



## ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

### “Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

by Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 4. Rosh HaShana 1 — New Year: Roots, Meanings, and Context

##### Context

At the head of the annual cycle of Jewish festivals, *Rosh HaShana-the Jewish New Year* proposes a two-day encounter with one another, with the Divine, with Creation, and with ourselves. Like most of the major Jewish festivals, Rosh HaShana derives from the Torah and evolved dramatically during the rabbinic period onward until our time. Rosh HaShana is rich with meaning, ritual, culinary, family, personal, and community customs.

A central theme of Rosh HaShana is *malkhut*-divine sovereignty. We enter the palace of the Sovereign of the Universe. Reflected in the traditional liturgies, melodies, prayers, clothing, and sounding of the *shofar*-ram's horn, the atmosphere is regal.

As we proceed through the cycle of the festivals in this Bea Zucker Calendar series, we explore unique feminist perspectives. In this first of three units on Rosh HaShana, we focus on roots, meanings, and context of the holiday.

##### Background

###### *Biblical roots*

The Torah briefly refers to a festival on the first day of the seventh Hebrew month. Like all of the biblical festivals and [Shabbat](#), the Torah instructs abstinence from performing many [acts of labor](#), particularly those involved in bread and garment-making. A distinguishing element of festival of the seventh month is the sounding of the *shofar*- a ram's horn that has been hollowed out so that it may be blown.

<p>Bamidbar 29</p> <p><sup>1</sup> In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a <b>day of sounding the <i>shofar</i>-horn.</b></p>	<p>במדבר כט</p> <p>א וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם.</p>
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In our experience, the sounding of the shofar is unique to the fall high holy days. However, in the Torah, the shofar appears in many contexts. In this session, we explore associations of the shofar and meanings for Rosh HaShana.

###### *Akedat Yitzchak*—Binding of Yitzchak

The sages choose the Torah passage narrating the binding of Yitzchak for the reading on the second day of Rosh HaShana.

<p>ט וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת-</p>	<p>9 They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Avraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Yitzchak; he laid him on the</p>
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<p>הַעֲצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל-  הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים. י וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-  יְדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֹתוֹ מִלֶּאֱדָן יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר  אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲיֵנִי. יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל-  תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְאַל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה  כִּי עֵתָה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרְאֵ אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא  חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי. יג וַיֵּשֶׂא  אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵ וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחַר  נִאֲחָז בְּסֹבֵב בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלְךָ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-  הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַחַת בְּנוֹ.  בר' כ"ב</p>	<p>altar, on top of the wood. 10 And Avraham picked up the knife to slay his son. 11 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Avraham! Avraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." 12 And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." 13 When Avraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. Ber. 22</p>
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After the angel intervenes to prevent the child sacrifice, Avraham sees a ram, and offers it as a substitute for Yitzchak. There is no literal mention of the ram's horn in this text. Yet, reading this Torah passage on Rosh HaShana with its themes of awe, fear, and ultimate submission of human will to the Divine evokes the association of the ram with the shofar. We will explore this connection further in our second Rosh HaShana unit on the readings of the festival. See also the

*Mount Sinai*

A core reference to the shofar is in the revelation at Mount Sinai,

<p>וַיְהִי קוֹלֹת וּבָרָקִים וַעֲנַן כָּבֵד עַל-הָהָר וְקוֹל  שֹׁפָר חָזֵק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרְדּוּ כָּל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר  בַּמַּחֲנֶה.  שמי' יט: טז</p>	<p>. . . there was thunder and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the <b>shofar</b>; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Shmot 19:16</p>
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Preceding the direct divine encounter with the entire nation, the powerful voice of the shofar emanates from heaven in an atmosphere of mystery and fear.

There are a number of other passages in the Tanakh that contribute context to the sounding of the shofar -

- VaYiqra 25:9 mentions the shofar in relation to a special Yom Kippur—the Jubilee, the fiftieth year culmination of seven sabbatical cycles. This mention of the shofar shares the theme of awesome encounter and divine judgment.
- In the second book of Shmuel, the shofar sounds when the Holy Ark is raised up (6:15).
- In Jeremiah chapter 4, the shofar intends to arouse the People to repent and mend their ways in order to prevent the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and exile from home.
- In his motivating sermons, Jeremiah speaks of the sound of the shofar as a signal of the enemy approaching, another context of fear and judgment (see 6:17, 42:14).
- In the book of Yoel, the shofar announces both a terrifying day of divine judgment, and a day when repentance through fasting and heart-felt accounting is urgent

(chapter 2).

- Psalm 47 expresses a majestic theme connecting the divine with the shofar sounding,

וַעֲלֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּתוֹפֵה; 6 God ascends amidst the [shofar] blast,  
יְהוָה בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר. the Divine amidst the voice of the shofar.

These passages about the shofar all resonate with central themes of Rosh HaShana.

Psalm 81 vocalizes a different tone of the shofar—musical celebrations of the new month,

ג שָׂאוּ-זַמְרָה וְתִנּוּ-תִרְ; כַּנּוֹר נְעִים עִם- 3 Take up the melody, and sound the timbrel, the sweet harp  
נָבֵל. with the psaltery [an ancient stringed instrument].

ד תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בְּכֶסֶה לְיוֹם חַגְנוּ. 4 Blow the shofar at the new moon, at the full moon for our  
feast-day.

Psalm 98 sets the shofar in a song of both divine majesty and musical celebration:

א מְזִמּוֹר שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ 1 A Psalm. O sing to the Divine a new song;  
כִּי-נִפְלְאוֹת עָשָׂה; for S/He has done marvellous things;  
הוֹשִׁיעָה-לוֹ יְמִינוּ, Her/His right hand, and Her/His holy arm,  
וַיִּזְרַע קִדְשׁוֹ. have wrought salvation for Her/Him.

ב הוֹדִיעַ יְהוָה, יִשׁוּעָתוֹ; 2 The Divine has made known Her/His salvation;  
לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם, גְּלָה צְדָקָתוֹ. Her/His righteousness has S/He revealed in the sight of the  
nations.

ג זָכַר חַסְדּוֹ, וְאַמּוּנָתוֹ-- לְבַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל: 3 S/He has remembered Her/His mercy and Her/His  
רְאוּ כָל-אַפְסֵי-אֲרֶז-- אֵת, יִשׁוּעַת faithful-ness toward the house of Israel;  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ. all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

ד הִרְיעוּ לַיהוָה, כָּל-הָאָרֶץ; 4 Shout to the Divine, all the earth;  
פָּצְחוּ וְרַנְּנוּ וְזָמְרוּ. break forth and sing for joy, yes, sing praises.

ה זָמְרוּ לַיהוָה בְּכִנּוֹר; 5 Sing praises to the Divine with the harp;  
בְּכִנּוֹר, וְקוֹל זַמְרָה. with the harp and the voice of melody.

ו בְּחִצְצָרוֹת, וְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר-- 6 With trumpets and sound of the shofar  
הִרְיעוּ, לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה. shout you before the Sovereign, the Divine.

ז יִרְעַם הַיָּם, וּמְלֵאוֹ; 7 Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof;  
תֵּבֵל, וַיִּשְׁבִּי בָּהּ. the world, and they that dwell therein;

ח נְהַרוֹת יִמְחָאוּ-כָף; 8 Let the floods clap their hands;  
יַחַד, הַרִים יִרְנְנוּ. let the mountains sing for joy together;

ט לְפָנֵי יְהוָה-- כִּי בָּא, לְשַׁפֵּט הָאָרֶץ: 9 Before the Divine, for S/He has come to judge the earth;  
יִשְׁפֹּט-תֵּבֵל בְּצֶדֶק; וְעַמִּים, בְּמִישָׁרִים. S/He will judge the world with righteousness, and the  
peoples with equity.

These last two psalms suggest very different aspects of the shofar from near-sacrifice, fear of impending judgment, terrifying holiness, war, and repentance, and Jubilee. In Psalm 91, the divine Creation and humanity join together in song—timbrel, harp, shofar play; water and mountains sing and clap. This version of divine judgment amidst musical rejoicing points to celebratory tones of the shofar; among many musical instruments and elements of the natural world, the shofar joins in joy.

The festival marked by the sounding of the shofar draws from all of these themes.

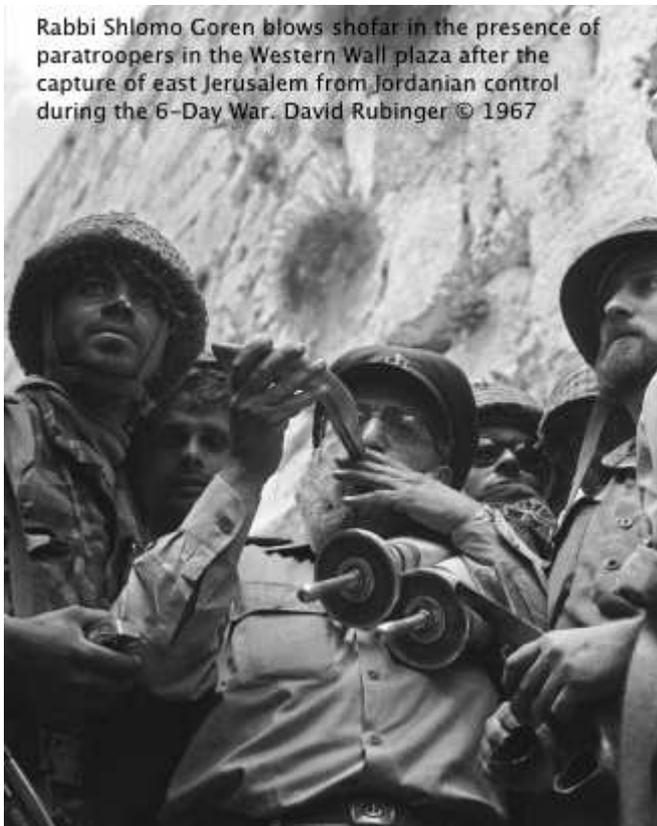
### *Rabbinic shift*

According to the Torah text cited above in Bamidbar 29, the Jewish year begins with the spring month of Nissan. However, our sages appoint the seventh month in the biblical year—the month of Tishrei—as our Jewish New Year, Rosh HaShana. The rabbinic decision to opt for Tishrei affects the meaning of our calendar substantially.

On the first verse of the Torah, the well-known French medieval commentator [Rashi](#) explains why the Torah begins with *Bereishit*—Creation of the universe rather than with the observances of Nissan recorded in the book Shmot—where the first commandments to the Jewish People appear in the Torah. His question parallels ours about why the year begins with Tishrei rather than Nissan.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from, “This month [Nissan] is for you,” (Exod. 12:2) which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded. Now for what reason did S/He commence [the Torah] with “In the beginning [*Bereishit*]?” . . . . For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan],” they will reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be S/He; S/He created it and gave it to whomever S/He deemed proper.”

According to Rashi, the Torah does not aim for an exclusive Jewish audience. Rather, the Torah begins with a foundation narrative for broader humanity. Rashi explains that the Jewish People must establish our place among the peoples of the earth within the frame of Creation. Creation is the universal foundation, the beginning for all.



Rabbi Shlomo Goren blows shofar in the presence of paratroopers in the Western Wall plaza after the capture of east Jerusalem from Jordanian control during the 6-Day War. David Rubinger © 1967

Rashi's comments suggest one plausible reason for the switch of Rosh HaShana from the month of Nissan to Tishrei. In Nissan, we commemorate the Exodus from slavery in Egypt leading to the formation of the Israelite nation. Among the sages, Tishrei associates with the birthday of the entire world, of the first humans—Adam and Chava, the anniversary of Creation. Whereas Nissan focuses on the particular narrative of the Jewish People, Tishrei focuses on the more universal creation theme.

As the Torah begins with Creation, so also does our New Year. The shofar blasts on Rosh HaShana herald the renewal of Creation, and our relation with the Creator whose precious creatures we are.

In the liturgy of Rosh Hashana, the traditional poem following the blowing of

the shofar asks for mercy in judgment based on the endearing relationship of Creator-creature, parent-child, even master-servant. The poem declares, "הַיּוֹם הִרְתָּ עוֹלָם—Today is the conception-birth of the world."

On Rosh HaShana, many imagine a white-bearded male god-king seated on *his* heavenly throne with the books and ledgers of our lives open, judging *his* subjects. In this somber, decorous, formal, court-like scene, each passes humbly before the supreme singular Master of the universe one-by-one (see the [Unetaneh Tokef](#) prayer).

Our current exploration indicates a wide spectrum of associations of the shofar, a central observance of the Jewish New Year. A less-mentioned context of the shofar is the tremendous rejoicing of Creation before the Creator/Judge depicted in specific psalms. By contrast with the shofar's piercing call to solemn repentance and judgment, Psalm 91 sings of a different kind of encounter with the Divine Judge. With no hint of fear, the psalm expresses awe in praises, buoyant with confidence in salvation, remembrance, mercy, righteousness, and equity.

May the celebratory theme of birth and renewal in the presence of the Divine Sovereign inform our Rosh HaShana festivities.

## **Observances, Practices and Resources**

Janet Zimmern composed this poem, and intention,

### **For the Shofar Blower**

At this awesome season  
pregnant  
with all possibility we pray today:

By our choices and deeds,  
with Divine Intervention,  
Supernal Midwife of Israel  
and of All Creation,  
attend,  
assist us  
to birth as yet unknown wonders,  
miracles of Life.

With an awesome fear of God,  
I place this shofar to my lips.

. . . . continue [here](#)

For more and different insight about the transition from the biblical spring new year to our fall new year, see the talmudic controversy between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer about which is the first month, Nissan or Tishrei, in Tractate [Rosh Hashanah 10b–11a](#). See also "[How Rosh Hashanah Became New Year's Day: From Nissan To Tishrei](#)" by Michele Alperin.

Hayom Harat Olam reminds us to gently and lovingly bring ourselves back to God, the eternal mother whose womb is always open and ready for the seed we wish to plant. We enter the world through determination and planning mixed with an utter lack of control and abundant mystery.

See Adina Allen's reflection on Rosh HaShana as the day of conception of Creation, "[The Womb from which the World Came](#)."



For an Orthodox perspective on the development in the halacha toward accepting women's obligation to hear the shofar and competence to make the blessing and blow it, see Arlene Pianko's dated but relevant essay from *Tradition*, "[Women and the Shofar](#)."

Malcolm Miller's essay, "[The Shofar and its Symbolism](#)" offers a broad and

detailed analysis of the shofar in Jewish culture and beyond. The last section on its uses in modern music is particularly fascinating.

See Helen Plotkin's reflection on the Rosh HaShana (and Yom Kippur) *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, "[Need a Reason to Repent? The Answer—No Matter Who You Are—Can Be Found Here](#)."

Listen to different sounds of the shofar: [Yemenite](#), [Iraqi](#), [Ashkenazi](#) (on Hoshana Rabba).

Learn to blow the shofar with [this video](#). There does not yet seem to be a video of a woman blowing shofar on the internet. If you know a fine female shofar-blower, perhaps you could upload a video.

Hear different musical settings of the liturgical poem, *Hayom Harat Olam*: according to the tradition of [Modzhitz hasidim](#), a [Libyan version](#), a [contemporary version](#) by the Israeli Vach family.

Avraham Tal, the vocalist of the Israeli ensemble *Shotei ha-Nevuah* (Fools of Prophecy) refers to the sound of the shofar in his popular Israeli song, a contemporary mystical vision, [Kol Galgal](#). Listen carefully for the reference to the *kol shofar*-voice of the shofar in the Hebrew song.

### Questions for Discussion

*The Holy One said, 'On Rosh Hashanah recite before Me [verses of] malchuyot-Sovereignty, zichronot-Remembrance, and shofrot-shofar blasts: Sovereignty so that you should make Me your Sovereign; Remembrance so that remembrance of you should rise up before Me. And through what? **Through the shofar.**'*  
(Rosh Hashanah 16a, 34b)

1. The sound of the shofar is beyond words. If you have heard it blown during Rosh HaShana prayers, reflect on your experience of the shofar. Try to familiarize yourself with its many voices. What feelings and associations does it arouse in you?

2. What are you looking to hear and experience when you listen to or blow the shofar on Rosh HaShana?
3. When reviewing and evaluating your life choices and behavior, what atmosphere do you feel is more conducive to inspiring self-improvement—fear, or joy and celebration? A mixture of both? Why? How does awe at the Creator fit into this process?
4. Do you find any gender significance to the contrasting voices of the shofar, solemnity compared with rejoicing on the festival, the shift to the Creation theme? Explain.

### **Summary of Issues**

In the Torah, the sounding of the shofar is the main feature of Rosh HaShana. Among its many voices, the biblical shofar accompanies fear, repentance, sacrifice, and war, as well as musical celebration of humanity with the Creator. Rather than a white-bearded male god-king seated on *his* heavenly throne, our exploration summons images of tremendous Rosh HaShana rejoicing in the renewal of Creation, in the divine birth of the universe.

### **Methods & Observations**

The talmudic sages interpret the Torah according to their values, priorities, and conscience, as they understand the intention and meaning of the text. Sometimes the rabbinic sages contradict what seems to be the plain sense of the text. In this case, the sages reframe the Torah calendar so that the seventh month in the Torah becomes the first, the New Year. Continuing this path, feminism prioritizes differently from some rabbinic inclinations. The Rosh HaShana shofar sounding to declare and celebrate the conception-birth of Creation is an example of a preference for more inclusive gender imagery for our New Year.

### **Contact**

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