

Mysteries of the Shofar

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Introduction

The first time we read about the *Shofar* (שׁוֹפָר) in the Bible was right after the Exodus when the Israelites encamped below Mount Sinai. The *Shofar* is commonly recognized as a ram's horn.ⁱ The Lord instructed the Israelites to wait for the third day when He would come down upon the mountain, and the blast of a *Shofar* would sound before them.

In Leviticus and then again in Numbers, we read about the Feast of Trumpets (in Hebrew is *Yom Teruah*, which means the Day of Blowing).ⁱⁱ The day is more accurately referred to as a "sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts." It is written, "*The first day of the seventh month [the Feast of Trumpets] shall be a sacred holiday to you when you may not do any mundane labor. It shall be a day of Teruah [blowing] for you*" (Numbers 29:1). The Hebrew word, again, used here is *Teruah* (תְּרוּעָה) which translates as "blowing" or "to blow."

In Leviticus, we also read about the *Shofar* of the Jubilee (*Yovel*) to be blown on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). This day came ten days after the Feast of Trumpets.ⁱⁱⁱ Here, specifically, the Lord commanded the blowing of a ram's horn—a *Shofar*.

The word *Shofar* and Jubilee are sometimes used in a combination called the "Horn of Jubilee (*keren ha'yovel*)."^{iv} At other times in scripture, the word Jubilee is synonymous with the *Shofar* and is considered the same.^v

Two Silver Trumpets

In Numbers, we first read about the commandment for the Israelites to make two silver trumpets that were to be used in companion with the *Shofar*.^{vi} The Hebrew word for trumpet is *Chatzo'tza'rote* (חֲצוֹצְרוֹת) plural, and singular is *Chatzo'tzeret*. Unfortunately, there is confusion in the King James translation, which uses the same English word, "trumpet," for both a ram's horn and a silver trumpet. On the other hand, in Hebrew, there is a distinction between the two as they are not the same instrument.

The silver trumpets were blown differently, and used for specific festivals, either in combination or separately with the *Shofar*. As it is written: "*Also in the day of your gladness, in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets (be' chutz'tza'rote) over*

your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be a memorial for you before your God: I am the Lord your God" (Numbers 10:10).

The sons of Aaron, the priests, were instructed to blow the silver trumpets as an everlasting ordinance;^{vii} as it is written, *"When you go to war in your land against the enemy who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets (be' chatzo'tza'rote), and you will be remembered before the Lord your God, and you will be saved from your enemies" (Numbers 10:9).*

The purpose here was to call forth God's army for battle. Shortly after, we read about Israel going to war with the Midianites, and the sons of Aaron blew the silver trumpets (*va'chatzo'tza'rote*).^{viii} Later in scripture, for example, at the walls of Jericho, the priests were commanded to blow a *Shofar* instead of a trumpet. It is written, *"And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets [Shofars]" (Joshua 6:4).*

The Shofar

The *Shofar* is mentioned seventy-two times in the Bible. It is molded and polished from the single horn of a kosher animal. Excluded, however, is the horn of a cow that the Israelites worshiped in the sin of the golden calf. Ironically, the word *Shofar* is derived from the Hebrew words *shor* and *par*, which translate as bull and ox.

The *Shofar* is traditionally made from a ram, a male sheep at least one-year-old. It can also be made from the Bushwack antelope (also called a Kudu). The *Shofar* is carefully hollowed out, sterilized, and bent to its desired shape. The bending symbolizes the human heart, which should be bent before the Lord. The narrow tip is cut and shaped into a mouthpiece. Any cracks or holes in the *Shofar* render it unsuitable. And, no mending with any foreign substances is permitted.

Over time, each Jewish community has developed their style of *Shofar*. Spanish and Sephardic communities and Jewish communities in Poland use either a flat or straight *Shofar* with a low pitch or one bent that develops a very high tone. In North Africa, the Jewish people use a straight *Shofar* with a deep sound. In Holland, a goat horn is traditionally used. And Yemenite Jews use either a ram's horn or the classic long spiral *Shofar* made from a Bushwack antelope or an Ibex that produces a deep trumpet-like sound.

Some *Shofars* are decorated with precious stones or carved with symbols, like the Star of David or Menorah. Christian and Messianic communities have also painted or decorated their shofars with silver. Wetting the inside of the *Shofar* with water can enhance its sound. However, coating the inside with lacquer or urethane can distort the *Shofar's* sound rendering it invalid.^{ix}

Many legends and mysteries surround the small number of *Shofar* makers and their trade secrets. Nowadays, most *Shofars* are produced in Israel. However, the horns themselves are mostly collected in Morocco, Algeria, and countries in southern Africa.

The *Shofar* is one of the world's oldest and supernaturally enchanted instruments of worship in Jewish culture. In the Bible, the *Shofar* is conceived as an instrument used by God Himself. It is a symbol of God and a manifestation of His voice—the *Shofar* of the Messiah.

It invokes an emotion of the soul beyond words to describe, and no human sound is closely comparable. It blows a hole in our hearts with a powerful force that releases a flood of pent up feelings and emotions, opening our souls to the untapped yearning for the presence of God.^x There is simply nothing else like it.

How We Use the Shofar

In Judaism, each blast of a *Shofar* has a unique spiritual impact. The instrument is blown in the upward position, the same as the horn exists in nature.^{xi} One central commandment of the Feast of Trumpets (which is also called *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year) is to hear the blowing of the *Shofar*.

The rabbis teach that Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of creation.^{xii} This day, we proclaim God to be King and Creator of the universe at His coronation ceremony. Therefore, it is customary to stand when the *Shofar* is sounded as we are standing before the King of Kings.^{xiii}

In the Jewish prayers, we read, "*For the Lord Almighty great King of the entire universe... The Lord rose to the sound of Teruah; God to the sound of the Shofar.*" Blowing the *Shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*, therefore, foretells of the coming Kingdom of God.

Our sages set forth two blessings over the *Shofar*, each beginning with: "*Blessed are You, God our Lord, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments...*" You will notice the blessing begins in the second person (us) and concludes in the third person (Him).

Experiencing God's benevolence, we are telling the Lord that we are too small and unworthy to stand before the King and speak to Him. Yet, we are unable to refrain from blessing Him for what He has done for us.^{xiv} In response to hearing these blessings and the blowing of the *Shofar*, we say *Amen*, inferring the same blessing upon us as if we had ourselves recited the prayer and blown the *Shofar*.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, the *Shofar* was used during specific convocations, such as the commencement of Shabbat, the beginning of the months (new moons), and the fiftieth year of Jubilee (*Yovel*). It was used during *Selichot* (which are the two days before *Rosh Hashanah* when we beg for God's forgiveness), and it was blown on certain days of fasting.^{xv}

On the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, when the last *Shofar* blast would sound, the high priest would stand silently at the entrance to the Holy of Holies. He would chant a short prayer as he entered the room in silence, asking God to atone for the people. The connection the high priest must have felt with God at that moment is beyond description. This man represented the entire nation of Israel before the Lord. The reverence he experienced for God reverberated to every Jewish soul, especially those who were present in the Temple with him.^{xvi}

The *Shofar* was also used at other special celebrations, such as the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem,^{xvii} and during Asa's repentance when he removed the idols from the land of Judah and Benjamin.^{xviii} After the Second Temple was destroyed; sadly, the *Shofar* lost much of its significance in the Jewish people's daily lives.

You will notice from the Bible that both the silver trumpets and *Shofar* were blown on these festivals and new moons accordingly, as it is written, "*With trumpets [va'chatzo'tza'rote] and the sound of a horn [Shofar]*" (Psalm 98:6). Each instrument had a particular purpose.

The rabbis explain in the Mishnah (which is the oral commentary on the *Torah*) that on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year), the silver trumpets were blown abruptly, but the *Shofar* was blown for an extended time. Their reasoning is because the *Shofar* was considered to be the timely mitzvah, meaning the commanded blessing.^{xix} This commandment is highlighted in Psalm 81, where it reads, "*Blow the trumpet (Shofar) at the time of the New Moon, At the full moon, on our solemn feast day*" (Psalm 81:4).

On these festivals, one's awe for God was to be greater than one's love for Him. For this reason, the rabbis instruct us: "*The level of Divine pleasure evoked through blowing the Shofar in the Holy Temple – the location where God's essence was manifest – is greater than the pleasure naturally activated on Shabbat. As such, the Shofar is sounded in the Temple even when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.*"^{xx}

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we mark the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance or Days of Awe that lead up to Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. We are warned to repent and turn away from our wicked ways (teshuvah) and seek the King's kindness during this time.^{xxi} Blowing the *Shofar* during these ten days is an integral mystery linked to the Day of the Lord. The sounds reach heaven and create a tangible presence of awe towards God.

The *Shofar* instills a sense of trepidation and fear that should lead us to humble ourselves before God. It is written, "*If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?*" (Amos 3:6). This atmosphere of awe towards God climaxes on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), the culmination of God's judgments and the Day of the Lord.

The Shofar Reminds Us

The sages tell us that on *Rosh Hashanah*, when the Lord hears the call of the *Shofar*, He rises from His throne of justice and sits on His throne of mercy and judges the personal accounts of each man and woman.^{xxii} This time of judgment is called the *Shofar* blast of remembrance (*zich'ron teruah*), as God is reminded of His covenant with Israel.

The *Shofar* reminds us of the revelation of the *Torah* and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (*Matan Torah*), which is celebrated on Shavuot (Pentecost). The Israelites declared to the Lord, "*We shall do and we shall hear!*"

These prayers are recited in the holiday prayers called *Musaf*, which are additional prayers added to the regular service, and are called a sacrifice of prayer. In these prayers, we declare, "*You revealed yourself in the cloud... in sounds and bolts you were revealed before them, and at the sound of Shofar you appeared to them.*" Therefore, the blessing of hearing the *Shofar* is expanded when it is sounded among the congregation; as it is written, "*In a multitude of people is a king's honor*" (*Proverbs 14:28*).

The sound of the *Shofar* rising and falling symbolizes the binding of dark forces, releasing the Jewish people from their bondage. This is called the *Shofar* of redemption. And at the end of the age, the *Shofar* symbolizes the children of Israel being redeemed from the land of Egypt. This great *Shofar* will be blown on the Day of the Lord when He finally delivers the children of Israel from all the earth where He scattered us; as it is written, "*So it shall be in that day: The great trumpet [Shofar] will be blown*" (*Isaiah 27:13*).

The *Shofar* reminds us of our prophets, who warned the people of the judgment to come if we do not repent.^{xxiii} The prophet Ezekiel declared, "*When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet [Shofar] and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head*" (*Ezekiel 33:2-4*).

The *Shofar* reminds us of the walls at Jericho that fell with the blowing of the *Shofar*. And it reminds us of the destruction of Jerusalem, which came under the victorious trumpet blasts of our enemies.

The *Shofar* was a reminder of Abraham's great test of faith (which is called *Yirat Shomayim* in Hebrew) when he prepared to sacrifice his only son Isaac on Mount Moriah.^{xxiv} The rabbis recite, "*Said the Lord, blow to me the horn of a ram, so that I shall remember how Isaac son of Abraham was bound and thus I shall remember them.*"

The *Shofar* reminds us of the Day of the Lord and judgment at the end of this age, the ingathering of the Jewish people to their homeland, the assembling of the Gentiles to Jerusalem on the Feast of Tabernacles, and the resurrection of the dead.^{xxv} As it is written, "*The great day of the Lord is near... A day of trumpet [blowing the Shofar] and alarm against the fortified cities and*

against the high towers" (Zephaniah 1:14 & 16). "All inhabitants of the world and dwellers on the earth: When he lifts up a banner on the mountains, you see it; And when he blows a trumpet, you hear it" (Isaiah 18:3).

In the Jewish prayers, we say, "And a great *Shofar* will sound, and the voice of thin silence shall be heard, and angels shall rush, and awe and fear shall grasp them, and they shall say this is the Day of Judgment..." For it is written, "I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away both man and beast; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea—and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble. When I destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, declares the Lord" (Zephaniah 1:2-3). "See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants" (Isiah 24:1).

Lastly, the *Shofar* confuses *Satan* not effectively to serve as a prosecutor at Israel's Divine judgment. This is so that we merit a merciful ruling from the Lord.^{xxvi} The Lord declared that in the fiftieth year, the *Shofar* of the Jubilee would pronounce Israel's freedom from all her debt and return the captives to the land of their inheritance. As it is written, "Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make the trumpet to sound throughout all your land" (Leviticus 25:9).

This last *Shofar* blast declares God's final atonement for the Jewish people and their land. It is written, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; For He will avenge the blood of His servants, And render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people" (Deuteronomy 32:43).

Sounds of the Shofar

According to the Mishnah, three main musical notes are each blown three times for a total of nine mandatory notes that must be blown with the *Shofar*. These are *Tekiah*, *Teruah*, and *Tekiah*, each repeated three times.^{xxvii}

Three additional notes were added in the fourth century, including *Shevarim*, which sounds like a groaning person. Maimonides (one of our great sages) said: The blowing (*Teruah*) of the *Shofar* is like the howl of a wailing woman or the moan of someone travelling in his heart over something dire.

The rabbis later expounded in the Talmud that a total of thirty blasts are required. And today, the *Shofar* is blown a total of one-hundred times in the following pattern:

1. *Teruah*, consisting of nine short blasts,
2. *Shevarim*, three short blasts, each one taking the same length of time as three blasts of the *Teruah*; and
3. *Tekiah*, a single blast that is the length of the *Teruah* and *Shevarim* combined when those blasts are sounded one after the other.

Ashkenazi Jews produce a staccato rhythm, while the Sephardic Jews produce a wavy tremolo sound. The final blast is the "large" *Tekiah* (*Tekiah Gedolah*), which is three times longer than the *Tekiah*. The words *Tekiah* and *Teruah* share common verbs and gerunds that are used to represent both the silver trumpet and the *Shofar*.

These one-hundred sounds are considered symbolic of the one-hundred and one letters of Sisera's mother, who lamented for her son's return from battle. Sisera had died in battle, and his mother's lament is recorded in Judges. It is called the Song of Deborah.

In the Sephardic communities, an additional *Tekiah* is sounded, totaling one-hundred and one, corresponding with the numerical value of the name "Michael," the guardian angel of Israel who seeks mercy on their behalf.^{xxviii}

The meaning for the word *Teruah* comes from Psalm 2, where it reads, "*You shall break them [in Hebrew, tero'aim] with a rod of iron; you shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*" (Psalm 2:9).

Jewish mystics describe the *Shofar* sounds this way: "*The Teruah blasts are in the [spiritual realms of beauty] sefira of tiferet and break the power of the negative spiritual energies, [the Sitra Achra], breaking them with powerful shattering blasts. These blasts act like an iron rod shattering pottery, and this is why King David chose the word 'teraim,' which shares the same root as 'Teruah,' to describe a shattering action.*"

The Lord says, "*Happy is the nation that knows Teruah (the Shofar blast), they walk in the light of your countenance, God*" (Psalms 89:16), and in Isaiah, we read, "*For when Your judgments are in the earth, The inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*" (Isaiah 26:9).

Notice the emphasis on *knowing*, not blowing, or hearing. Why? Because the rabbis understand the secret of the *Teruah*, as it is written, "*Shatter (in Hebrew, Teraim) them with an iron rod*" (Psalm 2:9).^{xxix} *Teruah* is derived from the root "to break" or "shatter," hence the *Shofar's* broken notes.

The rabbis tell us that *Tekiah* comes from the brain, while *Shevarim* comes from the heart. This is reflected in Psalm 51, where it reads, "*The contrite [in Hebrew, nishbar] spirit is a sacrifice [in Hebrew, zevach] to God; O God, You will not despise a contrite and broken [nishbar] heart*" (Psalm 51:19).

The word *shevarim* means "broken" and is related to the *sefira* of *gevura*, which is God's power to restrict and conceal the light so that His creatures can receive His lovingkindness. And it takes great strength (*gevura*) to break or humble something. In the quoted verse, the same root word, "*shever*," describes the contrite and broken heart. The *Nefesh* (soul) is the raw life force and is represented by the blood. The heart distributes the blood, and so it characterizes the soul (*Nefesh*).

In summary, the sound of *Tekiah* says: We are desperate for God. The sound of *Shevarim* and *Teruah* says: We are brokenhearted over our separation from God. And the final blast of the *Tekiah* is God's response of love, saying, "Return, My children, return. No matter where you roam, you can always come back home."^{xxx}

Atonement

One of the repeated themes of the *Shofar* blast is "atonement." When the heart is broken, as opposed to being full of itself, the light of the Divine can enter. The *Shevarim* blasts of the *Shofar* represent the breaking of pride in our hearts before the Creator. This diminishes our consciousness, called *bina*, and is derived from the Hebrew word for understanding.

Bina, in turn, relates to the heart and is the state where the soul wants nothing for itself. When we annul ourselves before God, His harsh judgments are "slaughtered," taken from the word *zevach*, meaning to "slaughter." And these are slaughtered by our broken and contrite spirit, as it is written, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

The sound of the *Teruah* is from the wings of the lungs, which is the source of the sound. The lungs and windpipe contain the sound. They make the simple sound while the mouth, specifically the lips, make the "speech" of the *Shofar*. Speech always represents the *sefira of malchut*, the spiritual realm of exaltedness, and humility. And so, the very act of blowing the *Shofar* represents our unification with the Divine. We become *one* with God.

Conclusion

So, let us summarize. The *Shofar*, not the silver trumpet, is an instrument that God uses to shatter our pride and open our hearts to His lovingkindness. However, it is not the *Shofar* that makes the sound. It is our mouth that cries out from our heart, from our soul in repentance to the Lord. And with a broken and contrite spirit, the Lord, in turn, shatters His judgments against us.

Rambam (another of our great sages) writes:

"Although the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a Divine decree [which is accepted without our having to understand its reason], nevertheless, we can discern a purpose in doing so. It is as if it tells us: Sleepers, arise from your slumber, and those who are dozing, awake from your lethargy. Review your actions, repent your sins, and remember your Creator! Those who forget the truth with the passing of time and who waste their years pursuing vanity and folly that is purposeless and cannot save you - look into your souls and improve your ways and your deeds. Let all abandon the ways of evil and thoughts that offer no benefit" (Hilchot Teshuvah 3).

These verses address repentance and forgiveness and are the central theme surrounding the time from the Feast of Trumpets through the Day of Atonement. These will be fulfilled on the Day of the Lord with a great *Shofar* blast when Christ returns. Then, He will pour out His judgments on all flesh, but on Jerusalem, His spirit of grace and supplication.

God will open Israel's uncircumcised hearts, and she will regret her sins. As it is written, *"And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn"* (Zechariah 12:10).

The nation of Israel will cry out for the Lord just as in the days of Egypt, and they will call out for the coming of the Messiah, the son of David; as Yeshua said, *"You shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"* (Matthew 23:39). Yes, Israel will cry out from her bondage and suffering.

And God will remember His covenant with Israel, and He will save them. And so, all Israel shall be saved, as it is written: *"The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins"* (Romans 11:26-27). *"Oh, that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord brings back the captivity of His people, Let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad"* (Psalm 14:7).

Amen!

ⁱ Exodus 19:13, 19:16, 19:19, 20:18.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 23:24. Numbers 29:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 25:9.

^{iv} Joshua 6:4-8.

^v Exodus 19:13.

^{vi} Numbers 10:2.

^{vii} Numbers 10:8.

^{viii} Numbers 31:6.

^{ix} Ibid. The Laws of the Shofar.

^x Gurkow, Lazer. The Long Blast. Chabad.org.

^{xi} Rabbi Gornish, Yitzchak. The Laws of the Shofar.

^{xii} Kitov, Eliyahu. Sounding the Shofar. Chabad.org.

^{xiii} Kitov, Eliyahu. Listening to the Sound of the Shofar. Chabad.org.

^{xiv} Kitov, Eliyahu. Blessings Over the Sounding of the Shofar. Chabad.org.

^{xv} The Sephardic Jews have Selichot prayers for the entire month of Elul. Ashkenazi Jews ask for forgiveness only during the week before Rosh HaShannah, for at least four days starting from the Saturday night before the holiday.

^{xvi} Ibid. The Long Blast.

^{xvii} 2 Samuel 6:15.

^{xviii} 2 Chronicles 15:14 & 28.

^{xix} Rosh Hashana 3:3. Baal Shem Tov. The Trumpets and the Shofar. Chabad.org.

^{xx} Silberberg, Naftali. Why is the Shofar Not Blown on the Shabbat? Chabad.org.

^{xxi} Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4.

^{xxii} Vayikra Raba, 29:10.

^{xxiii} Sefer Kol Hakemach LeRabeinu BChai.

^{xxiv} Gemara, Rosh Hashanah, 16:1.

^{xxv} Machzor Hameforash, R' Saadya Gaon.

^{xxvi} Gemara, Rosh Hashanah, 16:1.

^{xxvii} Shulchan Oruch, Orach Chaim 586-593.

^{xxviii} Kitov, Eliyahu. One Hundred Sounds. Chabad.org.

^{xxix} Adilman, Binyomin. The Shabbat Shofar. Chabad.org.

^{xxx} Ibid. The Long Blast.