



Keddem Congregation

קהילת קדם

## SHOFAR SOUNDING MADE EASY

Becoming בַּאֵל תְּקִיעָה (*Baal T'kiah*)  
in One Easy Lesson

Alan M. Marcum  
Keddem Congregation  
Elul, 5760/September, 2000

### Background Information about the Shofar

*Baal T'kiah*: Master of the Blast, Master of the Shofar Call. We start with some background on shofar, to prepare us to learn the calls and techniques themselves.

#### **What Is a Shofar?**

A shofar is an animal's horn. Traditionally, a ram's horn is used for a shofar, but many other animals' horns may be used. In fact, the horn of any kosher animal, except a cow<sup>1</sup> and an ox may be used. (We don't use a cow's horn or an ox's horn because of the Golden Calf.)

Why a ram's horn, traditionally? Because it was a ram that Avraham saw, caught in the thicket by its horns, when the angel stayed him from sacrificing Yitzchak.

Unlike most instrumental horns (e.g., a trumpet, or a French horn) a shofar has no separate, formed mouthpiece. Rather, the small end of the shofar is hollowed out, shaped, and smoothed somewhat to form an integral mouthpiece. *The First Jewish Catalog* has a good section on shofarot<sup>2</sup>.

#### **When Do We Sound Shofar?**

We traditionally sound shofar at Rosh Chodesh (the new month), each morning during Elul, on Rosh Hashanah, and on Yom Kippur. Shofar is blown during Elul<sup>3</sup> to call our attention to the coming Days of Awe, and to remind us to prepare for the season. Elul is a prelude to the Days of Awe; shofar is one way we connect them.

#### **Why Do We Sound Shofar?**

We sound shofar to signal or to accompany an important public event. There have been many uses of shofar: the installation of a new king, a battle victory.

#### **Why Do We Sound Shofar on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?**

On Rosh Hashanah, shofar is used to proclaim God's sovereignty. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, it announces our freedom from *chayt*, from the *missing of the mark*.

Rosh Hashanah has many names, one of which is *Yom T'ruah*. From Leviticus (*Vayikra*) 23:24, "...In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall be a solemn rest...a memorial proclaimed with the blast of horns..."

<sup>1</sup> Or a bull, or a steer.

<sup>2</sup> Shofarot is plural of shofar.

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, shofar is not sounded on Shabbat.

Despite this, there is no specific *mitzvah*, no commandment telling each of us to sound shofar on Rosh Hashanah. There is no *bracha* (blessing) for *sounding* shofar. Rather, the *mitzvah* is to *hear* the shofar; the *bracha* is thanking God for commanding us to *hear* shofar.

Traditionally, one person at a time sounds shofar during Rosh Hashanah, so that we know which shofar we're hearing while fulfilling the *mitzvah*. At Keddem, we have frequently had more than one *baal t'kiah* during Rosh Hashanah, but only one is blowing at a time. During Yom Kippur, though, we include as many members of the community as possible in sounding the concluding shofar calls, and invite all who want to join in the blowing to blow. All are welcome to blow the Yom Kippur calls, from novice to *baal t'kiah*.

## Blowing Shofar

Shofar is sounded much like any brass instrument. You're trying to get a column of air vibrating. However, you have no mouthpiece, no valves, no designed tuning, no nice bell to help transfer the sound from inside the horn to the outside air. So, it's a little harder to get a good sound.

### What are the Shofar Calls

There are three basic shofar calls, and two variants. During the Shofar Service, all five of these calls are used. The three basic calls (sometimes called "notes") are:

1. תְּקִיעָה (*T'kiah*): A blast. This is one sound, about 1½-2 seconds long. Accomplished *baalei*<sup>4</sup> *t'kiah* will make this a two-toned call, the second note one fifth higher than the first, and about twice as long, conforming to halakhah.
2. שְׁבָרִים (*Sh'varim*): Broken blast. *Sh'varim* is like three quick *t'kiah* calls in rapid succession, with the whole affair taking as long as a regular *t'kiah*.
3. תְּרוּעָה (*T'ruah*): Alarm! Many rapid notes, at about the same pitch. A *t'ruah* should take as long as a *t'kiah*, but should have a total of between seven and thirteen separate notes (most frequently cited in my research: nine notes).

The variants are:

4. שְׁבָרִים-תְּרוּעָה (*Sh'varim-T'ruah*): A broken alarm. One call that's a combination of *sh'varim* and *t'ruah*. The call is sounded without breathing between the two pieces (between the *sh'varim* and the *t'ruah*).
5. תְּקִיעָה גְּדוּלָה (*T'kiah G'dolah*): A big blast. The *t'kiah* is held for a long time. There are at least three traditions for how long: as long as possible; for eighteen seconds; for three times as long as a regular *t'kiah*.

During Keddem's Rosh Hashanah *Shacharit* (Morning) Service<sup>5</sup>, ten calls comprise each "verse." This verse is repeated four times during the Shofar Service, and once at the end of *Shacharit*:

*T'kiah sh'varim-t'ruah t'kiah.*

*T'kiah sh'varim t'kiah.*

*T'kiah t'ruah t'kiah.*

*T'kiah.*

<sup>4</sup> Baalim is plural of baal; Baalei T'kiah means "Masters of T'kiah."

<sup>5</sup> There are various traditions and customs regarding this, so we'll focus on Keddem's practices.

For the fourth and fifth repetitions of the verse, the final *t'kiah* is replaced by *t'kiah g'dolah*.

During the end of the Yom Kippur *N'ilah* (Concluding) Service, the verse is sounded one last time, concluding with the *t'kiah g'dolah*.

### **How do I Get Sound Out of this Thing?**

Let's start out with the most basic of ways to get sound. Make a raspberry. That's right, a Bronx cheer. Next, do it with your tongue just barely separating your lips—almost completely inside your mouth—instead of sticking as far out as possible.

Thp-thp-thp-thp-thp-thpt. Right.

Now, pull your tongue completely inside your mouth, and blow through your lips. Pretend you're mimicking a horse blowing through its lips, but keep your lips tight instead of loose.

Ppp-ppp-ppp-ppp-ppp. Good!

While you're mimicking a horse with tight lips, bring the shofar up to the center of your mouth. Keep blow while you do it, even as the shofar's mouthpiece contacts your lips. The shofar will now amplify your ppp-ppp-ppp-ppp-ppp sound, and you might even get some nice sounding harmonic coming from the horn.

There you go: that's the most basic *t'kiah*. Practice that several times, until you can get the sound started without having to imitate that horse first. Bring the shofar to your lips, purse your lips, and blow. Don't worry about that two-tone fancy *t'kiah* yet.

### **Beyond the Basics**

Once you're able to get a *t'kiah* out of your shofar, and even while you're just trying to do it without first imitating that horse, experiment with the placement of the shofar on your lips. Some people like to blow out of a corner of their mouth; others blow out of the center. A shofar's "mouthpiece" is usually asymmetric, so try turning the shofar around 30°-45° at a time, until you think you've found where it's easiest to get a reasonable sound. Remember how you're holding and positioning the shofar when you find that spot so you can use it again consistently.

For a *sh'varim*, you just link three *t'kiah* calls together without taking a breath, without really even stopping between each.

There are two ways to blow *t'ruah*. The simple way is just to wiggle the shofar around a bit, back and forth on your lips, while blowing *t'kiah*. This will cause the sound from the shofar to break up, almost as if it were several separate notes. The complicated way is to "tongue" each of the notes comprising the *t'ruah*, interrupting the flow of air ever so briefly with your tongue. (The really good brass players use a technique called "double-tonguing," where they use two different parts of the tongue to modulate the air, allowing for more rapid notes.)

When you're ready to work on *sh'varim-t'ruah*, just sound the three-part *sh'varim*, immediately followed by the many-part *t'ruah*. It sounds complicated, and perhaps seems intimidating, but it really is just the two separate notes sounded without a pause.

For that finale, the *t'kiah g'dolah*, a few hints. First, even if you're sounding a two-tone *t'kiah*, don't worry about that for *t'kiah g'dolah*. It's better if *t'kiah g'dolah* is two-toned also, but don't worry about it in the beginning. Second, you'll be able to hold a softer, quieter note longer than a big loud one. Third, it's traditional at the end of the *t'kiah g'dolah* to use your last bit of air to end with a bit of a flourish: make the last moment of the call be loud!

## Practice

Between now and Yom Kippur, practice. At first, just work on the basics: *t'kiah*. Add *sh'varim* when you're ready, perhaps after a day or two. Then add *t'ruah*, again after a day or two.

Keep your practice sessions short at first: it's important to work your lip into shape gradually. Five minutes or so is a great start: it's no fun to have a blister on your lip!

When you have the three basic calls down, add the two variants: *sh'varim-t'ruah* and *t'kiah g'dolah*. I like to practice *t'kiah g'dolah* as the last call of my session: it just feels right. When you feel comfortable with all the calls, string them together in the verse shown on page 2.

## Buying a Shofar

Some closing advice on buying a shofar. Choose your shofar in person, or have someone you know choose it in person. There are many variations in size, shape, color, markings, ridges, ease of blowing, and tone. Visual esthetics affects the price; sound quality and ease of blowing do not.

Choose a size and a price range. A larger shofar is heavier; that might or might not be a consideration. A larger shofar is also more expensive. A child's shofar this year is around \$25-\$30, and a small adult's shofar around \$35-\$40. A very large ram's horn that all but doubles back on itself, with very pronounced markings and ridges (and a marvelous deep resonant tone) costs around \$120-\$140; other sizes and prices come between the child's and the very large horn. The triple-twist Yemenite shofar (from an animal similar to an antelope) can run to \$175-\$200.

It's a strange quirk of fate that the smaller shofarot typically purchased for children and beginners are much more difficult to blow than the larger ones. (However, it's much easier to get a long *t'kiah g'dolah* from a small shofar. You need less energy to sustain the vibrating air column—to keep the note sounding—with a small shofar, whose air column is small, than with a large shofar, whose air column is big.)

You might find a few shofarot that aren't curved in three dimensions, but rather are curved only in two. Some people like the way these look better than the others, some don't, but there's no difference in ease of blowing. All shofarot will be curved, symbolizing humility (a bent back).

When I buy a shofar, I start by finding those in the chosen price range (and, therefore, size). I then blow each of them, keeping those that are easiest to blow and have the best sound (these two qualities often accompany one another, but that's not always true), returning the others. I go back through those kept until I narrow it down to those that have the best sound. Now it's time to go with esthetics: from those remaining, choose the one you think looks best. Return the rest, pay for the one you've chosen, and say a *shehecheyanu!*

## Caring for Your Shofar

As you might guess if you think about it, dogs *love* shofarot: they smell just like bones to them. In fact, if you blow yours for anything more than a few minutes, you'll probably detect a very animal-like aroma. That's okay: don't worry about it.

I occasionally (once every year or two) polish my shofar with a high quality furniture polish. Avoid getting your shofar very hot and moist.

## Blow, Baby, Blow

Many people let their shofarot sit on the shelf for almost the entire year. Don't let yours collect dust. Blow year round. Mark the new moon. Blow each morning during Elul. Practice a little during the rest of the year.

*Yashir koach: may you go from strength to strength!*