



Numbers 29:1: Listening to the Sound of the Shofar

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Editor's Note: Huffington Post Religion has launched a [scripture commentary/reflection](#) series, which brings together leading voices from different religious traditions to offer their wisdom on selected religious texts. We are pleased to announce a series of reflections on scripture associated with the Jewish High Holidays with reflections by Rabbis from across the country and diverse traditions.

This is the third such series following Ramadan reflections on the Holy Qur'an as well as Christian reflections on the Gospel. Next month we look forward to having Hindu leaders offer scriptural reflections upon the occasion of Diwali.

We hope all readers, Jewish and non-Jewish will gain wisdom from the insights of our contributors during the High Holidays.

"And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be a sacred assembly, a cessation from work, a Yom Teru'ah, a day of sounding the teru'ah." (Numbers 29:1)

All Jewish holy days have mitzvot, special commandments connected to them. The mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is "L'shmoah kol shofar," to listen to the sound of the shofar. The shofar is a ram's horn. The sound it makes is unpredictable, eerie, powerful, and ancient. Its connection to Rosh Hashanah is not just from the Biblical verse (above), but from the story we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. There, at the very last minute before Abraham commits what for us is the unthinkable act of murdering his own son, Abraham looks up to see a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. Abraham looks up, wakes up to a different possibility, and substitutes the ram for his son. Sounding the shofar evokes that ram. The shofar calls us to wake up, to do tikkun nefesh, an accounting of our souls, and to ask for forgiveness: first from other people...and then, from God. The sound is both a challenge and a warning.

There are three sounds: tekiyah, shevarim and teru'ah. The sound of tekiyah, a long whole note, connects us to creation, revelation, and redemption. We hear that sound: we are present as the universe is created. We hear that sound: we stand again at Sinai. We hear that sound: we are partners in bringing about redemption.

It seems that the ancient rabbis knew what tekiyah sounded like because they describe it. But they are not so sure about the other two sounds. Given that Torah calls Rosh Hashanah Yom Teru'ah, the day of the sounding of the teru'ah, it was important to the rabbis of the Talmud to get the sound right. They determine the sound based on a surprising source -- a word that appears in the Book of Judges about the mother of Sisera, when she hears of her son's death: "The mother of

Sisera stood at the window and ya-bev: she made the sound of yevavah [which is the Aramaic translation of teru'ah]." (Judges 5: 28)

The mother of Sisera? Remember who Sisera was? In the time of the Judges, Sisera was the captain of the enemy army that oppressed the Israelites. Why do we care about his mother?

Here is what the Talmud says: "What is the sound of teru'ah? One opinion is that... she (the mother of Sisera, upon hearing of his death) sighed and sighed and therefore the teru'ah should sound like a gasping sound, and one opinion is that she cried and cried and therefore the sound of the teru'ah should be constantly broken like uncontrollable crying." (B.T. Rosh Hashanah 33b)

Because there were two different sounds, sighing and crying, the ancient rabbis compromised and included both sounds in the shofar service on Rosh Hashanah: they called the first, shevarim, three gasping sounds, and the second, teru'ah, nine staccato sounds like crying. Both of these sounds emerge from the anguish of the mother of Sisera.

There is another tradition that links the sound of the shofar to a different mother. This midrash, rabbinic story, describes that when Sarah mistakenly heard that her husband Abraham had sacrificed her beloved only son, "Sarah began to cry, and moan the sound of three wails, which correspond to the three blasts of the shofar, and her soul burst forth from her and she died." (Midrash Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer)

Two different mothers, one the mother of our enemy; the other, the mother of our own ancestor, Isaac. The tears of both Sarah and the unnamed mother of Sisera are in the sound of the shofar.

What are we meant to learn from linking this sound to the stories of these mothers? Perhaps the lesson is that the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah reminds us that every human being, whether our enemy or our friend, has a mother. Every human being killed, whether enemy or family, leaves a mother sobbing by a window or dying of a broken heart. We are all children of our mothers, and we are all children of God. We can't truly hear the sound of tekiyah gedolah, the long whole note signaling redemption, until we see the face of God in every human being. Perhaps that is why the Zohar, the major text of Jewish mysticism, says: "All sounds on high are included in the Shofar."

We enter the New Year with the sounds of the shofar reverberating through us. May they remind us to try to see every human being as one created in God's image. And then perhaps, this New Year will be a year of peace.