

# The Shofar: A Tool for Dialogue

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## Who listens to the shofar?

Two opposite answers to this question are given in the two berakhot we say before blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShana. Before the first set of shofar-blasts, we say a berakha, using the standard form that is used before performing many mitzvot: “Baruch atta ... asher kiddeshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivvanu lishmoa kol shofar” (Blessed are you ... who sanctified us with his commandments and commanded **us** to hear the voice of the shofar). But in Musaf, which contains the central tefillot of the day (Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot), we conclude shofarot with the berakha “for **you** listen to the voice of the shofar, and hear the cry, and there is none like you. Blessed are you, who hears the cry of His people Israel with mercy.” In the birkat ha-mitzva, we mention the obligation of **Jews** to hear the shofar, while in Shofarot, we evoke the expectation that **God** hears the shofar.

Recognizing these two opposite answers is a central part of understanding the mitzvah of shofar. The tefilla of Shofarot itself shows that the shofar is designed to evoke a sort of meta-moment in history in which the Jews hear God, and then God hears the Jews.

Like Malkhuyot and Zikhronot (the other central sections of the Musaf prayer on Rosh HaShana), Shofarot consists of an introductory section, followed by three pesukim from Torah, three pesukim from Ketuvim, three pesukim from Nevi'im, and a concluding verse from Torah.

## Initial Torah Verses

The pesukim chazal chose for Shofarot follow a very specific pattern. The initial three pesukim from Torah, chosen from Shemot chapters 19-20, describe the revelation at Sinai. Furthermore, each passuk describes not only the voice of the shofar which sounded at the revelation at Sinai, but a reaction of Moshe or of the Israelites.<sup>1</sup> The pesukim chosen are:

1. Shemot 19:16, which mentions the loud sound of the Shofar at Sinai as the cloud (representing God's Presence) descends, states “the whole people who were in the camp trembled;”

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<sup>1</sup> Shemot 19:13, which mentions God's command about the “blowing of the horn,” but which does not mention the Israelites' reaction, is absent.

2. Shemot 19:19 “The voice of the shofar became exceedingly strong; Moshe spoke and God would answer him loudly.”
3. Shemot 20:15 “The whole people saw the voices (thus) and the torches, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking, and the people saw and moved and stood from afar.”

The first and third verses describe the Israelites’ awe at the sound of the shofar, which heralded the Presence of God. The second verse describes Moshe’s actions, which are a basic part of the interactions between the Israelites and God: Rashbam understands that the sound of the shofar served as an auditory backdrop to a conversation between Moshe and God, while Ramban offers the opinion that after the shofar terrified the people, Moshe would introduce God’s voice to them.

## Ketuvim Verses

In contrast to the Torah verses, which describe the shofar as sounded by God, the verses from Ketuvim describe the Israelites sounding the shofar before God. God’s reaction is mentioned only in the first of these verses: “God has ascended in the cry, the Lord – in the voice of the shofar” (Ps. 47:6). The other verses describe the Israelites sounding the shofar: “In trumpets and the sound of the Shofar, cry out before the King, the Lord” (Ps. 98:7). All of the Ketuvim verses chosen describe an action of the Israelites, done before God, as part of worship.

## Nevi'im Verses

The verses chosen from the Nevi'im move away from the idea of the Israelites as the shofar-blowers. Like the verses from Torah, they describe God as the blower of the shofar. But the meta-historical moment they describe is not the revelation at Sinai, but the moment of final redemption, the ingathering of the Jews to Jerusalem. Each passage describes the Israelites’ reaction to God’s blowing of the shofar: the return to Jerusalem. The verses chosen are:

1. “All the dwellers of the world and inhabitants of the earth, you will see as the banner of the mountains is lifted, and will hear as the shofar is blown” (Isaiah 18:3). The passage speaks of God receiving the oppressed Israelites who are brought as tribute to Jerusalem.
2. “And it will be on that day, a great shofar will be blown, and the lost ones will come from the land of Assyria and the dispersed ones from Egypt, and they will bow to the Lord at the holy mountain of Jerusalem” (Isaiah 27:13).
3. “The Lord will appear upon them, and His arrow will go forth like lightning, and the Lord God will blow a shofar ... the Lord of Hosts will protect them” (Zechariah 9:14-15). The surrounding verses call on Zion to rejoice at the arrival of her king who will rule from “sea to sea,” and order the “prisoners of hope” to return because God is about to appear and save His people.

Just as in the verses chosen from the Torah, here it is God who blows the shofar, and it is the Jews who hearken to His call.

## The Final Torah Verse

A pattern emerges among the three sets of verses described above. First, we find the Torah verses, which describe God as sounding the shofar, and the Israelites listening and reacting.

Then, we find the Ketuvim verses, in which the Israelites sound the shofar, hoping for a Divine reaction. Finally, we find the Nevi'im verses, which describe the culminating moment of history, when God will again sound the shofar, and the Israelites will listen and react. One might expect that the pattern would conclude either with the final redemption, or with another Torah verse about the shofar at Sinai. But instead, the concluding verse chosen is Be-Midbar 10:10, which does not explicitly mention shofar. Be-Midbar 10:9-10 are:

*(9) And if a war should happen in your land, upon the enemy who shows enmity to you, you shall call out in trumpet blasts and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God and you shall be saved from your enemies. (10) And on the day of your happiness and on your festivals, and on the first of your months, you shall blow the trumpets upon your burnt offerings and upon your peace-offerings, and they (the trumpets) shall be for you a remembrance before your God, I am the Lord your God.*

**Be-Midbar 10:9-10**

(ט) וכי תבאו מלחמה בארצכם על  
הצר הצרר אתכם והרעתם  
בחצצרות ונזכרתם לפני ה'  
אלהיכם ונושעתם מאיביכם:  
(י) וביום שמחתכם ובמועדיכם  
ובראשי חדשיכם ותקעתם  
בחצצרת על עלתיכם ועל זבחי  
שלמיכם והיו לכם לזכרון לפני  
אלהיכם אני ה' אלהיכם:  
במדבר י:ט-י

The choice of Be-Midbar 10:10 to conclude Shofarot is meant to fill a lack in the first three parts of the pattern. The first three sections describe the Israelites' reaction to God's blowing of the shofar (in the verses from Torah and Nevi'im), but not the Divine reaction to the Israelites' shofar-blasts (in the verses from Ketuvim).<sup>2</sup> The concluding verse from Torah describes God's reaction to the Israelites' blowing of the trumpets: the trumpets effect a "remembrance" before God, and the Israelites are saved from their enemies (in v. 9) and their sacrifices are accepted (in v. 10).

The verses of Shofarot therefore answer the question: Who listens to the shofar? Both God and Israel. The shofar is a tool for dialogue between God and Israel.

The berakha we say before beginning to blow shofar "asher kiddeshanu be mitzvotav ve-tzivvanu lishmoa kol shofar" (who sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to hear the voice of the shofar) uses the phrase "kol shofar" found in the Torah verses, in Shemot 19-20, in which Israel listens to God's shofar. In contrast, the berakha that concludes Shofarot includes the phrase "ma'azin teru'a" - "You hear the cry." This echoes the language of Be-Midbar 10:9-10, which uses the verb "va-hare'otem" (you shall call out).<sup>3</sup>

The verses construct a sort of implicit argument: God, at Sinai, we listened to Your teki'ot and reacted appropriately. You have promised us that at the moment of the final redemption, we will again listen to your teki'ot and react. God, at this moment, please listen and react to our teki'ot: "for you listen to the voice of the shofar, and hear the cry, and there is none like you. Blessed are you, who hears the cry of His people Israel with mercy."

<sup>2</sup> The only Divine reaction in the verses from Ketuvim is found in Ps. 47:6: "God has ascended in the cry." But this reaction is not one that explicitly responds to the Jews' requests.

<sup>3</sup> For further links of these verses to Shofarot, see Rashi on Be-Midbar 10:10.