

How Many Shofar Blasts Are We Supposed to Hear?

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The *mitzvah* most closely associated with Rosh Hashanah is that we should hear the sound of the shofar.¹ If so, why is it that we don't fulfill that *mitzvah* by hearing it once? Why so many blasts? It's a long story, but unlike many long stories, we think this one is actually interesting! Our narrator will be R. Yechiel Mikal Epstein (d. 1908), the author of the halakhic compendium *Arukh Hashulhan* (*Orah Hayyim* ch. 590). We paraphrase his account here.

In three separate verses the Torah mentions a requirement to sound a horn blast (*t'ruah*, תרועה) during the seventh month² of the year (Tishri).

Leviticus 23:24

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זָכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ :

Speak to the people of Israel: on the first day of the seventh month you shall have a day of rest, a commemoration with horn blast, a sacred occasion.

Numbers 29:1

וּבְחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מִלְאכַת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם :

On the first day of the seventh month you shall have a sacred occasion... it shall be a day of horn blast for you.

Leviticus 25:9

וּהִעֲבַרְתָּ שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים תַּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל־אֶרְצְכֶם :

You shall sound³ a shofar blast on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall sound the shofar throughout all your land.

We've placed Leviticus 25:9 out of order because the Talmud subjects it to a close reading. In discussing the details of the shofar blast to be sounded during the Jubilee year, it asks:

B. Rosh Hashanah 33b-34a

ואין לי אלא ביובל, בראש השנה מנין? תלמוד לומר בחדש השביעי,
שאין תלמוד לומר בחדש השביעי! ומה תלמוד לומר בחדש השביעי? שיהו כל תרועות החדש השביעי
זה - כזה.

These details apply to the shofar blast during the Jubilee. How do we know that they apply as well to the shofar blast on Rosh Hashanah?

Because the verse (Lev. 25:9) reads *baḥodesh hash'vi'i*, “of the seventh month,” even though this phrase is superfluous! (Rashi: because the verse also mentions “on the Day of Atonement,” and we already know from other verses that Yom Kippur occurs in the seventh month.)

So why *does* the verse read “of the seventh month”? To inform us that all the shofar blasts that occur during Tishri must meet the same specifications.

Since the word *t'ru'ah* is mentioned in three verses, *and* since they all meet the same specifications, we learn that we must hear three shofar blasts (*t'ru'ot*) on Rosh Hashanah. And because the verb “to sound” occurs twice in Leviticus 25:9 (וְהִעֲבִירָהּ שׁוֹפָר , וְהִעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר), we learn by way of Oral Torah that each *t'ru'ah* or shofar blast is to be preceded *and* followed by a simple blast that we call a *t'ki'ah* (תְּקִיעָה), a “sounding.” Thus, the requirement on Rosh Hashanah *mid'oraita*, according to Torah law, is that we hear a total of nine sounds of the shofar:

t'ki'ah - t'ru'ah - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - תרועה - תקיעה (תרי"ת)
t'ki'ah - t'ru'ah - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - תרועה - תקיעה (תרי"ת)
t'ki'ah - t'ru'ah - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - תרועה - תקיעה (תרי"ת)

So far so good. But there's a problem: what is a *t'ru'ah*? We know that it is *not* a *t'ki'ah*, a simple (one-note) blast, but what is it exactly? *Targum Onkelos*, the classic Aramaic translation of the Torah, renders the word *t'ru'ah* as יבבא, which carries the sense of “sounding an alarm.” And as the *Arukh Hashulḥan* points out, that fits well with the verse Numbers 10:9, which instructs us to make a horn blast during time of war. It makes sense, actually: on Rosh Hashanah, we “sound the alarm” to wake ourselves from our spiritual slumber to do the work of *t'shuvah*.⁴ But we still don't know the precise sound of the alarm that defines *t'ru'ah*. The Talmud (*B. Rosh Hashanah* 34a) lists three possibilities:

1. wailing and sobbing, short, repetitive sounds, *i.e.* the sound that we customarily call *t'ru'ah*;
2. sighing, the sound that one makes when one is worried, *i.e.* the three “fractured” sounds that we customarily call *sh'varim*;
3. a combination of the above: sighing, followed by wailing, *i.e.* what we today call *sh'varim-t'ru'ah*.

Because we are in doubt (*safek*) as to the proper definition of the Torah's word *t'ru'ah*, the Rabbis adopted a *takkanah* (a legislative ordinance) that in sounding the shofar we should cover all the possibilities. For this reason, the order of shofar blasts *mid'rabanan*, on the basis of that Rabbinic ordinance, is as follows:

t'ki'ah - sh'varim-t'ru'ah - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - שברים-תרועה - תקיעה (תשרי"ת)
t'ki'ah - sh'varim - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - שברים - תקיעה (תש"י)
t'ki'ah - t'ru'ah - t'ki'ah - תקיעה - תרועה - תקיעה (תרי"ת)

Further, we repeat this order three times.⁵ That is, we need to hear תשרי"ת three times, תשי"ת three times, and תשי"ת three times, because of the *safek*, the possibility that each of these may be the correct definition of *t'ru'ah*, which we have to hear three times. This makes for a total of thirty sounds, since *sh'varim-t'ru'ah* counts as two.

Thirty sounds? Is that all? But there are many more shofar blasts at services in traditional synagogues! Remember that the shofar is sounded twice during the traditional Rosh Hashanah liturgy, a practice already mentioned in the Talmud (*B. Rosh Hashanah* 16a). The first series of thirty blasts is sounded immediately after the Torah and *haftarah* readings. The second series is sounded during the repetition of *musaf* by the *sh'liah tzibur*. It is divided into three parts: ten blasts following the recitation of *malkhyot*, ten following the recitation of *zikhronot*, and ten following the recitation of *shofarot* on Rosh Hashanah. Thus, according to Rabbinic law (*mid'rabanan*), we are required to hear sixty shofar blasts. Moreover, many communities follow the *minhag* mentioned by R. Yeshayahu Horowitz (Prague; d. 1630) to sound one hundred shofar blasts.⁶ To arrive at that total, those communities add the additional forty blasts following the end of *musaf*, sometimes following the Mourners' Kaddish.

How many shofar blasts are sounded in Reform services? That's a really good question. Since each Reform congregation is free to develop its own worship practice, we can't say that there exists a single, unified Reform liturgy. (The days of the "*Einheitsgebetbuch*" and the "Union Prayerbook" are long gone.) But *Mishkan Hanefesh*, the CCAR's current *mahzor*, can serve as a baseline standard for what takes place in North American Reform synagogues. And if a congregation worships from that book, it will hear thirty shofar blasts, which meets the Toraitic (though obviously not the Rabbinic) requirement.

How the Reform service manages to include thirty blasts is complicated and, to our mind, a bit clumsy. The easiest way to do it would be to sound all thirty blasts immediately following the Torah and *haftarah* readings, which is the location of the first set of shofar blasts in the traditional liturgy. Instead, *Mishkah Hanefesh* divides the thirty blasts into three separate sections. Why?

Reform liturgy, as we know, dispenses with *t'filat musaf* (the "Musaf" service). This presents no great problem on any other day of the year, but Rosh Hashanah is different. That's because Reform liturgists want to include the *malkhuyot*, *zikhronot*, and *shofarot* sections, which traditionally are recited as part of *t'filat musaf*, in the Reform service. So how do they include these portions of the liturgy when they omit *musaf*? They might have incorporated all three sections within *t'filat shaharit*, in the same manner that they are incorporated in the traditional *musaf* prayer.⁷ Instead, they scatter the three sections. *Malkhuyot* is placed within *t'filat shaharit* (pp. 199-207); *zikhronot* occurs immediately following the Torah and *haftarah* readings (pp. 262-269); and *shofarot* is recited right before *Aleinu* (pp. 278-285). The shofar is sounded at the conclusion of each of these sections, just as it is sounded at their conclusion in the traditional *t'filat musaf*. Each sounding consists of ten blasts: תר"ת, תשי"ת, תשרי"ת, making thirty in all.

We've called this arrangement "a bit clumsy" because it removes *zikhronot* and *shofarot* from the framework of the *t'filah*, where along with *malkhuyot* they function as equal elements in the three great theological themes of the day. In *Mishkan Hanefesh*, *zikhronot* and *shofarot* are

detached from the *t'filah* and scattered to different parts of the service, giving the impression that they are of lesser importance compared to *Malkhuyot*, which retains its position in the *t'filah* itself. But that's a complaint for another time. What's important here is that the Reform Rosh Hashanah liturgy contains thirty shofar blasts, which fulfills the Toraitic requirement.

Parenthetically, the *t'ki'ah* that appears in *Mishkan Hanefesh* at the beginning of the evening service (p. 15) is purely for show. It doesn't count as one of the required shofar blasts, which occur during the daytime on Rosh Hashanah.

NOTES

¹ Rambam, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, positive *mitzvah* no. 170: “to hear the sound of the shofar on the first day of Tishri” (לשמוע קול שופר ביום ראשון מתשרי). By contrast, the requirement concerning the shofar on Yom Kippur of *yovel*, the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:9), is לתקוע בשופר, to *sound* the shofar, rather than to hear it.

² The Torah counts the month of the year beginning from the spring; the first month is the month that is now called Nissan. So why is the new year celebrated in the seventh month? That's another long story, also interesting, but it's enough that we tell one long story at a time!

³ The Hebrew verb והעברת, which is often translated as “to carry” (and see Robert Alter's translation of the verse), is understood here as “to sound (the shofar)”; see *B. Rosh Hashanah* 34a and Rashi to Lev. 25: 9.

⁴ See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot T'shuvah* 3:4: אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עוררו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם וכו'.

⁵ Different *minhagim* exist. Some communities will sound תשריית three times, then תשיית three times, and finally תריית three times.

⁶ *Sefer Sh'lah (Sh'nei Luhot Hab'rit)* 220b.

⁷ In the traditional *musaf*, *Malkhuyot* is recited as part of the *k'dushat hayom* benediction, while *zikhronot* and *shofarot* form separate rubrics of the *t'filah*, each concluding with its own *b'rakhah* (benediction).