



# JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

## ROSH HASHANAH: A DAY OF SHOFAR BLOWING SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



We are all familiar with Rosh Hashanah, the holiday ushering in the new year and upon which we are judged. Yet, we only know this name and concept through Rabbinic tradition. Let's take a look at how the Torah describes the day in its own words:

### SOURCE 1: TORAH, BAMIDBAR 29:1 – ROSH HASHANAH – A DAY OF TRU'AH (SHOFAR BLOWING)

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month\* (Rosh Hashanah), you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it **as a day of blowing. (tru'uah)**

וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ  
יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלָאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם  
תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם:

(\*Note: Rosh Hashanah is the first day of Tishrei, which is the seventh month of the Jewish New Year. Why it's not in the first month of the year is a class for another day!)

**Question:** Why do you think the holiday is described in the Torah as a "day of tru'ah" (blowing) without any mention of Rosh Hashanah - the New Year, or judgment?

**It must be that blowing the shofar, which is the mitzvah of the day, somehow defines its essence.** But how? Let's take a look at a section of the Talmud from the Tractate Rosh Hashanah to gain more understanding of the function of the shofar:

### SOURCE 2: TALMUD ROSH HASHANAH 16A KINGSHIP, REMEMBRANCE, AND SHOFAR IN THE MUSSAF PRAYER

And **recite** before Me **on Rosh Hashanah** verses that mention **Kingship, Remembrances, and Shofros:** Kingship so that you will **crown Me as King** over you; Remembrances so that **your remembrance will rise before Me for good**; and with what will the remembrance rise? **It will rise with the shofar.**

וְאָמְרוּ לִפְנֵי בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה מַלְכוּיֹת זְכוּרוֹנוֹת  
וְשׁוֹפְרוֹת. מַלְכוּיֹת – בְּדִי שֶׁתִּמְלִיכוּנִי עֲלֵיכֶם,  
זְכוּרוֹנוֹת – בְּדִי שִׁיעֲלֶה זְכוּרֹנֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי לְטוֹבָה,  
וּבִמָּה – בְּשׁוֹפָר

The verses mentioned in the source above are those we say in the Rosh Hashana prayers at Mussaf, and refer to the three major themes of the prayer and the day: (1) **making God king (kingship)**, (2) entreating God to **"remember us favorably in judgment,"** and (3) **shofar blasts** – literally **the instrument that moves God to render a positive judgment.**

**Just a note about the judgment of Rosh Hashanah for context:** We are used to thinking that we are being judged on our past deeds on Rosh Hashanah. But that is only partly true. More accurately, we are being judged upon how sincerely we want to **improve in the year ahead**, with last year's deeds as a barometer of what we may deserve. **This yearning to change and come closer to God, which we express on Rosh Hashanah is summarized as "Making God King."** When we undertake to stand up for God's values and do His mitzvot, we literally bring His sovereignty into the world – one person at a time.

The goal is to make God King and upon this we are judged, yet the source describes a somewhat odd way to accomplish this; **we blow the shofar and somehow bring remembrances in front of God for a good judgment. How does this make God King?**

Let's look at this process more carefully, and ask some other basic questions about it:

**Question:** First of all, what are the "remembrances" that the Talmud is referring to?

**Question:** Secondly, whether we deserve a good judgment or not, what do positive remembrances have to do with it? It almost sounds like we are planning to manipulate God to do something He wouldn't do otherwise.

**Question:** Finally, how is this "manipulation" accomplished through the shofar?

Before we answer our questions, let's take a look at another way the day of Rosh Hashanah is described in the Torah:

**SOURCE 3:** TORAH, VAYIKRA 23:24 ROSH HASHANAH –  
A REMEMBRANCE OF TRU'AH (SHOFAR BLOWING)

Speak to the Children of Israel saying: In the **seventh month, on the first day of the month (Rosh Hashanah)**, you shall observe complete rest, a "**remembrance of tru'ah (blowing)**," a sacred occasion.

דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֹדֶשׁ  
הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם  
שַׁבָּתוֹן זִכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ:

**Question:** Question: We see Rosh Hashanah described as a remembrance of tru'ah (blowing). Maybe the verse is referring to the same remembrance God desires through the shofar? What could that be?

**SOURCE 4:** TALMUD ROSH HASHANAH 16A –  
SHOFAR IS A REMINDER OF THE AKEIDA, BINDING OF ISAAC

Rabbi Avahu said: Why do we blow with a **shofar from a ram**? God said, "Blow with a shofar of a ram in order that **I should remember the binding of Isaac**, son of Abraham, and I will **thereby consider it** as if you had **bound yourselves before Me.**"

אמר רבי אבהו: למה תוקעין בשופר של  
איל? - אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: תקעו  
לפני בשופר של איל, כדי שאזכור לכם  
עקידת יצחק בן אברהם, ומעלה אני  
עליכם כאילו עקדתם עצמכם לפני.

**Question:** What is so special about the "binding of Isaac" that it is presented as the key to inducing a good judgment from God on Rosh Hashanah?

There are two significant attributes modeled through the Akeida, one by Isaac and one by Abraham. **Isaac modeled self-sacrifice** – the literal nullification of self before God; while **Abraham taught us about the love of God**, which grew through a decades-long spiritual journey culminating with his attempt to offer his son to God.

**Question:** Question: Do you see a connection between the binding of Isaac and the obligation of "Making God King"?

Self-sacrifice and love; are there any better qualities with which to show our devotion to God, during the act which coronates Him as King? Therefore, the shofar is the perfect instrument through which to deliver this message to God, because it symbolically embodies these attributes, and reminds us that just as our ancestors possessed them, so do we.

**The blasts invoke their merit, and awaken within us this spirit from deep within our souls, calling us to recommit ourselves to God and His plan for humanity.**

## DEEP DIVE ON THE SHOFAR:

**SOURCE 5:** CODE OF JEWISH LAW, SHULCHAN ORECH 586:1 –  
SHOFAR: BENT OR STRAIGHT?

The shofar of Rosh Hashanah should be **from a ram and bent**; under extreme circumstances, all shofars are kosher, whether straight or bent, **however the mitzva is better fulfilled with a bent one** rather than a straight one.

שופר של ראש השנה מצותו בשל  
איל וכפוף ובדיעבד כל השופר  
כשרים בין פשוטים בין כפופים  
ומצוה בכפופים יותר מבפשוטים

**Question:** We understand now why we use a ram's horn. But, why do you think the Rabbis prefer it to be bent, though it is much harder to blow than a straight one?

- One answer given by many, among them the Chofetz Chaim, is that the bent shofar reminds us to humble ourselves, thereby **"bending our hearts before God."**
- Another approach might be that a **bent shofar more closely resembles the course that our lives take, winding, circuitous, and sometimes difficult, bent, crooked, and out of shape.** We have to blow hard and continuously to get this bent and winding shofar to make a sound.

Consider a few final thoughts that will take this concept to a deeper level:

**SOURCE 6:** TORAH BEREISHIS 2:7 – THE BREATH OF LIFE

The Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and He **blew into his nostrils the breath of life;** a living soul.

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹקִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן-  
הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפִּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי  
הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

As the verse suggests, **our very life force is derived from the "breath of God Himself."**

**Question:** Do you see a connection between this concept and the central mitzvah of shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah?

God asks us to **take the very breath** that **He has given to us**, and on **Rosh Hashanah blow it back to Him**, as it were, **with self-sacrifice** (symbolized by the ram's horn of the Akeida,) **and love**, each step of the way invoking the spiritual greatness of Abraham and Isaac. This is how we make God King, with an intensely moving visual of sacrifice and commitment, motivated by love of God.

Let's conclude these thoughts where we began. **This day is called a "day of tru'ah (blowing)."** According to the **mystical writings of the Zohar**, it is called a **day of tru'ah**, because it is a **day of brokenness**. We come before God broken and contrite on Rosh Hashanah, sincerely committing to a new beginning.

Yet, the sounds of the shofar we blow on Rosh Hashanah are not all broken and short. Take a look at the final source below which provides a meaningful explanation regarding this observation:

**SOURCE 7:** RABBI SIMCHA BARNETT LECTURE THE NOTES OF THE SHOFAR – TEKIAH-TRU'AH-TEKIAH,

**Rosh Hashanah is a day of tru'ah.** Though every sequence of notes that we blow with the shofar has a different type of **tru'ah** in the middle, it is nonetheless bracketed by another note, called a **tekiah**, at the beginning and the end. **The tru'ah is a short, broken note** that is patterned after crying, while the **tekia is a long and unbroken note**. We understand why we blow the tru'ah, but why the tekiah?

This sequence of **tekiah-tru'ah-tekiah** mirrors the course of our lives and the history of the Jewish People. As Jews, we first heard the long, unbroken (unified) **tekia** when we received the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Since then, we've traversed a long and winding road, full of trials and tribulations, often bent over against our will and broken, symbolized by the **tru'ah**. **But our destiny as part of the Chosen People is to fix what is broken and to lead the world to an era where we will once more hear the unbroken "Tekiah Gedola," heralding the messianic era of world peace under the dominion of God.** This is why we blow the shofar; it's our unarticulated prayer and commitment to God to help bring His vision for humanity into existence. **This is how we "Make God King." And upon the strength of this commitment, we are judged!**

**Question:** What broken areas of your life would you like to make whole this year?

**Question:** How can you contribute to a revival of the Jewish People, and its message to the world to help advance God's plan for humanity?