

# HEAR THE HORN

BY SAM PASSOW

**H**earing the blast from a ram's horn – known as a shofar – is the central ritual to the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and it also happens to be a mitzvah.

Scholars speculate that using the shofar dates back to the early Hebrew tribes as a way to call people to assemble for a sacrifice or signal the start of a war.

Craig Weisz, husband of Rabbi Debra Orenstein at Congregation B'Nai Israel in Emerson, usually performs the shofar-blowing duties at his congregation's services. He says he appreciates the responsibility that comes with that. It's not about him making a beautiful sound; rather, it's about helping his fellow congregants fulfill the mitzvah.

"The commandment isn't that you blow shofar," Weisz says. "The commandment is that you hear the sound of shofar."

The shofar is a popular present for bar or bat mitzvahs. Thanks to synagogues offering shofar workshops, older congregants have also learned how to blow one.

Ruben Nayowitz, owner of Judaica House in Teaneck, says shofars come in a variety of sizes and shapes, and most are still made from ram horns.

"Some of them are shaped artificially, in that they soften up the horn after it's been removed from the animal," Nayowitz says. "They clean it out, polish it and shape it."

The traditional twist is the most popular, but some people like it straight with just a little twist at the end, he says. The direction of the twist depends on which side of the animal it came from. For a shofar to be considered kosher, it cannot have any cracks or breaks, except for the mouthpiece or at the end.

"The way they test for that is they

put water in and make sure that the water doesn't leak out," Nayowitz says.

Shofars can range in color from black to a very light shade of off-white. That depends on how many fights the ram had. The changes in color come from broken blood vessels inside the horn, Nayowitz says.

"The shofar is made of the same material as your nails, so if rams have been in a lot of fights, they generally have a darker shade," he says.

In addition to color, there are more options for the exterior instead of just a natural finish.

"Sometimes they carve designs into them. Some are covered in silver if they want to make them really fancy," Nayowitz says. "Some are hand-painted."

There is also a longer type, which are usually called a Yemenite shofar, he says. Those come from a different animal – often an antelope.

"Those are quite large. They can reach lengths of four or five feet in size," Nayowitz says. "Many people will use those but many of the traditional Jews will not because it's not from a ram."

While the longer ones have a slightly deeper sound, the size and shape isn't really important to the shofar's tone.

"What will change the sound the most is the mouth piece," Nayowitz says, "depending on how that's cut."

Weisz would agree that the key to a solid sound comes down to the mouthpiece – not the size of the person's lungs. He says blowing the shofar isn't difficult, but it's a trick you have to learn.

"It's kind of funny because I'll work with these big strapping teenagers in the religious classes who really want to blow it out, but struggle," he says. "Then my 4-year-old daughter will come up and blast it."

The trick, Weisz says, is making a "raspberry sound" with your lips.

"Little kids, especially, love to make that," he says. "So I get them to do that without the shofar."

When his students get a good "raspberry sound," he places the shofar against their lips.

"Sure enough, they're often surprised when they get a nice tone from getting those vibrating lips against the

mouthpiece," Weisz says. "And it's fun to see. Little kids can get it. Older people can get it."

After that it's just practice, he says.

He personally learned from a man named Michael Chusid, a member of his old congregation in California.

"It wasn't his job. It was really his dedicated hobby to learn and teach everything about shofar," Weisz says.

Chusid has a website, [hearingshofar.com](http://hearingshofar.com), with "really more than most people would ever need to know" about shofars, Weisz says. It is full of lessons on the history and technique of the ram's horn.

For anyone interested in learning to blow the shofar, Weisz recommends finding someone who can teach you – like at a shofar workshop that local synagogues hold around the holidays – and practicing to get comfortable with it.

"Don't be shy. It's not a commandment that you must blow perfectly," he says. "If you can get any sound out of it, you have fulfilled your job and people have been able to do the mitzvah of hearing it." ♦



Shofars come in a wide variety of sizes and shapes, some ornately adorned to just a simple horn.