward understanding would be (2) that the forty days must begin on the thirtieth day of Av, *which we call "the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul"*. The *Magen Avraham* says that the Tosafos in *Bava Kamma* (82a, beginning "*keday*") nevertheless comes to the "nonstraightforward" conclusion that the original forty days in the desert began on the first of Elul (i.e. what we call "the second day of Rosh Chodesh"), and that year Elul indeed extended a full thirty days.

[Parenthetically: The Tosafos comes to this "nonstraightforward" conclusion because the *Midrash Tanchuma* says that the *second* set of forty days began on the *nineteenth* of Tammuz, so the day on which *that* forty days ends - i.e. the day *before* Moshe went up to get the second Tablets - was *itself* the last day of AV (how this calculation works is not spelled out by the Tosafos). The Tosafos noted earlier however, that according to *both* of the above-mentioned approaches, Moshe was on the mountain forty days and *thirty-nine nights*; therefore, the above-cited *pesukim* which refer to *forty* nights must actually refer to the second set of forty days, unless we were to *combine* the two approaches and say that Elul was thirty days **and** Moshe went up on the thirtieth of Av (which the Tosafos finally rejects because of the *Midrash Tanchuma*, as mentioned).]

Part 3: Applying the Above to the Question of Exactly When to Start Blowing Shofar

The *Magen Avraham* brings authorities who say that based on the above-mentioned "straightforward" approach, we should begin blowing shofar on the **first** day of *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, corresponding to the timing of the shofar-blowing in the desert. He then brings an explanation for having a *minhag* to the contrary: the intent could be to have [the round number of] *thirty days* of shofar blowing, *counting both days of Rosh HaShanah* (i.e. in addition to the first twenty-eight days of Elul - for we do not blow on the last day [not our subject]). [It seems this must mean thirty *calendar dates* on which we *theroretically* blow shofar - whichever of those dates do not fall on Shabbos, that is.]

However, the *Magen Avraham* says that his *own* preferred explanation of a *minhag* to start blowing on "the second day of *Rosh Chodesh*" (i.e. the first of Elul) would be based on the above-mentioned "nonstraightforward" approach of the Tosafos in *Bava Kamma* (that *in that year in the desert*, Elul was thirty days long). The *Mishnah Berurah* ⁽ⁿ³⁾ implies that this is the *minhag* "slightly more accepted" by the Halacha.

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