Horns and Blasts
The Fascinating World of the Shofar

According to the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 26a), a shofar may be made from the horn of any animal from the Bovidae family except that of a cow, although a ram is preferable. Bovidae horns are made of a layer of keratin (the same material as human toenails and fingernails) around a core of bone, with a layer of cartilage in between, which can be removed to leave the hollow keratin horn. There are short shofars, long shofars, curly shofars, straight shofars and curved shofars. There are black shofars, brown shofars, beige shofars and any combination of these colors. All of Klal Yisrael blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. On the facing page are some of the different shofars blown around the world.

Blowing the Shofar

- When Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the shofar is not blown.¹
- Women are not required to listen to the shofar since it is a mitzvah that is dependent on time. A woman cannot blow the shofar for the benefit of a man since he is commanded to fulfill this mitzvah while she is not. However, the custom is that women do listen to the shofar and can blow the shofar for themselves and other women, even with a beracha.²
- On a Biblical level, one is only required to listen to nine calls of the shofar.³ This is derived from verses that three teruot are required and each needs a tekia before and after, totaling nine.⁴ However, a question arose as to what constitutes a proper terua: is it three short sounds (shevarim), many rapid sounds (terua) or both together (shevarim terua)?⁵ The Talmud⁶ therefore requires that we listen to all of them, for a total of 30.
- The Talmud⁷ specifies that the shofar is blown on two occasions on Rosh Hashanah: once while “sitting” (before Musaf), and once while “standing” (during Musaf). This increases the number of blasts, from the basic requirement of 30 to 60. The Aruch mentions a custom to blow 100 blasts: 30 before Musaf, 30 during the Musaf silent prayer, 30 during the chazzan’s repetition of Musaf, and 10 more after Musaf.⁸ The final 10 blasts are a tradition dating to the Geonim. Blowing 100 (or 101) blasts is nearly universal today, though many congregations omit the 30 blasts in the silent prayer, and instead blow 40 after Musaf.⁹

¹ Rosh Hashanah 4:1.
² Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 589:6, Rama.
³ Ibid 590:1.
⁴ Ibid 590:2, Mishna Berurah.
⁵ Ibid 590:2.
⁶ Rosh Hashanah 34a.
⁷ Ibid 16a.
⁸ Aruch 272:1; mentioned in Tosafot Rosh Hashanah 33b.
⁹ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 129:17.
Ram’s Horn, Ashkenazi-Sephardi Style
The classic ram horn shofar is by far the most commonly used shofar. Used by both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, it is made from the horn of a domestic ram. Most ram horn shofars are long, with a straightened handle and light in color, though black ones are available from black rams. Due to a relatively long drill hole, it has a high and sharp tone.

Ram’s Horn, Yemenite Style
Made according to the Rambam’s ruling that the original shape of the horn must not be changed. This kind of shofar is not straightened, but rather cut next to the hollow part of the horn and has a short drill hole, and therefore a low, deep sound. These shofars are usually not ornamented externally, leaving the horn in its natural state.

Ram’s Horn, Moroccan-German Style
A flat ram’s horn shofar. Its production process is complex and takes a long time. It originated during the Spanish Inquisition when the Jews had to conceal their religion and customs and would flatten the shofar to hide it more easily under their clothes. Following the expulsion from Spain, some Jews arrived in North Africa, while others reached Eastern Europe. A vast shofar industry flourished in Morocco, although this type of shofar can also be found in Jewish communities in Poland, Germany and elsewhere.

Kudu’s Horn
The kudu is a species of antelope found in the southern parts of the African continent. Its horn can reach a length of about 150cm and is impressive in size, color and sound. Yemenite Jews used to blow this horn because kudu’s horns were easier to obtain than ram’s horns. This horn has a deep sound due to its large volume of air and can produce different tones (usually 2-3 or more).

Ram’s Horn, Bavli Shofar
The Bavli is a natural, unfinished ram’s horn with a very deep sound and is typically used by Iraqi and Iranian Jews. It looks similar to a Yemenite shofar, with a short drill, a large mouthpiece, and a relatively wide sound box. It is characterized by its narrow panel and a deep low sound.

Did You Know?
- The shofar is the musical instrument mentioned most frequently in the Bible – 72 times!
- The raw horn goes through 14 different stages before it becomes an elegant shofar.
- Washing or cleaning the shofar will change its sound temporarily until it is completely dry.
- Each horn is unique and there isn’t one exactly like it in the whole world, not even its “twin horn” (the other horn of the same ram)!
- The size of the shofar does not affect how kosher it is.
- During the Ottoman and British rule of Jerusalem, the Jews were not allowed to sound the shofar at the Kotel.