



Z-mail

by Rabbi Dovid Zauderer

Z-mail Rosh Hashanah Issue

Rabbi Dovid Zauderer

THE SHOFAR AND THE CHAUFFEUR

A well-to-do American Jew who had spent many years in a small town, moved to the city and was made chairman of the Ritual Committee of a large synagogue. Before the High Holidays, it was his duty to engage a cantor. When the transaction was completed, the cantor inquired, "How about a Shofar?" "Look Mister, you may be a great cantor, but don't put on airs with me," snapped the new chairman. "If I, a rich man, can drive my own car, then so can you -- and without a chauffeur!"

That might be a cute joke, but when you think about it, the connection between the *shofar* and the *chauffeur* has a lot of truth to it. For many, if not most, North American Jews attending High Holiday Services this year, the ram's horn that is blown in the synagogue is quite like that tuxedoed fellow sitting in the front seat of the limousine.

You see, we hire a chauffeur so that he can do the driving for us while we sit back and relax. And, in much the same way, we go to *shul* on the High Holidays and let the cantor blow the *shofar* and chant the prayers for us, and the rabbi preach to us, while we sit back in our seats and just take it all in. The High Holiday services have become a *spectator sport*.

But that's not the way it is supposed to be. The cantor is referred to in Hebrew as the *Shaliach Tzibbur*, the "Representative of the Community". Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment – a day when each and every one of us stands in front of G-d in judgment, pleading for our very lives.

The cantor is no more than a "lawyer" of sorts, representing us in the Great Court – but surely, when our future is hanging in the balance, we are not going to rely on the lawyer to win our case. We need to do most of the work ourselves, to ensure that the Judge sees us in a favorable light.

The purpose of the *shofar* being blown in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah is to be a *wake-up call* to all of us that the Judge of all Judges has entered the courtroom and that we had better get with the program and make positive changes in our lives so that we merit another good year.

Kol Nidrei night at the *shul* might feature a cantor with a voice like Pavarotti, but just remember that he is pleading with G-d *on our behalf* for all the broken promises and commitments that we might have made throughout the past year.

The truth is that this “spectator” position that we have adopted during the High Holiday season has spilled over into the rest of our Jewish ritual involvement throughout the year. We have become “Jews by proxy”, practicing a form of “chauffeur-driven Judaism” where we let others pray, eat kosher, teach our kids about Jewish rituals etc. *for us* while we sit back in our comfortable chairs and relax.

In one of my favorite movie lines of all time, which I heard in the film *Keeping the Faith*, Rabbi "Jake" Schram (played by Ben Stiller), says: “*Jews want their rabbis to be the kind of Jews they don't have the time to be.*” (... and Father Brian Finn (played by Edward Norton) responds: “*Yeah, and Catholics want their priests to be the kind of Catholics they don't have the discipline to be.*”)

Let's make a commitment this year that we will become *active participants* in the High Holiday services (maybe praying with a user-friendly prayer book like the Artscroll *Machzor* would help), and, even more importantly, let's commit to taking a more hands-on role in our own spiritual growth in the coming year through the active study of Torah and a more serious involvement in Judaism. We don't need the rabbi or cantor to be Jewish for us – thank you very much – we can do it ourselves.

May G-d bless all of us with a *Kesivah v'Chasimah Tovah* – may we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life and have a sweet New Year.

GOOD SHABBOS AND SHANAH TOVAH!