TUTORIAL: The Voices of the Shofar

HOW IS A SHOFAR MADE?

The most important mitsva of Rosh HaShana is hearing the Shofar. A Shofar is an animal horn that has been modified into a wind instrument. To prepare one, the inner core is removed from the horn sheath, and then a mouthpiece is opened and shaped at the narrow end.

This video, in Hebrew, shows the whole production process:

TUTORIAL: HOW DO YOU BLOW A SHOFAR?

So how do you actually get a sound out of it?

Do not put the mouthpiece inside your mouth, between your lips, as though you were inflating a balloon. If you simply blow air into the Shofar that way, you generally will not get the right sound.

The Shofar rests against closed lips, to one side of the mouth (the right side if possible) or in the center. Once the mouthpiece is against the lips, blow while keeping the lips pressed firmly together and making them vibrate, as if you were repeatedly pronouncing the letter “P.” This is basically the same technique used to play a trumpet.

This video shows it clearly:

Do not puff out your cheeks or take in an exaggerated amount of air. Breathe as normally as possible. The hard part is finding the exact position and angle of the mouthpiece on your lips so that air does not escape out the sides. That takes some practice.

The basic steps:

1. Close and press the lips together.
2. Make the lips vibrate with a sound like the letter “P.”
3. Rest the mouthpiece of the Shofar on the lips.
4. Move the Shofar slightly and adjust its position until you find the point where it produces a clean, steady sound.

THE VOICES OF THE SHOFAR (QOLOT)

Every Shofar has its own “voice,” the way every person has a particular voice. Still, a given Shofar produces basically one musical note. On Rosh HaShana that note is articulated in three different ways, which our Sages call qolot, “voices.”

The first voice is the teqi’a. A long, continuous, unbroken sound.

The second is shebarim. Three shorter, broken sounds. To produce them, you interrupt the stream of air into the Shofar several times.

The third is the teru’a, a series of very short, consecutive sounds. Traditionally about nine of them. A common way to do it is to make quick little interruptions with the tongue while blowing.

In this video, especially between seconds 6 and 9, you can clearly hear one of the most common ways of producing the teru’a:

There are other traditions for the teru’a. In some communities, instead of separating each small sound with taps of the tongue, the player rapidly changes air pressure or lip position, creating a kind of wavering sound that is less clearly divided.

This form of teru’a is characteristic of many Yemenite Jews, among other communities, and is also found in some Syrian traditions.

You can hear it in this video:

THE 100 SOUNDS

The basic combination of Shofar sounds on Rosh HaShana is:

- Teqi’a / Shebarim-Teru’a / Teqi’a: 4 sounds.
- Teqi’a / Shebarim / Teqi’a: 3 sounds.
- Teqi’a / Teru’a / Teqi’a: 3 sounds.

Ten sounds in all.

The series is repeated several times over Rosh HaShana: before Musaf, during the Tefila of Musaf, during the repetition of Musaf, and again at the end. That is how we traditionally reach 100 voices of the Shofar, □□□□□ □□□, meah qolot, on Rosh HaShana. This year only on Sunday, the second day of Rosh HaShana.

So behind every sound of the Shofar there is much more than technique. There is a precise tradition about how to produce its different “voices,” how to combine them, and above all how to hear them, in order to fulfill the central mitsva of Rosh HaShana.