



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# Sounding, Hearing

No mitzva over the course of our calendar year is more impactful than the mitzva of *tekiat shofar*. And yet, like so much else surrounding the festival of Rosh Hashana, this mitzva is not commanded directly in the Torah text.

Instead, the obligation emerges obliquely out of the Torah's description of Rosh Hashana as a *Yom Terua*, a day of a broken (shofar) blast, and a *Zichron Terua*, a remembrance of a broken (shofar) blast.

The Torah's lack of clarity concerning the shofar's sounding creates ambiguity about the character of the mitzva itself. Specifically, the rabbis ask, are we each obligated to *sound the shofar* on Rosh Hashana, or are we each obligated to simply *hear the shofar blasts*?

*Is tekiat shofar* a mitzva of *sounding* or of *hearing*?

The answer to this question not only carries practical ramifications but shapes a centuries-old debate concerning the mitzva's philosophical underpinnings, as well.

Some authorities maintain that the Torah obligates each individual adult male *to actually blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana*

This approach, however, presents an obvious problem. Only select individuals are actually capable of properly sounding the shofar. How, then, can members of the general population fulfill their personal responsibility?

The solution to this problem, according to many authorities, lies in the application of the halachic principle of *shomeia k'oneh*, "one who hears is as one who recites."

Based on the concept of *areivut*, the deep interconnection between all Jews, the principle of *shomeia k'oneh* enables an individual to fulfill certain mitzvot through listening to another Jew's performance of those obligations. For this to happen, both the individual performing the mitzva and the listener must have their reciprocal relationship in mind.

Thus, if the *ba'al tokea*, the individual sounding the shofar, intends to do so on behalf of all those within earshot, and those listening aim to fulfill their mitzva through his shofar sounds, *the halacha regards each individual present as having personally sounded the shofar*.

Most other authorities, however, including the Rambam, adopt an entirely different approach to the mitzva of *tekiat shofar*. In their view, the mitzva does not require the

Mazal Tov to  
Menachem Russek  
& Deena Wasserman  
on their marriage

Mazal Tov to Ita Rochel,  
and the entire Wasserman,  
Russek, Levine and Leff families

personal sounding of the shofar by each individual participant. On the contrary, these scholars maintain, the mitzva of *tekiat shofar* simply obligates one to *hear* the appropriate shofar blasts, even if those blasts are sounded by another.

The blessing adopted by most authorities over the years – and universally recited today in conjunction with the mitzva – mirrors this position:

*Baruch ata Hashem, Elokeinu Melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvosav, v'tzivanu lishmoa kol shofar.*

Blessed are You, Hashem, our Lord, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us in His mitzvot and commanded us *to hear the sound of the shofar*.

Finally, yet other authorities raise specific halachic issues with each of the above classical approaches and offer compromise positions between the two. Whatever the upshot of this halachic debate, however, the question remains: Why isn't the Torah clearer in its exposition of the laws of *tekiat shofar*? Why leave the nature of this important mitzva shrouded in mystery?

One could argue that the textual ambiguity is deliberate. Perhaps the Torah wants us to recognize that there is a dual character to the mitzva of *tekiat shofar*. This mitzva may well be designed to remind us that there are times to “sound” and times to “hear.”

The two dimensions of the mitzva will shift from moment to moment over the course of every Rosh Hashana.

At times, when words fail, the shofar blasts serve as prayers to be “sounded,” wordless pleas intended to pierce the heavenly vaults. In these moments, we transcend the limitations of speech, as through the sounding of the shofar we communicate to God the

unspoken fears, concerns, hopes, and aspirations that lie deep within the recesses of our hearts.

*Not everything can be put into words*, we effectively declare. And we beseech God to accept the powerful emotions that remain unsaid.

The insertion and integration of the primary shofar sounds directly into the Rosh Hashana Musaf Amida underscores their role as wordless prayer.<sup>1</sup>

There are other times, however, when the shofar blasts are not meant to be “sounded,” but to be “heard.” These are the moments when the demand upon us is *to stop talking and to listen*, to hear the myriad voices that should power our prayers.

In the shofar blasts we should hear the voices of our earliest progenitors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, whose search for God led them to establish the three daily prayer

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1. Two traditions have risen concerning these shofar blasts, known as the *tekiot d'me'umad* (standing *tekiot*). Ashkenazim limit their sounding to chazan's repetition of the Amida, while Sephardim sound them during the congregation's silent recitation of the Amida, as well.

In each case, these shofar blasts are connected to the three major sections of the Rosh Hashana Musaph Amida: *Malchiot* (Kingship), *Zichronot* (Remembrances), and *Shofarot* (Shofar Blasts).

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services; the voice of King David, whose psalms bring the myriad of human emotions into our tefilla each day; the voices of scholars over the ages who further shaped our prayers; the voices of Jews across time, whose unrealized dreams for the future are now dependent on us; and, above all, the voice of God, telling us of His dreams for our people, of the challenges of our time that must be met.

And, if we listen carefully enough, we will also hear in those shofar blasts the voices of our own hearts, reminding us of the true priorities that we know, deep down, should guide our lives. Heard from a place of open sincerity, the shofar blasts call us back to the truly important facets of our lives, so often lost in the daily grind.

On Rosh Hashana, the shofar must be both “sounded” and “heard.” Whether this happens is entirely dependent upon us.

The mitzva of *tekiat shofar* demands that we be sensitive to the rhythm of the festival, to the shifting moments of the days. We must be ardent in our prayers, yet contemplative in our thoughts. Only if we both “sound” and “hear” the shofar will we achieve our Rosh Hashana goals. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes “Unlocking the Torah Text,” and “Unlocking the Haggada.”



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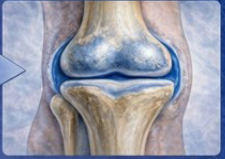
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