

Photo: David Cohen/Flash90

## Shofar: The Sounds of Repentance

**N**o words can completely describe the sound of the *shofar*, the ram's horn sounded hundreds of times on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and throughout the High Holy Days that culminate on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. 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 transcendent.

In the Jewish tradition, the *shofar* is described as the key to opening any door in the palace of the “King of Kings” through the power of a heart broken in true repentance. King David illustrates this for us in the beautiful words of Psalm 51, as he sought forgiveness for committing adultery with Bathsheba: “*My sacrifice O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise*” (Psalm 51:17).

Like the *shofars* that were sounded by the Israelites before the walls of Jericho fell to the ground (Joshua 6:1–20), the *shofar* sounded today has the power to break down whatever separates us from God, and once we break down these barriers, all doors can open for us.

In this Fellowship Study, we will learn about the many facets and multiple layers of meaning to the *shofar*. However, the underlying message of the *shofar* can best be summed up by the word itself.

In Hebrew, *shofar* (שׁוֹפָר) is very similar to *shiper* (שִׁפֵּר), which means “to improve.” The High Holy Days are a time of introspection, repentance, and change—as we improve ourselves, to repent, and to return to our God.



Photo: J. James Hesel

*“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

# A Wake-Up Call

There are three types of *shofar* sounds that are used during Rosh Hashanah, each eliciting different emotions and responses. One of the most intense sounds is the *teruah*, which consists of nine short blasts. It sounds similar to an alarm clock, and that's precisely its intention—to wake us from our spiritual slumber.

We all relate to waking up to an alarm clock. The bed is warm, the pillow is soft, and we long to stay in bed a bit longer. Outside, we face a world that is colder and harsher. We would prefer to stay in the security of our bed. But if we want to make the most of our time, we need to rise early and overcome the urge to stay in our beds. Only then can we head into our day with a sense of purpose. This is what the psalmist meant when he wrote that those who know the sound of the *teruah* are happy.

And when we use to the fullest the gifts God has given us, we will be rewarded accordingly. In Psalm 62:12, we are reminded, “*You reward everyone according to what they have done.*” In the Christian Bible, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, similarly reminded the people there that judgment was coming and warned them, “*God will repay each person according to what they have done*” (Romans 2:6).

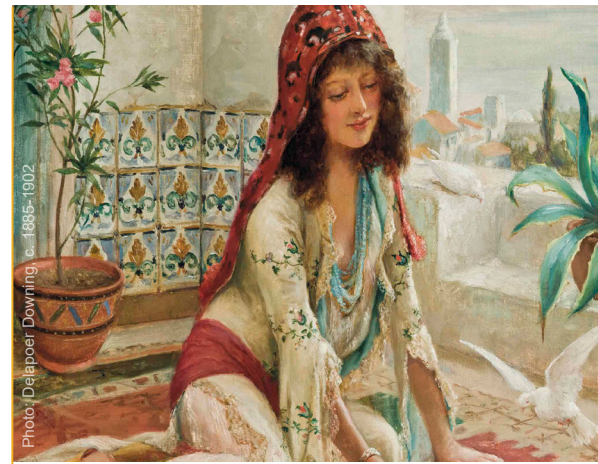
In Jewish tradition, the *shofar* is our collective wake-up call so that we might lead productive lives and have meaningful years ahead. During the year, it's easy to fall into a mindless slumber as we get caught up in daily life and mistake the allure of getting ahead materially with our purpose.

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 spiritual state during the year and our wake-up call at the start of the year. During the year, we might drift to sleep spiritually and mentally, but our heart remains alert. 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, a call we find repeated in the Christian Bible: “*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock*” (Revelation 3:20).

In the Christian Bible, we also discover numerous calls to “wake up” from our slumber. Paul, after instructing the church in Rome on how to live godly lives, exhorted them, “*And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed*” (Romans 13:11). And in his vision that the Apostle John recorded in the Book of Revelation, the church at Sardis was sternly warned to “Wake up!” and repent because “*I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again*” (Revelation 3:2-3, NLT). Indeed, waking up and repenting go hand-in-hand, as we will explore more deeply in the next section.

Those who hear the sound of the *shofar* will awaken to a more God-centered life. They will start the New Year with renewed purpose and motivation. It is more demanding than sleepwalking through our days, but ultimately, it leads us to a life richer in meaning and satisfaction.



*I slept but my heart was awake.  
Listen! My beloved is knocking:  
“Open to me, my sister, my darling,  
my dove, my flawless one.”*

— SONG OF SONGS 5:2

# A Call to Return

One of the major themes of Rosh Hashanah is *teshuvah*, תשובה, meaning, “repentance.” This is why it is also known as the Judgment Day.

Rosh Hashanah, which literally means “head of the year,” is not the anniversary of the creation of the world, as some mistakenly assume. The truth is that it comes five days after the anniversary of the beginning of Creation, and commemorates the sixth day, when Adam was created. Rosh Hashanah actually is the anniversary of the creation of humankind. It seems appropriate then that every year at this time, God looks upon us in a special way and judges how we are leading our lives.

The concept of judgment day is also mentioned throughout the Christian Bible, but refers to a day when, in Christian tradition, all will give account of their actions and words before God. As Jesus told his followers in Matthew, “*But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken*” (12:36). The Apostles Paul and Peter also warned the early church of God’s wrath on that day of judgment. (See Romans 2:5, 2 Peter 2:9 and 3:7.)

We spend Rosh Hashanah in prayer and introspection. We reconsider how we are living our lives and return to the “original plan,” which is to live a life of obedience and contribution.

In Judaism, this repentance consists of several steps. We must express regret for our misdeeds. We must sincerely confess our sins. We must resolve to behave differently in the future. And, if we have hurt another person through our actions, we must make amends. In the Christian Bible, Jesus taught this principle to his followers this way: “*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift*” (Matthew 5:23-24).

We take that first step to repentance on Rosh Hashanah and continue the process throughout the following days, called “the Days of repentance,” *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*. We complete the process on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The true test of our repentance comes when we find ourselves in situations where we have failed before, but this time, choose to remain obedient instead.

The call to repentance is found in the Christian Bible as well. When John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness, he called people to repent (Mark 1:4). Jesus, after being criticized for eating with sinners, said, “*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*” (Luke 5:32). As in Judaism, repentance in the Christian faith requires action. John the Baptist told the crowds, “*Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God*” (Luke 3:8, NLT).

The sound of the *shofar* reminds us that judgment is approaching and that it is time to mend our ways. We do not mention our sins in synagogue during Rosh Hashanah, because we are focused on the first step of repentance—returning to God and regretting our past mistakes. Confession will come in our liturgy on Yom Kippur.

The goal of Rosh Hashanah is to change our hearts and our heads, setting us once again in the right direction. The *shofar* sounds the way.



*“Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty.”*

— ZECHARIAH 1:3

# An Invitation to Change

As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 96:13, *“Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.”* This is the secret of Judgment Day. When God judges us, He looks upon us with love. His goal is to prompt us to change into our best possible selves.

Tradition teaches that when the *shofar* is sounded at the start of Rosh Hashanah, God gets up from His Seat of Judgment and sits instead in the Seat of Mercy. Why? Because He loves us and does not desire to punish us.

The sounding of the *shofar* is comparable to the sounding of a gavel that signals the start of a trial. When the *shofar* is sounded on Rosh Hashanah, it is as though our own trial has been initiated. We come before God, demonstrating our intention to cast away our sins and return to Him.

The Jewish sages teach that God says, “Where there is judgment from below, there is no need for judgment from above.” God takes no pleasure in punishing us. When He sees that we are actively working on ourselves, He looks upon us with mercy without the need for stern judgment. Sounding the *shofar* demonstrates our willingness to participate in the process of introspection and change.

On the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, Jews participate in an unusual custom known as *Tashlich*, which means “casting off.” We go to a body of water, recite prayers, and throw crumbs of bread into the water. To an outsider it might seem strange, but what is taking place is a symbolic casting off of sins. We read from the Book of Micah, *“you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea”* (7:19).

We take bread, which symbolizes our sins, and cast it into the depths of the sea. The water symbolizes how God will wash our sins away and cleanse us. The Bible reassures us our sins have been taken away: *“as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us”* (Psalm 103:12). This custom helps us grasp that God will forgive our sins and that we are free to change into whoever God wants us to be.

Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to change, to confess, and to come clean. We can’t do it alone—we need God’s help—but we can be forgiven and we can start fresh and new.

The *shofar* is narrow at the end where it is blown, but wide where the sound comes out. This recalls the verse from Psalm 118 that says, *“When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me into a spacious place”* (v.5). In the original Hebrew, the verse literally translates as, *“From a narrow place I cried...He brought me into a spacious place.”*

During this season of repentance, we cry out to God, through the *shofar*, from a “narrow place” where we have ended up because of our sins. In doing so, God forgives us, washes away our sins, and sets us free to grow, to begin anew, and start the New Year with a clean slate.



Photo: Edmund von Wörndle, c. 1869

*You will again have compassion on us;  
you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl  
all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

— MICAH 7:19

# 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?
3. **What goals have you set for your life? For this year?** Now is the time to check and see where you are in achieving those goals. What changes or adjustments do you need to make in order to still reach your goals?
4. **What past sins or mistakes might be holding you back today?** In a symbolic way, like the casting of bread crumbs into the water, take the opportunity during Rosh Hashanah to write these down on a piece of paper and then throw them away. Consider what step you can take now to move forward.
5. **What do you really want out of life? Peace? Joy? Inspiration? Meaning?** How are 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.



# Apply It

1. **Set goals.** According to the Jewish calendar, now is the time to make New Year's resolutions. Pick at least one goal you want to work on this year and set a realistic plan for achieving it. (Proverbs 16:3, Philippians 2:13)
2. **Wake Up!** The *shofar* reminds us to keep ourselves spiritually alert and awake. Take time each day to focus on living a more God-centered life. (Song of Songs 5:2, Revelation 3:20)
3. **Make amends.** If there is someone you have hurt through your words or actions, reach out to that person and seek forgiveness. (Genesis 50:17, Matthew 5:23-24)
4. **Review the past year.** Make a column of the things you did right and a second column where you might need to repent and improve. Celebrate your accomplishments and consider how you might learn from your mistakes. (Job 36:10, Acts 3:19)
5. **Act now.** Choose one way that you can contribute more generously to your family, community, or to the world in general this coming year, whether it involves giving more of your time, talents, or money. (Deuteronomy 15:11, Matthew 19:21)
6. **Cry out to God. Crying to God is similar to blowing the *shofar*.** When we cry to God sincerely, telling Him of our troubles, our worries, and our sorrows, we offer God our broken heart and make space for Him to fill it. (Psalm 51:1-2, 1 John 1:9)

