A tool of remembrance: the shofar in modern music, literature and art
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2. The Shofar in the Bible

In this chapter, the more than 70 shofar verses in over 40 passages are classified according to John Searle’s speech act theory, and conclusions are drawn at the end of Chapter 3.2. The Bible translation used is the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation in the revised version of *The Jewish Study Bible*. This Bible translates the Hebrew *shofar* as “horn” or “ram’s horn” and in Neh. 4:12-14 and Job 39:24-25 as “trumpet.” Elsewhere in this Bible, “trumpet” is the translation of *ḥaẓoẓrah*; this is a silver trumpet, which occurs in the Bible 31 times, nearly always in the plural *ḥaẓoẓrot*, because it was blown in pairs. It is the only instrument with a detailed description in the Bible (Num. 10:1-10). Shofar and *ḥaẓoẓrah* often occur together, though little is known about the division of tasks between the two instruments.

### 1. Assertives

At the siege of Jericho in Josh. 6, God orders Joshua and his warriors to march around the city with the Ark, preceded by seven priests with seven shofarot. They must do this for six days; on the seventh day, they should march around the city seven times, blow the shofarot and produce a loud scream, and then the city will fall into their hands. The shofar blasts of the first six days are not directives, not signals to attack, but assertives with which Joshua’s troops confirm their loyalty to God. This assertive is enhanced by the magical number seven, indicating complete control. Another scriptural passage, Isa. 18:3-4, mentions shofar blowing as a sign of Judah’s inviolability under God’s protection on the Temple Mount; here too, the shofar blast is an assertive and not yet a directive calling to attack.

In Gen. 22, Abraham shows himself willing to sacrifice his son Isaac; after he has given proof of his loyalty, God provides a substitute sacrifice. Gen. 22:13: “When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.” Here the ram’s horn, the precursor of the shofar, produces God’s silent assertive confirming His covenant with Abraham.

### 2. Directives

In several passages, shofar blasts are directives to announce a holy day. Lev. 23:23-27 deals with the creation of two holy days, which eventually became Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. “Commemorated with loud blasts” is the translation of *zikhron teru’ah* (“re-membrance by shouting”), to remind God of the people that need His help. “23 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 24 Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on

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29 An interesting classification of the shofar’s biblical functions was made by the Old Testament scholar Richard M. Davidson in “Blow the Ram’s Horn in Zion!” Toward a Biblical Theology of the Shofar.” It is, however, not used here because it is based on a Christian interpretation of the Bible.

the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. . . . 27 Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement.” Num. 29:1-6 brings the same message in slightly different terms. Num. 10:10 deals with the blowing of the “trumpets” at “fixed festivals” and on “new moon days;” here, the “trumpets” are the ḥazōrot and it is not clear whether the shofarot are involved in the ceremony: “And on your joyous occasions—your fixed festivals and new moon days—you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being.” Ps. 81:4-6 calls the shofar blowing at the new moon “a decree upon Joseph when he went forth from the land of Egypt,” while Lev. 25:8-12 orders the shofar blowing on the Day of Atonement in the jubilee year.

In Joel 2:15-16, God gives the order to blow the shofar, to convene the people for a period of fast and repentance. Isa. 58:1 compares the warning voice of the prophet to a shofar blowing an alarm: “Cry with full throat, without restraint; / Raise your voice like a ram’s horn! / Declare to My people their transgression, / To the House of Jacob their sin.” In Jer. 4:4-5, God condemns Judah’s “wicked acts” and warns against an attack from the north; the shofar should blow an alarm to ensure that the people retreat to the fortified cities. In Jer. 6:1, the prophet urges the people of Benjamin, who live north of Jerusalem and will be the first to deal with an invasion, to flee to the south and to blow the shofar in Tekoa—a pun on tekaʿ (“to blow”). Jer. 6:17 deals with the prophets, who blow the shofar as a warning to the people, though their directives are being ignored. Ezek. 33:1-6 depicts the prophet as a watchman, blowing a shofar alarm and warning his people for an attack; whoever ignores this directive is himself to blame. In Amos 2:2-3, God announces the destruction of Moab “amid shouting and the blare of horns.” In Amos 3:6, the prophet adds in the name of God: “When a ram’s horn is sounded in a town, / Do the people not take alarm? / Can misfortune come to a town / If the LORD has not caused it?”

In most cases, the shofar is used in a military context and there are four sorts of directives with the intentions of alarm, assembly, attack and ceasing of pursuit respectively.

The first sort of directive is the alarm. In Jer. 4:5, a shofar alarm urges the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem to retreat into the fortified cities. Amos 3:6 and Zeph. 1:16 picture the fear among the population of a city upon hearing a shofar alarm. In Jer. 4:19-21, Jeremiah suffers from the war with its incessant shofar blowing: “My heart moans within me, / I cannot be silent; / For I hear the blare of horns, / Alarms of war. / 20 Disaster overtakes disaster, / For all the land has been ravaged, / In a moment, my tent cloths. / 21 How long must I see standards / and hear the blare of horns?” In Jer. 42:13-14, the prophet shows weariness of war and abhorrence of alarm blasts among all Judeans in Babylon. A horse that has served in a war does not shy at a shofar alarm, according to Job 39:24-25: “He does not turn aside at the blast of the trumpet. / 25 As the trumpet sounds, he says, ‘Aha!’ / From afar he smells the battle, / The roaring and shouting of the officers.”

The second sort of directive is the assembly call. In Judg. 6:34, Gideon, inspired by the spirit of the Lord, blows the shofar to gather his troops. In Judg. 3:21-28, Ehud stabs the king of the Moabites to death and flees to Seirah; there he gives the order to blow the shofar and withdraws with his troops; the same Hebrew verb takaʿ means in v. 21 “to
“stab” (the dagger) and in v. 27 “to blow” (the shofar). In 1 Sam. 13:3-4, King Saul has the shofar blown all over the country to convene the people and to make known his victory over the Philistines. In Jer. 51:27, God gives the order to blow the shofar to summon the nations to punish Babylon for its cruelty. Hos. 5:8 and Ezek. 7:14 depict situations where a shofar calls to battle; in the latter verse, however, God prevents the people from responding to this call, to punish them for their wicked behavior. In Neh. 4:12-14, exiles returned from Babylon rebuild Jerusalem’s ruined walls and use the shofar as a means of communication: “14 When you hear a trumpet call, gather yourselves to me at that place, our God will fight for us!”

The third sort of directive is the call to attack. A directive which can also be interpreted as a declarative is found in Josh. 6:16-21, where on the seventh day of the siege the troops march around the city of Jericho seven times with the priests blowing seven shofarot. “20 When the people heard the sound of the horns, the people raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed.”

The fourth sort of directive is the call to cease pursuit. In 2 Sam. 2:28, David’s commander Joab blows the shofar, ordering his troops to break off the action. Two men who plotted a coup against King David, thereby blowing the shofar, are captured and the shofar blast at their execution is a merciless reversal of the previous events. The first blast sounds in 2 Sam. 18:16-17: “Then Joab sounded the horn, and the troops gave up their pursuit of the Israelites; for Joab held the troops in check. 17 They took Absalom and flung him into a large pit in the forest, and they piled up a very great heap of stones over it.” The second in 2 Sam. 20:22: “and they cut off the head of Sheba son of Bichri and threw it down to Joab. He then sounded the horn; all the men dispersed to their homes, and Joab returned to the king in Jerusalem.”

3. Commissives
In Josh. 6:1-21, Israel conquers Jericho in the name of the covenant: “6 Joshua son of Nun summoned the priests and said to them, “Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and let seven priests carrying seven ram’s horns precede the Ark of the LORD.” The shofarot that will blow down the walls are carried around demonstratively and this tactic is a kind of commissive. Explicit commissives are the shofar blasts in 2 Chron. 15:12-14, where the Judeans, after a victorious war, pledge their loyalty to God “in a loud voice and with shouts, with trumpeting and blasts of the horn.”

4. Expressives
In Hos. 8:1, God orders a shofar alarm; this is an expressive, because He does not confirm the truth of a proposition, that He has already done in the previous chapter by demonstrating the unfaithfulness of the Israelites; instead, God reveals His emotions of disappointment and anger.

Expressives are also found in processions with the Ark of the covenant; in 2 Sam. 6:15, this procession is accompanied by shofarot and in 1 Chron. 15:28 also by ḡaẓoẓrot, cymbals, harps and lyres. The shofar blasts in the Psalms are not only expressives of gratitude to God but also assertives showing trust in Him. Ps. 150:3 praises God with shofar,
harp and lyre; in Ps. 47:6, the shofar sounds in honor of God’s kingship, and in Ps. 98:6 God is honored as king with shofarot and ḥażoẓrot. Ps. 89:16 uses the word teru‘ah, “joyful shout” or “shofar blast.”

5. Declaratives
When the Israelites approach Mount Sinai during their exodus from Egypt, Moses instructs them to prepare for God’s revelation. Exod. 19:16: “On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.” Here, the medium used by God is described as a great shofar, just like in Exod. 19:19: “The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.” Exod. 20:15-16 depicts the people’s fear of the great shofar, which confirms God’s omnipotence: “15 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 16 ‘You speak to us,’ they said to Moses, ‘and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’” In Deut. 4:12, 4:15-16, 4:33, 4:36, 5:4 and 5:19, God speaks with a voice from the fire, audible but not visible. God “changes the world by saying so,” and according to Isa. 27:13, he will do so at the end of days by blowing the great shofar, when the exiles from Assyria and Egypt are collected to worship Him on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

The shofar blasts at coronations are also declaratives. 1 Kings 1:34 and 39-41 depict the coronation of Solomon; after the king’s anointment by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, the shofar is blown and the people shout, “Long live King Solomon!” Adonijah, the pretender to the throne, and his followers hear the shofar and wonder: “Why is the city in such an uproar?” The coronation of Jehu in 2 Kings 9:13 is done hastily but not without a declarative by the shofar. Misleading declaratives are the shofar blasts of the men preparing a coup against King David: the king’s son Absalom in 2 Sam. 15:10 and “a scoundrel named Sheba son of Bichri” in 2 Sam. 20:1-2. In Judg. 7:22, three hundred warriors are equipped with shofarot and here, the massive shofar blowing is a declarative both to proclaim and to achieve victory: “For when the three hundred horns were sounded, the LORD turned every man’s sword against his fellow, throughout the camp, and the entire host fled as far as Beth-shittah and on to Zererah—as far as the outskirts of Abel-meholah near Tabbath.”

A classification of the above scriptural passages according to the social functions of the shofar would as well result in five categories. First, the shofar has a covenantal function in the announcement of the theophany and in calls to maintain the covenant. Second, it has a ritual function in the announcement of a holy day, in the escort of the Ark to Jerusalem, or in a song praise to God. Third, the shofar has a prophetical function in the admonition of the people, the proclamation of a fast, a warning to the enemy, the prophecy of disasters, the prophecy of the day of the Lord, or the prophecy of the end of days. Fourth, it is used in a political function, for the announcement of a coronation, or quite the reverse, for the announcement of a coup. And fifth, the shofar is very often used in
the military functions of alarm, assembly, attack, or ceasing of pursuit.

By no means are all the biblical shofar verses and functions from the complete overview in this chapter—and certainly not the many military functions—referred to in the 70 discussed works of art. Part III of A Tool of Remembrance will show that the shofar in the works of art has lost its concrete functions and moreover, that shofar blasts are no longer speech acts, because they are not meant to direct the lives of the listeners, readers, or viewers but only to stir their imagination.