

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HEAR THE SHOFAR?

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What are we supposed to feel when the shofar is blasted?

The shofar is sounded every day but Shabbat and the 29th day of the month leading up to Rosh Hashana. Then there are as many as 100 shofar blasts on Rosh Hashana. In the Torah, Rosh Hashana isn't even called Rosh Hashana - it's referred to as a day of blasting¹ or a day of rest and remembrance commemorated with blasting². Although we have many rich traditions associated with Rosh Hashana, the most central one seems to be that it is a day for blowing the shofar, but the mitzvah itself is to hear the shofar sounded.

What does it mean to hear the shofar?

The rabbis of the Talmud wonder what it means to have a mitzvah to hear something. Does it count if you are passing by and you happen to hear the shofar? Does it count if you hear the echo of the shofar? Does it count if you hear it sounded by someone who didn't intend for it to be heard by another person?³ The rabbis, ever concerned with fastidiously performing mitzvot, are stumped by a mitzvah that seems so passive. Can you just happen to perform a mitzvah by walking past an open window? The rabbis seem to want there to be a measure of attention or intention required to fulfill the mitzvah.

What is the shofar saying?

The sound of the shofar has a complex character:

It is the alarm that wakes you from your slumber and urges you to repent⁴

It is the cry of Sarah when she found that her husband took her son to sacrifice him to God⁵

It is the cry of the mother of Sisera, the general of a Canaanite army, as she waited for him to come home from battle not knowing that he had already been slain⁶

It is a reminder to us that God provided a ram in place of Isaac, preventing Abraham from sacrificing his only son⁷

It is a calling out to God to remember us on this day

It is a joyful sound

It is a shout

It is a prayer

Not all Jews are obligated to hear the shofar. And not all Jews are hearing. And not all Jews go to synagogue or have access to a shofar blowing outside of synagogue. And the shofar service can be overwhelming and scary and noisy. But while the Rosh Hashana shofar experience is usually situated in a service, it is meant to direct attention outside the confines of the service, to the world around us. For those of us who will hear the physical shofar and those of us who will not, what are the cries of the world which the shofar directs us to hear?

What might it mean to hear the voice of the shofar in the world?

To heed the alarm that tells you it is time to make change in the world?

To attend to the parent crying out for their child?

To cry out for the loss of life to war and violence?

To remember those whose lives have been sacrificed in place of the privileged and powerful?

To call God out on this day?

To bring joy into a broken world?

1 [Numbers 29:1](#)

2 [Leviticus 23:24](#)

3 [Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 28b](#)

4 [Rambam, Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Teshuva 3:4](#)

5 [Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 32:8](#)

6 [Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 33b](#)

7 [Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 16a](#)

To shout out against injustice?
To pray without words?

Identify for yourself ways in which you will bring your attention and intention to the sounds of the shofar all around you. What do you need to be woken up to? Whose cries do you need to heed? Whom have you forgotten? What alarm are you raising? What joyful sounds are you bringing? What is calling you to action this Rosh Hashana?

