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A tool of remembrance: the shofar in modern music, literature and art

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Summary

The shofar, like the menorah and the Star of David, is a central symbol of Judaism. In the Hebrew Bible, it is the most frequently mentioned instrument: it announces the revelation of the Ten Commandments, it calls for religious rituals, it is heard in the exhortations of prophets and it gives the signal for battle. Only rarely is it a musical instrument. The shofar is also prominently present in the Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur prayer books, where it produces a wordless continuation of prayer, and is therefore considered a ritual instrument instead of a musical instrument. By the end of the 19th century, writers, composers and artists changed their way of looking at the shofar and thanks to their work, the shofar was given a second youth, revealing its unexpected artistic abilities, without forgetting its religious past.

A Tool of Remembrance explores the use and meanings of the shofar as a traditional religious symbol in the new, secular context of modern music, literature and art, where the instrument is no longer subject to religious restrictions and is directed to general, not exclusively Jewish audiences of listeners, readers or viewers, who are not aroused to action or repentance, but invited to experience the artists' personal interpretations of Jewish traditions.

A *status quaestionis* on the shofar in modern music, literature and art does not exist. The relevant literature on the instrument consists of several articles and chapters in books and an article about the shofar in modern music, and there is still no scholarly monograph on the instrument. Three hundred works of music, literature and art from the period of the late 19th to the early 21st centuries were found in libraries, museums, and on the Internet. From this collection, a corpus of 30 compositions, 30 literary works and 10 works of art were selected. Preference was given to art which goes beyond mere reproduction or confirmation of traditional religious texts, art with a surprising or even controversial use of the shofar. The number 70 (30+30+10) is not only the number of the "standing blasts" in the Rosh Ha-Shanah service, but also the symbol of completeness. This study has a synchronistic character and does not discuss the historical development of the shofar in modern art, but instead, a number of works.

For a better understanding of the dialogue between traditional religious texts and modern works of art, methodological concepts of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin are brought in, as well as concepts of the British-American writer Thomas Stearns Eliot.

Shofar blasts are located on the borderline between speech and music. In the Bible and the prayer books they are always accompanied by linguistic utterances, which clarify their intent. According to John Searle's speech act theory, they can be considered assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, or declaratives. Many shofar blasts in the Bible are directive speech acts, with which God Himself or a shofar blower in His name incites the hearer to an action, whereas many shofar blasts in the prayer books are expressive speech acts, with which the congregation express their feelings toward God.

The shofar in the Bible calls for obedience, whereas it calls for prayer and devotion to God in the prayer books. In Bakhtin's terminology, these shofar blasts are "authoritative

discourse." An artist who carries his audience into an imaginary world around the shofar, does not possess authority, but instead, only persuasion, and his utterance is "internally persuasive discourse." In the work of art, two voices are heard: that of the traditional religious text and that of the artist. The artist speaks to an addressee, that is, a Jewish or non-Jewish, religious or secular audience. In addition, he has what Bakhtin calls a "superaddressee," whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed; this can be the God of Judaism, the God of Christianity, a pre-biblical deity, Zionism or his own conscience.

The biblical shofar is blown at times and places determined by God's will, a ritual, an emergency or a military campaign, whereas the shofar in the prayer books contributes to the celebration of Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Bakhtin labels such special connections of place and time "chronotopes," and the works of art show many new examples of them. For research on the assimilation of traditional texts, Bakhtin provides three useful concepts: "hybridization," "stylization," and "parodic stylization;" in hybridization, the traditional and modern elements in the work of art with a shofar remain recognizable, whereas in stylization one style uses the other as raw material.

In the dialogue with the traditional religious texts, an artist can choose three points of departure. In the first, the Present is determined by the Past (Eliot): the artist is inspired by a traditional religious text about the shofar or by shofar blasts. In the second point of departure, the Present is indirectly determined by the Past, that is, through another work of art. In the third point of departure, the Past is altered by the Present: the artist has an artistic, psychological, social or political "own question" (Bakhtin) and finds an example, illustration, analogy, or contrast in a traditional religious text; after the creation of the work of art, the traditional text will be read differently.

The works in which artists take the Past as a point of departure are inspired by many different biblical passages, not necessarily with the shofar as a subject. The most commonly used are the theophany on Mount Sinai, the conquest of Jericho and Psalms of praise with a shofar. Even the halakhah regarding the shofar from the Mishnah appears to be a useful point of departure. From the prayer books for the High Holy Days, artists especially choose the Malkhuyyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot sections from the Rosh Ha-Shanah service and the Neilah section from the Yom Kippur service. Shofar blasts are either quoted in compositions, or transformed and played by a shofar or another instrument, or imitated by means of an onomatopoeia in literary works. Sources of inspiration are also the rough shofar timbre itself, as well as the system of 100 shofar blasts from the Rosh Ha-Shanah service, from which either the complete structure is adopted or the principle of tripartition.

The second point of departure, in which the Present is indirectly determined by the Past, leads to works of art inspired by moments from other works, or to the adaptation of complete works of art in other artistic mediums, for example an illustration to a poem, a cantata on a poem, or an opera based on a play.

In the third point of departure, in which the Past is altered by the Present, some artists defend the shofar tradition against the threat of modern technology or modern bu-

siness, whereas others are engaged in the technological modernization of the shofar. The Shoah is an important subject in shofar art with the themes of pogroms, sanctification by the shofar, strength from faith and commemoration. Wars between Israel and its neighbors, and the phenomenon of terrorism are the starting points of several artists. Other important sources of inspiration are confrontations between the Jewish religion and nature religion; between Judaism, Christianity and Islam; or, within Judaism, between religiosity and secularity. Finally, many artists are inspired by ideas about a better world, originating from Messianism, Zionism, Socialism, Environmentalism, or respect for their fellow humans.

In the discussed works of art, three connections of the shofar with religious tradition are broken. First, the connection with synagogal space. The shofar moves from the bimah in the synagogue to the public and secular stages of the concert hall, the theater, the museum, the street and the home. Through the use of books, sound recordings, and digital media, space limitations are overcome and whereas a shofar blower in the synagogue blows in the direction of Jerusalem, a shofar artist faces his audience. Second, the connection with liturgical time, especially with the High Holy Days, Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur is broken. Moreover, technology makes it possible to record the shofar blasts and to present them at any moment. Third, the connection with halakhah and rabbinical authority and their interpretation of the traditional religious texts is broken. Artists do not use shofar calls to direct the lives of their listeners, readers, or viewers, but to stir their imagination.

Three qualities of the shofar seem to be a source of inspiration to modern artists. First, its wealth of religious connotations, many of which are related to existential themes of life, death, and redemption, which are also classical themes in art. Second, the sound quality of the rough animal horn, which contrasts with the polished sound of modern, standardized musical instruments. And third, the simplicity of the four traditional blasts and the tripartite system of 100 blasts, which provide useful material for artists in a wide variety of styles.