

Turn the Holidays on High Workshop with Chava

Sofar

ROSH HASHANA PRAYERS

bound yourselves before Me.”¹² Indeed, according to the *Midrash*, the *Akeidah* actually took place on Rosh Hashana.¹³ And “Because you listened to Me,” G-d promises Abraham, “I will bless you, and through your children all the nations of the world will be blessed.”¹⁴

We are also told that in the merit of Abraham withholding his love and compassion for Isaac in order to fulfill G-d’s command to offer Isaac, G-d too will withhold his ‘wrath’ and forgive us.¹⁵

The *Akeidah* (literally “binding”)—the single greatest statement of faith in history—expresses the deepest connection we can have with G-d. A bond in which we completely dedicate ourselves to the Divine will and become transparent channels for G-d’s plan on this earth. Abraham and Isaac epitomized this profound relationship.

When reading this portion in the Torah on Rosh Hashana, and then following it up with blowing the ram’s horn, we both invoke the great merit of our ancestors as well as declare that we too are dedicating our very lives to our Divine calling, transcending all immediate material comforts and distractions.

The Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashana is followed by the Haftorah from the Book of *Jeremiah* (Ch.31). We read this on Rosh Hashana because it expresses G-d’s abounding love for Israel: “Is Ephraim not My beloved son, is he not a precious child that whenever I speak of him I recall him even more? Therefore My inner parts stir for him; I will surely have compassion on him...”¹⁶ This is one of the themes of Rosh Hashana—G-d remembering us and showing us compassion.¹⁷

Shofar Blowing

The mitzvah of the day of Rosh Hashana is the blowing of the shofar. This mitzvah expresses the essence of the holiday.

In the course of the *Shacharit* and *Musaf* service, the shofar is sounded one hundred times, in various combinations of *tekiyah* (a long blast), *shevarim* (a trio of broken sobs) and *teruah* (a staccato of short notes). At this point, the shofar is blown thirty times. It will be blown another thirty times during the silent *Musaf Amidah*, another thirty in the cantor’s repetition, and the final ten before the end of *Musaf*. In addition, another thirty blasts are sounded at the end of the service to confuse the *Satan*.

When (the first day of) Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat, the shofar is not sounded. Shabbat accomplishes the same effect that the shofar does.

The awesome moment of blowing shofar—which is sounded by the most pious man in the community—begins with both Torah scrolls being clutched by two people who stand at each side of the one who will blow the shofar.

Before the sounding of the shofar, several prayers are said with intense concentration, to prepare for the awesome moment of the shofar sounding:

Psalm 47—consisting of ten verses (corresponding to the Ten *Sefirot*)—is recited seven times, piercing the seven heavens and the seven emotions. Each time corresponds to one of the seven: *chesed* (love), *gevurah* (discipline), *tiferet* (compassion), *netzach* (endurance), *bod* (yielding), *yesod* (bonding), and finally *malchut* (sovereignty). Also, the Name of G-d, *Elokim* (which refers to *gevurah*) is mentioned seven times in this psalm. By saying this psalm we help eliminate and sweeten the seven severities (*gevurot*) of each of the

seven emotions and each of the seven days of the week. And by repeating the psalm seven times, we sweeten the (7x7=) 49 dimensions of impurity.¹⁸

The one who blows the shofar then recites eight verses, verse by verse, and the congregation repeats them after him. The six middle verses form the acrostic *kera Satan*, which means “cut off the accuser,” erase the sins of which we are accused.

This is followed by the *Yehi ratzon* said with special Kabbalistic intention, “May it be Your will, G-d...that the merit of certain Names...should tear asunder the screens and the accusers which separate between You and Your people Israel. I exalt You, my G-d, the King of judgment who hears the sound of the shofar of Your people Israel with mercy.”

Then come the two blessings on the shofar: the blessing on the commandment to blow shofar; and the seasonal blessing, *Shebecheyanu*.

The sounding of the shofar, in three groups, for a total of thirty sounds:

Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah, Tekiah
Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah, Tekiah
Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah, Tekiah

(the one who blows shofar confesses silently)

Tekiah, Shevarim, Tekiah
Tekiah, Shevarim, Tekiah
Tekiah, Shevarim, Tekiah

(the one who blows confesses silently)

Tekiah, Teruah, Tekiah
Tekiah, Teruah, Tekiah
Tekiah, Teruah, Tekiah Gedolah

Following the shofar sounding, we say: “And so may it be Your will, our G-d and G-d of our fathers, that the angels that are formed from the [blowing of the]

shofar; and from the *tekiah*, the *shevarim*, the *teruah* and the *tekiab*; and from the *tekiab-shevarim-teruah-tekiah*; and from the *tekiab-shevarim-tekiah*; and from the *tekiab-teruah-tekiah*, ascend before the Throne of Your Glory and intercede favorably in our behalf to atone for all our sins.”

The one who blows the shofar recites three more verses, and the congregation repeats them after him verse by verse.

Ashrei—“Happy are those who dwell in Your house”—is recited, as the one who blew the shofar returns to his place. It is a custom that he then turns and looks at all the people in the congregation who just heard him blow shofar.

SHOFAR



TEN REASONS are given for sounding the SHOFAR on Rosh Hashana:¹⁹

- 1) Trumpets are sounded upon appointment of a new king. So too on Rosh Hashana, when G-d renews the creation of the universe and His kingship over it, and we coronate Him as our King.
- 2) As a call to repentance.
- 3) To remind us of Mt. Sinai where they heard “the sound of a shofar increasing in volume” (Exodus 19:19), and to “accept and then understand” as our ancestors did then.
- 4) To remind us of the words of our prophets that are compared to the sound of a shofar (Ezekiel 33:4).
- 5) To remind us of the destruction of the Temple

that took place amidst the sound of our enemy's trumpets. This is meant to arouse in us the yearning for the rebuilding of the Temple.

6) To remind us of *Akeidat Yitzchak* who gave his life for heaven, and we too are ready to do the same.²⁰

7) The sound of the shofar has the power to drive awe into our hearts before G-d.

8) To remind us of the upcoming great Day of Judgment, which is called a day of shofar and *teruah* (Zephaniah 1:16).

9) To remind us of the ingathering of the exiles so that we yearn for it, as it says that "On that day they will sound the great shofar and those lost will return." (Isaiah 27:13).

10) To remind us and strengthen our faith in the Resurrection of the Dead, which will be heard like the sound of the shofar (Isaiah 18:3).

Shofar also contains in itself all three central Rosh Hashana themes (see below): *Malchiyot* — as coronation of the King, *Zichronot* — as symbol of the ram's horn that replaced Isaac to invoke G-d to remember us in the merit of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, *Shofarot* — the actual shofar is a call to teshuvah.

SHOFAR AS A WAKE-UP CALL

Maimonides writes: Although blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashana is a divine decree, it contains a hidden message, namely: Slumberers, arise from your sleep, wake up from your deep sleep, you who are fast asleep; inspect your actions, repent, and remember your Creator. Those of you who forget the truth because of daily trivialities, indulging throughout the year in the useless things that cannot profit you nor save you, look into your souls, amend your ways and deeds. Let everyone give up his evil way and his bad purpose.²¹

The All aspects of the shofar — its shape, makeup and sound — carry messages to us.

Shape

The shofar must be bent: To bend our hearts and spirits.

Narrow at mouthpiece, wide at other end: the call from the depths of our hearts pierces heaven and causes an expansive response.

Hollow: Hollow out our insides, to be receptive to a greater light.

Ram's horn: Docile and humble like the ram — *kabbalat ol*.

Not flesh, but bone: *Bittul* (selflessness) must not feel that it is part of something that still retains the life of the animal.

No cracks: For the sound to be heard, there can be no 'back door' escape hatches, no fissures or splits, only one seamless shofar.

Sounds

The Talmud explains,²² that the three sounds, *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*, are three different cries: *Tekiah* is an unbroken, pure sound of hope. *Shevarim* are drawn out gasps, like someone who is ill. *Teruah* is the short outburst of cries.

There are several psycho-spiritual meanings behind the secret of the shofar sounds. Here is a selection of a few of the many applications. The spiritual significance of the shofar sounding is explained at length in Jewish mysticism, with a variety of different explanations. Generally its significance focuses on two elements:

1. Sweetening severe judgments (*bamtokot ba'gevurot*), and transforming them to forces of love

and compassion. As the *Midrash* states, "When G-d is ready to judge He sits on the chair of judgment. But when the shofar is sounded, He rises from the chair of judgment and sits down in the chair of compassion, and He transforms the judgment to compassion."²³

2. G-d is moved to do so because the sound of the shofar parallels and reflects the purest cry of the human soul in search of its Source.

The effect of the cry of the shofar is compounded by the distress of the soul which feels limited by the "narrow straits" and inhibited depths of life and its hardships. But precisely because it comes from "narrowness," the cry is so profound and reaches the widest expanses of heaven. In the words of one of the verses we recite before the sounding of the shofar: "From my narrow place, from my depths and constraints, I call to You, and You respond to me from Your expansive place."²⁴ This is actually mirrored in the shape of the shofar: one side is narrow, the other wide. Blowing into the narrow part is precisely what allows the powerful blast to be sounded.

Also, the three actual sounds of the shofar echo three different psycho-spiritual experiences. The long unbroken note of the *tekiab* (preceding the other sounds) reflects the simple cry of the soul from its depths (unlike the sound of words which are shaped by the mouth). The three broken notes, drawn out sobs of the *shevarim* is the sigh of the broken heart, gasping for hope. The staccato of short crying outbursts of the *teruah* is the crying soul eliciting compassion. It is not broken like the *shevorim*. The final, long drawn out blast of the *tekiab* (following all the other sounds) expresses the confidence that we have triumphed and G-d responds from the wide expanses above.²⁵

According to the *Zohar*, the first three sounds correspond to the Patriarchs: The *tekiab* is Abraham (*chesed*, "love"). *Shevarim* is Isaac (*gevurah*, "discipline/severity"). *Teruah* is Jacob (*tiferet*, "compassion"). The first and last blasts—of love and compassion—refine, sublimate and sweeten the *gevurah* of *shevarim*.²⁶

In another place it states that the *teruah* corresponds to David (*malchut*, "sovereignty," which is built from *gevurah*, hence the staccato cries), and the final *tekiab* is Jacob.²⁷ Thus, all four sounds correspond to the building of *malchut* (a key theme of Rosh Hashana), which is constructed from *chesed*, *gevurah* and *tiferet*—representing the four legs of the celestial chariot, which in turn correspond to the four worlds.²⁸

Chassidic teachings explain that the sequence of the sounds reflects the journey into deeper recesses of the heart and soul: the first *tekiab* is the cry of the soul that can still be expressed in a long drawn out sound. The *teruah* begins to lose its sound, because the cry from a deeper part of the soul cannot be expressed in sound. The *shevarim* is yet another deeper level, where the sound is breaking into very short cries. Finally the last *tekiab* is symbolic of the "voice that has no sound," from the deepest depths of the soul that cannot be expressed even in the slightest sound.²⁹

There is also an opposite explanation: In order for the unbroken sound of the *tekiab* to be contained by us, we need the *shevarim* which breaks the sound into "digestible" parts. This also allows us to refine and sweeten the severity of Isaac, which cannot be contained unless it is diluted into containable parts.³⁰

