

Rosh Hashanah, the Shofar and the Akedah

Rosh Hashanah means "the beginning or 'head' of the year."

Israel had two kinds of calendars. In one Tishri was the first month, in the other it was the seventh month.

This feast has many layers of meaning attached to it. It's also called the feast of trumpets.

It begins the 10-day period called the Days of Awe, when God judges the lives the people of Israel.

In fact, in **Leviticus 23:24-25** its only distinguishing feature is the blowing of the shofar.

- **Leviticus 23:24-25** - "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

(Also described in **Numbers 29:1-11**)

The Shofar

Let's look at the blowing of the shofar.

A shofar is made from the hollow horn of a kosher animal, usually a ram. It is twisted and bent "by the circumstances of life" and represents the quality of humility.

There are three types of blasts: *tekiah*, a long sob-like blast; *shevarim*, a series of three short wails; and *teruah*, at least nine piercing staccato bursts. The primary shofar blowing consists of 30 blasts. Then there are 7 more opportunities to blow the shofar, producing 10 blasts each time.

The three notes that are blown represent the cry and groanings of a woman in childbirth. The 100 soundings of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah echo the cries of women giving birth - "99 of which makes them think of death and only one which makes them think of life." (Rabbiah Rosh Hashanah 541, II, page 248) More specifically, they are the cries of Sarah giving birth to Isaac or alternately, her shriek's of grief when she found that Isaac had been sacrificed.

But they also reflect the groanings of the heart struggling toward repentance, as well as the deep longing of the human soul for God - so primal that it can not be expressed in words.

The blowing of the shofar traditionally called Israel together for a solemn convocation, or to go to war. It was also commanded at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, on the Jubilee

Year, and during the month of Elul. The sound of the shofar was heard at the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and when King David brought the ark into Jerusalem. The shofar was blown every day in the Temple.

Every new moon was accompanied by a blowing of the shofar. The moon disappears for two days and on the third day faintly reappears. Why blow the shofar blast at a new moon? "They shall be a reminder of you before your God" (Numbers 10:10) A reminder of what? The same thing as at Rosh Hashanah - God explains: "So that I might recall for your sake the Akedah of Isaac and of Abraham and account it to your credit as though you bound yourself on the altar before me." (B. Rosh Hashanah 16a)

And the shofar will be heard at the resurrection of the dead.

- **1 Corinthians 15:52** - "for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

On Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar confuses Satan, and on Yom Kippur he has no power.

Maimonides said the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a wake up call for Israel: "Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts." (Hilchos Teshuvah, chapter 3, halacha 4)

- **Psalms 89:16** - "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound (of the shofar): they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance."

The Akedah

[Most of this is from the book "The Last Trial" by Shalom Spiegel]

The shofar is also connected to the Akedah - Abraham's trial of faith when he was told to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22.

The rabbis said the ram caught in the thicket that served as a substitute for Isaac provided the horn to make the shofar that was miraculously blown at the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai.

- **Exodus 19:13** - "...when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount."

- **Exodus 19:19** - "And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice."

The ram's other horn would be blown at the end of time on judgment day at the resurrection of the dead.

Rosh Hashanah and the blowing of the shofar is directly tied to the Akeda, and it contains many mysteries.

The parallels between Christ's crucifixion and the midrash stories surrounding Isaac's sacrifice are striking.

Abraham and Isaac travelled to Mt. Moriah - which later became the Temple Mount on which the Temple was built. Tradition says a pillar of cloud stood over the spot to guide them.

Mt. Moriah was the place where Adam had offered a sacrifice, and also where he was both created and buried.

Pseudo-Jonathan (Targumist) **Genesis 1-6**: "And the Lord God created man in two formations; and took dust from the place of the house of the sanctuary, and from the four winds of the world, and mixed all the waters of the world, and created him red, black, and white; and breathed into his nostrils the inspiration of life, and there was in the body of Adam the inspiration of a speaking spirit, unto the illumination of the eyes and the hearing of the ears..."

Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 12: "With love abounding did the Holy One, blessed be He, love the first man, inasmuch as He created him in a pure locality, in the place of the Temple."

Jubilees 4:29: "Adam died. And all of his children buried him in the land of his creation. And he was the first who was buried in the earth."

"And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac - like one bearing his own cross" - Genesis Rabbah 56:3

While Abraham was building the altar, Isaac kept handing him the wood and the stones. Abraham was like a man who builds the wedding house for his son, and Isaac was like to a man getting ready for the wedding feast, which he does with joy (Midrash Wa-Yosha) "Both of them brought the stones, both of them brought the fire, both of them brought the wood." (Midrash Yalkut Shimeoni)

Isaac was "bound hand and foot" according to the tradition, which is similar to Jesus' hands and feet being nailed to the cross.

Although Abraham's hand was stopped before he could sacrifice Isaac, the tradition continually talks about the blood of Isaac.

There are traditions that the Akedah took place Yom Kippur or on Passover, not Rosh Hashanah. In relation to this, the qualities of protection by the blood of the Passover are transferred the rabbis into the blood of atonement from the Akedah.

In **1 Chronicles 21:15** the death angel is inflicting a plague on Israel because David

numbered the people. At the threshing floor of Atad, where the Temple would be built, the death angel stops. "And when he was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, 'What did he behold? He beheld the blood of the Akedah of Isaac." (Mekilta, Bo, 7 and 12) In fact, they maintain that when the angel of Death passed over the children of Israel on Passover, the blood of the lambs they had smeared on the doorposts was interpreted as "the blood of Isaac's Akedah. "And the Abraham called the name of the place 'The Lord Seeth.' Now, elsewhere (**1 Chronicles 21:15**) it says, 'And as he was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and He repented Him of the evil.' What did He behold? He beheld the blood of Isaac's Akedah, as it is said (**Genesis 22:8**) God will for Himself behold the lamb for a burnt offering."

The blood of the substitute ram is being mixed up with the blood of Isaac. In other midrash, the ashes of the burnt offering of the ram are mixed up with the ashes of Isaac.

But why? Because there was a remarkable exchange that took place.

The ram was the bellwether of Abraham's flock, and he had named it Isaac, according to one tradition. "Let Isaac for Isaac come."

"Although Isaac did not die, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had died and his ashes lay on top of the altar." - (Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat)

"At the time of the Akedah, Isaac's soul quit him and went over to the ram, which had been created on the first Sabbath eve twilight. And this is the meaning of 'the sheep for his burnt offering, my son' (**Genesis 22:8**) that sheep is my son, actually." (Yalkut Reubeni)

Other Midrash makes this even more explicit -

Abraham said before Him: Master of the whole universe, behold, I am slaughtering the ram; do Thou regard this as though my son Isaac is slain before Thee. He took the blood of the ram and said: Do Thou regard this as though the blood of my son Isaac were being poured before Thee. As Abraham skinned the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though it were the skin of my son Isaac, which is being flayed before Thee. As he coated the ram with salt, he said: Do Thou regard this as though the salt were being poured on my son Isaac. As he offered the limbs of the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though these were the limbs of my son Isaac being offered to Thee. As he burned the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though the ashes of my son Isaac were heaped up on the top of the altar before Thee." (Genesis Rabbah ad Genesis 22:13)

This substitute of the ram pointed to a greater atonement later, in the days of Messiah.

In the verse "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and lo, behind, a ram." The letters of "behind" are inverted strangely, so the rabbis take this to mean the future. "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to father Abraham, after many generations, in the future your children will be caught in sins and entangled in all kinds of distress, but in the end they will be redeemed by the horns of the ram, as it is said (**Zechariah 9:14**),

"And the Lord shall be seen over them... and the Lord God will blow the horn." (J. Taanit 2:4, 65d)

"All year long Israel are in the grip of sin and entangled in distress; but on Rosh Hashanah they take hold of the shofar and sound the blast, and are brought to mind before the Holy One, blessed be He, and He forgives them." (Genesis Rabbah)

The Akedah is even associated with the resurrection of the dead:

"If Abraham had not subjected his son Isaac to Akedah, there would be no Resurrection of the dead." (Yalkut Reubeni, Wa-Yera)

The association with the Messiah and the cross is even stronger than that:

Commenting on **Psalm 8** - "Thou has made him but a little lower than the angels (Elohim) ... Thou hast put all things under his feet" - "This psalm speaks of nothing other than Isaac ben Abraham in connection with the Akedah." (Yalkut Makiri, Psalms p. 49)

- **Hebrews 2:9** refers this to Christ. "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man."

So what became of Isaac? Like Christ, he was resurrected.

"For Isaac was in the grip of fear as he lay bound on top of the altar, and his soul flew out of him, and the Holy One, blessed be He, restored it to him by the dewdrops for the Resurrection of the Dead." (Lekah Tob) "That is why David, may he rest in peace, said: 'Like the dew of Hermon that cometh down from the mountains of Zion.' (**Psalm 133:3**) - for he is referring to that dew with which [the Holy One blessed be He] revived Father Isaac. Forthwith the ministering angels began to recite, Blessed art Thou, oh Lord, who quickens the dead." Furthermore, God promised "When their ancestor Abraham did my will, I swore to him that never would I withdraw the dew from his descendants." (J. Berakot 5:2, 9b)

What does any of this have to do with us on Rosh Hashanah?

We need to "reckon ourselves dead" as Paul says:

- **Romans 6:11** - "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."