

This month's study with
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“Say to the Israelites: ‘On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of Sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts.’”

— Leviticus 23:24



The *Shofar*: The Three Sounds of Renewal

No words can completely describe the sound of the *shofar*, the trumpet made of a ram's horn that is blown hundreds of times on *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. It is a primal cry, a royal declaration, and a jarring, piercing, awakening sound all at the same time. The sound of the *shofar* is multifaceted, holy, and transcendental.

The first *shofar* was discovered on the day that Abraham brought his son Isaac to be offered as a sacrifice to God on Mt. Moriah. According to Jewish tradition, that day fell on *Rosh Hashanah*. As Abraham was about to offer God what mattered most to him in life — his only son's life — God's angel stopped Abraham, letting him know that it had only been a test, and Isaac was meant to live.

However, Abraham still wanted to make a sacrifice to God. As we read in Genesis 22:13, “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.”

The ram was given to God, but according to Jewish tradition, Abraham removed the two horns creating the first two *shofar* trumpets. One was sounded at the giving of the *Torah* on Mt. Sinai, and the second was destined to be used at the end of time on the final Judgment Day.

When Jews around the world sound the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*, we recall the binding of Isaac and remember that God wants us to sacrifice our lives for Him, not

through dying for Him, but rather through living for God and loving Him.

The *Ba'al Shem Tov*, “Master of a Good Name,” was a renowned rabbi in 17th-century Ukraine. He once explained the power of the *shofar* in the following way: “In the palace of the king there are many chambers, and each one needs a different key. There is one key, one instrument, however, which can open all the doors — the ax. The *shofar* is an ax. When a person passionately breaks his heart before the Almighty, he can open any gate in the palace of the King of Kings.”

Like the *shofar* that was sounded by the Israelites before the walls of Jericho fell to the ground, the *shofar* sounded today has the power to shatter even a heart of stone and break through layers of complacency. It breaks down whatever separates us from God, and once we have broken down those barriers, all doors can open for us.

As we will learn in this month's *Limmud*, there are many facets to the *shofar* and multiple layers of meaning; however, it all comes down to one message which is best summed up by the word *shofar* itself. In Hebrew, *shofar* is nearly identical to *shiper*, which means “improve.” This is the season of introspection, and *Rosh Hashanah* is the holiday of judgment. The *shofar* beckons us to improve ourselves, to repent, and to return to our God.

Rabbi Eckstein



The Sound of the King

*God has ascended amid
shouts of joy,
the LORD amid the
sounding of trumpets.*

— Psalm 47:5

On *Rosh Hashanah*, a third of our prayers are devoted to affirming God as our King. While it's always important to recognize God as our sovereign ruler, what is the special significance of acknowledging Him as our King on the Jewish New Year and Judgment Day? Perhaps we should be more involved in confessing our sins and repentance; however those actions are reserved instead for *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

According to Judaism, on the first *Rosh Hashanah*, the first of the Hebrew month Tishrei, Adam and Eve were created, and Adam's first act was to proclaim God as King. For a brief time, it was clear to every creature that God was the Creator, Sustainer, and the Master of the world. However, that sweet time was short-lived, and confusion set in starting with the sin of the first man and woman until the time when Abraham appeared on the scene.

By that time, the entire world was enmeshed in paganism and idolatry. Until Abraham spread the truth of the One true God, no one recognized Him as King any longer. Abraham re-taught the world that there was one supreme God who ran the world; however, the forces of idolatry continued to compete with Abraham's teachings.

Today, the same confusion abounds in a modern form, and on *Rosh Hashanah* we are asked to clarify: Do we accept God as our King or do we answer to other powers, such as the allure of wealth, honour, vanity, or other values that compete for our allegiance? When we affirm God as our King, as clearly as He was recognized on that first *Rosh Hashanah*, we don't need to focus on repentance – it is a given that will naturally follow.

There are three main sounds of the *shofar*. The first, referred to as *tekiah*, is a long smooth blast, reminiscent of the trumpets that heralded the presence of a mortal king. The sacred *shofar* is blasted to announce the King of all Kings and to re-coronate Him in the presence of the people.

In Proverbs 14:28, we read: “A large population is a king's glory, but without subjects a prince is ruined.” A king needs obedient subjects to fully realize his kingship. On *Rosh Hashanah*, the whole nation of Israel recognizes God's sovereignty, welcoming His Kingship and strengthening His Kingdom. As the new year begins, we reaffirm God's dominion over our lives and our allegiance to Him.

think about it...

1. As we go through life, we tend to take our blessings for granted. Stop for a moment and contemplate the fact that all our blessings, such as health, wealth, family, friends, a job, our home, and everything else, could be gone in a second. *Rosh Hashanah* is a time to recognize our blessings and pray to God that we might be given them for yet another year.
2. As we blast the *shofar*, we coronate God as our King. What does it mean to you to recognize God as the King over your life? How does that realization affect the way you live, the choices you make, and the goals you set for this year?
3. What goals have you set for your life? What had you planned to accomplish this year?
4. Think about the character traits or behaviours that you struggle with most. Maybe it's anger, generosity, discipline, honesty, kindness, or forgiveness. What area would you like to work on this coming year? Identify it and write down three steps you can take in order to achieve it.
5. What do you really want out of life? Peace? Joy? Inspiration? Meaning? How is the life you are leading and your daily habits bringing you closer (or farther) from what you truly want? Consider what changes you need to make in order to attain what you really want from life.

Now is the time to check in and see how you are doing in achieving those goals. What changes or adjustments do you need to make in order to still reach your goals?



The Sound of Brokenness

*Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule
with trembling.*

— Psalm 2:11

Rosh Hashanah is both a holiday of joy as we celebrate the New Year but also a time of fear as we stand in judgment. The *Talmud* sums up the dual nature of this day with these words from the Psalms: “Serve the LORD with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.” But how can we both tremble and celebrate at the same time?

The Jewish sages teach that *Rosh Hashanah* “is to be a day of sobbing for you.” They reference Judges 5:28 when the mother of Sisera, chief enemy of the children of Israel, looked out her window and cried. As Deborah, who had already defeated Sisera, depicted in her song of praise to God: “Through the window peered Sisera’s mother; behind the lattice she cried out, ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?’”

The weeping of Sisera’s mother is a specific type of crying. Until that moment, she was used to her warrior son going out to battle and returning victorious – day after day after day. She began to take his success for granted. She saw him as invincible; nothing bad could ever happen to her beloved son. But on that day, she cried because her

reality was shattered and her heart broke as she was forced to face the truth – that her son was indeed mortal and nothing was guaranteed.

The second sound of the *shofar* is the *shevarim* sound. The word *shevarim* comes from the word *shavur* which means “broken.” It is three short sounds – or one sound broken into three pieces. It is the sound of brokenness, and it literally sounds like weeping.

This sound reminds us not to take anything for granted in life. On *Rosh Hashanah*, everything is on the line as God judges us for another year. Our families, our health, our livelihood, and all we hold dear – none of it is a given. We need to pray for all we have like our lives depend on it – because they do.

However, this crying is not meant to lead us into depression; rather, it is our offering to God. As our hearts are broken, we are better able to receive God. Our cries bring us closer to Him and draw down His abundant blessings. Our Father is merciful, beneficent, and forgiving – and that is why we can celebrate even as we tremble.

apply it...

1. According to the Jewish calendar, now is the time to make New Year’s Resolutions. Pick one to three resolutions you want to work on this year and set a realistic plan for achieving them.
2. Wake up to the good in your life! The *shofar* reminds us that all we have is a gift from God. Keep a gratitude journal for the next week, writing down at least three things each day for which you are grateful. Take time to thank God for those things on your list.
3. *Rosh Hashanah* is a time to remember that life is short and that nobody knows which year or day could be their last, so try living each day as though it were your last. Consider how your attitude toward others might change.
4. Review the past year. Make a column of the things you did right and where you might need to repent and improve. Celebrate your accomplishments and consider how you might learn from your mistakes or need to make things right with others.
5. Choose one way that you can contribute more generously to your family, community, or to the world in general this coming year – whether it’s your time, talents, or money.
6. Cry out to God. Crying to God – in words and with actual cries – is similar to blowing the *shofar*. When we cry to God sincerely, telling Him of our troubles, our worries, and our sorrow, we offer God our broken heart and make space for Him to fill it.



The Sound of Awakening

I slept but my heart was awake.

Listen! My beloved is knocking:

*“Open to me, my sister, my darling,
my dove, my flawless one.*

*My head is drenched with dew,
my hair with the dampness of the night.”*

— Song of Songs 5:2

“Happy is the people that know the sound of the *teruah* . . .” (Psalm 89:15, Jewish Masoretic Text). The third sound of the *shofar* is the sound called *teruah*. This sound consists of about nine short blasts. It sounds like an alarm clock, and it is intended to wake us from our year-round spiritual slumber.

We can all relate to the feeling of waking up to a jarring alarm clock. We long to stay in bed just a bit longer. The bed is warm, the pillow is soft. Outside, it may be colder, harsher, and more demanding. We prefer to stay in bed. Yet, we also know that to do so could ruin our day. To make the most of our time, we need to rise early, overcome the urge to stay in our comfort zone, and head into our day full of determination and a sense of purpose.

This is what the psalmist means when he writes that those who know the sound of the *teruah* are happy. While it may difficult at first to wake up and start our day off fresh and purpose-driven, ultimately our days end much more joyfully. We have accomplished, contributed, and feel the satisfaction of a meaningful life.

Similarly, on *Rosh Hashanah*, God gives us a collective wake-up call so that we might lead productive lives and have meaningful years ahead. During the year, it’s easy to fall into a mindless slumber. We can get caught up in the routine of life, the physicality of living, and the allure of “getting ahead” in the material realm.

In Song of Songs we read: *“I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking: ‘Open to me . . .’*” This is an apt description of our state during the year and our wake-up call at the start of the new year. All yearlong we get lost in sleep; but our heart remains alert. Our heart knows that there is more to life. It stays awake, yearning for a meaningful life. Then, on *Rosh Hashanah*, God knocks on our door via the sound of the *shofar*. It beckons us to wake up and let Him in.

Those who hear the sound of God’s alarm clock will awaken to a more God-centred life. It may be more demanding than sleeping through our days, but ultimately, it leads to a life richer in meaning and satisfaction.



Customs and Rituals Observed Today



Traditionally, a *shofar* is a curved ram's horn which is hollowed out so that it can produce a sound. However, a *shofar* can be a curved horn of any kosher animal except for one — the cow. This is because the cow represents the biblical sin of the golden calf (Exodus 32). The *shofar*, on the other hand, stands for repentance.

We begin blowing the *shofar* on the first of the Hebrew month of Elul, which is one month before the New Year begins. It is blown in synagogue and in homes in order to remind us that the High Holy Days are approaching and that it is time for introspection and change.

The *shofar* takes centre stage on the two days of the *Rosh Hashanah* observance. As the verse in Leviticus 23:24 tells us, both days are mainly “*commemorated with trumpet blasts.*” In synagogues across the world, men, women, and children make it their utmost priority to get to the synagogue in time to hear the blasts of the *shofar*. The room is silent as people stand in anticipation. When the first blasts emerge, it pierces every heart and soul.

The custom today is to blow a total of 100 blasts, consisting of a combination of the *tekiah* sound, one long blast; the *shevarim* blast, three shorter sounds; and the *teruah* blast, nine short blasts.

The *shofar* is also part of the *Rosh Hashanah* prayer service, and indeed, a prayer in and of itself. In the Psalms we read: “*When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD; he brought me into a spacious place.*” Literally translated, this verse reads: “I called from a narrow place and He brought me into a spacious place.” In Jewish tradition, this verse is connected to the *shofar* which is narrow in the place where the blower blows his breath and wide at the end where the breath emerges. The sound is said to go straight to Heaven as a plea for a healthy and good year. Through the *shofar*, we pray from a place of constraint, and God answers us in abundance.

Appropriately, the sound of the *shofar* is woven into the prayer service, sounded at different key intervals in sets of 30 or 40 blasts at a time. Moreover, the *ba'al tokeah*, literally “master of the blasts” who blows the *shofar* for the congregation, must be a righteous person, ideally older than 30, indicating a certain maturity. Like a prayer leader, the *shofar* blower leads the congregation in an encounter with God and must be suited to do so. When the blasts are sounded, a reader calls out each type of blast with precision so that the correct sounds are blown at the appropriate time.

Both at the end of the *Rosh Hashanah* service and at the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*, the final *shofar* blast is a *tekiah gedolah*, one long uninterrupted *shofar* blast. This expresses our prayer that we move away from the brokenness of the other sounds and that our lives will be long and smooth, bringing glory to God.

***When hard pressed,
I cried to the LORD;
he brought me into
a spacious place.***

— Psalm 118:5

