

Shofarot Kavanah 2025

Rosh Hashanah Day 1, September 23, 2025

Congregation Agudath Israel

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The Talmud asks: Why do we blow shofar at 2 different times during the Rosh Hashanah service? In other words, why do we blow shofar at both the Torah Service and during Mussaf? Isn't it enough to hear 1 set of blasts?

There's a strange answer given to this question. The Talmud answers that we blow shofar during both the Torah Service and during Mussaf כדי לערבל השטן - in order to confuse the Satan, the accuser.

So what does THIS mean?

In their gloss on the Talmud, the Medieval commentators known as the Tosafot, explain this idea of confusing the Satan through a story of the Heavenly court. I want to tell you that story. So journey with me for a moment...up to the courtroom of Heaven, where an important trial is taking place...

You are the defendant, along with all of humanity, arguing your case before the Judge. You've been sitting and standing all day, apologizing for past mistakes and pleading for a good verdict from the judge - none other than the True Judge - God.

So far, today you have a pretty good relationship with the Judge. You're having a good back and forth. The Judge knew your ancestors and liked them a great deal, so you keep telling old stories, reminding the Judge of the good old times, and you hope that this will influence the final decision. The judge won't recuse Himself for personal reasons in this scenario.

But all is not hunky-dory. On the other side of the court room is the prosecuting attorney - the Satan - the accuser - the embodiment of all bad things. You thought the trial was going well, but then the Satan starts doing what he does best and reminds the Judge of the all the bad things you've done this year! The Satan explains why the Judge shouldn't rule in your favor. This isn't good.

But all of sudden, the whole trial is interrupted by a shattering, powerful blast! What is this? It is the sound of the shofar that we blow during the Torah service.

This blare momentarily stuns the Satan. Nevertheless, it is only a brief interruption. In the Tosafists' mind, the Satan is well versed in Halacha. And he knows that the Jews are only required to blow one set of blasts. So yes, the power of the shofar tripped him up for a

second, but he's now confident that he has free reign to continue his prosecution without interruption.

The trial continues. You plead! The Judge listens. The Satan accuses!

But then... at this point of the day, where we are right now, at the time of the mussaf service... something incredible happens.

The Satan is once again speaking, really pulling apart your argument, but then, like before, there is an earth-shattering boom. The Satan is stopped in his tracks. The sound of the shofar has returned. "But how can that be?!" thinks the Satan. "The Jews are only supposed to blow one set." Now WE know this is simply the Jews blowing their next shofar during mussaf, but the Satan does not know this. He thinks this must be something else. He thinks this must be NOT the shofar of the congregations of Earth, but that this must be THE shofar Gadol: The Great Shofar, the one that tradition says will sound to announce the final redemption.

Of course, in the final redemption, the Satan knows he will be out of work, so at this moment, when he thinks it's coming, he becomes very frightened. He starts shaking, and stuttering, and cannot complete his closing argument.

In these final moments of the trial, the mussaf shofar blasts come to our rescue, the judge rules in favor of the defense, we obtain a good verdict and we are written for a good year.

Hooray!

Pretty good story right?

I think so.

I also recognize that many of us today, many of us today with our rational minds, might feel uncomfortable with images and stories like this. Whether that's here, or in Unetaneh Tokef, or throughout the Mahzor, I think we have a tendency today to explain away this mystical part of our Rosh Hashanah tradition as metaphor or superstition.

And I truly get that.

But I also believe that there is benefit to these images, to these stories. They help increase the drama and intensity of a very important day. And they hopefully influence us to act for the good. And to be the best we can be.

So as we begin the Shofarot service, where we will speak of the power of the shofar and bring up our anticipation of the Shofar Gadol of redemption...I want to challenge you with this experiment:

Take some time to imagine how you would feel if everything in the story I just told you from the Tosafot is true: that a trial in Heaven is actually happening right now, at this moment.

How would you feel if you knew for sure that you were, at this moment, standing trial for all your actions this past year? Would any of your behaviors change? Would you see the synsgogue service differently? What might you say in your defense in such a trial? Do you think you have a convincing argument? How would you challenge the prosecuting attorney? How might you speak to the Judge? What are your emotions right now? And how will you feel when, in a few moments, the sound of the shofar will, God-willing, pierce through these courtroom walls, and come to the rescue to argue on your behalf?

Finally what can WE do, so that next Rosh Hashanah, when the cry of the shofar pierces the walls of the courtroom for that second time of the day, the Satan will be right - that the sound next year is actually that of the Shofar Gadol, the great shofar of freedom and redemption. What can we do in 5786 to make that dream a reality?

We continue with Shofarot...