

# Shofar

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth,” said George Bernard Shaw, “without making some other Englishman hate or despise him.” Such is the significance of accent and vocabulary in English. If you ask me what is good, or what I believe, I will immediately respond by asking what you mean by the word “good” or “believe”. That is why the shofar is so central to Rosh Hashanah. A sound is much purer than language. In many ways it is neutral and unmistakable.

The Torah says nothing about a New Year, nothing about atonement. But it does say twice that this day is one of Teruah. And Teruah is always associated with blowing. There are trumpets and horns mentioned in the Torah and tradition has it that the horn should ideally be a ram’s.

The shofar is the most natural of all religious symbols. Unlike flutes, there are no holes for notes; there are no mouthpieces, no strings or valves. It requires direct human interaction for it to function. The wordless sounds are cultureless. Laws, texts are open to variation across the spectrum. The sound of the shofar transcends all human cognitive barriers and creates a unity amongst those who hear it unlike any other feature of our religion.

Music itself changes in many ways, of course. The instruments Mozart wrote for are not the same ones that we hear in most concert halls today. And what sounded good to Chinese ears a hundred years ago was very different than what most Western ears would have found attractive. And even in this world of universal music tastes, they vary all the time, even personal ones. The unique timelessness and cultural neutrality of the sound of the shofar makes it unlike any religious music.

There is a historical theme too. The sound we hear is identical to the sound they heard three and four thousand years ago. If the number of times it is blown has risen over the years, the three kinds of “blasts” have remained the same, even if there are minor nuances. This was the sound Jews heard in the desert, in the Temple, in Babylon, Rome, Spain, France, Poland, Russia, Morocco, Egypt, Afghanistan, even China. It was blown when the Yemenite and Moroccan communities were airlifted to Israel after 1948, and it was blown by Rabbi Goren, in that iconic photo, when the Western Wall was liberated in 1967. No matter what place, era, or culture, the sound has always been the same.

Think for a moment of all variety that currently exists in Judaism, all the different peoples, customs, communities, rules, and refinements. But the shofar is sounded, the same three blasts, the same number, by all groups. On Rosh Hashana wherever we go to pray, whether we are inspired by the prayers or bored, the shofar is the one element we will “get”. I can’t think of any other feature that bonds us Jews as the shofar does. That is its magic. Scholar or ignoramus, rich or poor, regardless of degree of religiosity, this

sound provides a common denominator. The shofar is the “Jewish sound”.

Mystically, the shofar also represents us humans. Created figuratively out of the earth, it takes the Divine breath of spirit to animate us. A piece of animal skin, nail, in itself of little value, when breathed into comes alive and stimulates us in ways beyond our imagination.

And, finally, the shofar is associated with the ram’s horn at the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, which is read during the Rosh Hashanah service. A ram was sacrificed instead of Isaac. The symbolism of Abraham, so obedient to what he thought was the will of God that he nearly killed his own son, has three messages. It is a motif of absolute dedication to God, overriding human conceptions of reality and authority. Secondly, it is also described as a test. Life itself is a constant test. We have to try to face everything that comes our way and do the best we can.

But what tools should we be using—ours or God’s? The Biblical narrative recalls the willingness of Abraham to kill his own son because he believed that that was what God wanted. In fact, the third lesson we learn from this is that we should not listen to voices or what we think God wants; since Sinai, the Torah revelation has given us a clear constitution.

Because humans are so prone to error it was necessary to establish a code of behavior and ethics that would establish rules that, no matter what voices one thought one heard, one could never transgress certain boundaries. If the Bible started off with simple general commands to Adam and Eve, over time, after the false starts, it became clear one needed more specific legislation.

If we can be mistaken in hearing voices, we cannot be so misled by the sound of the shofar. The shofar is the sound of Sinai. Revelation, like the shofar, takes someone to make it “work”. After the initial Sinai impetus it was left to human beings to take it forward. There would be no heavenly voices, no sudden miracles defining law.

Humans contribute positively to the ongoing vibrancy and progress of tradition, in constant creative dispute and tension. Currents and trends that go one way do not necessarily have to keep going in the same direction always. But it is only by being positively engaged that we can hope to contribute to continuity.