

Beha'alotkha - The Sounding of the Silver Trumpets Serves as a Reminder of Sinai
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 6, 2026 21 Sivan 5786

Let's Play Jeopardy! The category is:

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN THE TORAH¹
This individual is reputed to be the founder of music.
This individual complained that his son-in-law escaped before he could send him off with festive music.
Miriam used this instrument to accompany the dancing of the women after the parting of the Sea.
This instrument was sounded at Mount Sinai.
These instruments summoned Israel to assembly and war and were sounded at joyous occasions, such as holidays and new moons, and over sacrifices.*

*Ok. You don't have to turn the page over. Here they are:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שְׁנַיִם חֲצוֹצְרוֹת כְּסָפָה... (במ"א: א)

God spoke to Moses saying: Make yourself two trumpets of silver... (Num. 10:1)



A silver coin from the Bar Kokhba revolt (~132-136 CE) depicting the silver trumpets of the Temple. The Temple had already been destroyed. This coin commemorates them and symbolizes the yearning for their restoration. The Hebrew reads: "To the freedom of Jerusalem".

Num. 10:1-10 tells us that the two silver trumpets signaled many things:

In the Desert	
When the two trumpets sounded a Tekiah (one long blast) in unison...	it meant that the whole community was summoned to the Tent of Meeting.
When only one trumpet sounded a Tekiah (one long blast)...	it meant that only the tribal chieftains were summoned to the Tent of Meeting.
The first time the two trumpets sounded a Teruah (short blasts)...	it meant that the tribes situated on the eastern side of the Tent of Meeting were to move forward.

¹ Other than the human voice. "Answers" to the Jeopardy are on the other side of this sheet.

² Only two soundings are mentioned but in these verses there were four divisions on each side of the Tent of Meeting! The Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Bible) adds a third and a fourth blowing for the west and north divisions. According to Ibn Ezra there were only two soundings. Once the first two blasts were sounded and the first two divisions marched, the Kohanim stepped into the procession and did not sound the trumpets. The remaining divisions understood that they were to follow. Alternatively, according to Jacob Milgrom, a third and fourth sounding are implied by the text without it having to be specific.

³ *Otzar Dinim u-Minhagim*, p. 405. Rabbi Yehuda Dovid Eisenstein was one of the great private scholars of the last century. Born in Mezhirech [Poland/Ukraine] in 1854, he emigrated to the US in 1872 and died in New York in 1956. Interesting fact: *Once in the United States, Eisenstein managed a clothing store on the Lower East Side. He eventually lost a great deal of money in the business and decided to follow his intellectual and literary interests instead. In his memoirs, he*

The second time the two trumpets sound a Teruah (short blasts)... ²	it meant that the tribes situated on the southern side of the Tent were move forward.
In the Land of Israel	
Two trumpets sounding a Teruah (short blasts) in unison meant...	a state of war and were intended to have the people <i>be remembered before God and be delivered from your enemies.</i> (10:9)
Two trumpets sounding a Tekiah (a long blast) in unison accompanied sacrifices on joyous occasions, festivals and new moons.	<i>And on your joyous occasions, your fixed festivals and new moon days, you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices-of-well-being as a reminder of you before God, I am the Lord.</i> (10:10)

In the rest of the Bible the sounding of the silver trumpets and shofarot-rams' horns are used for many purposes:

To muster an army.	But throughout Jewish history the significance of the shofar sounding continued to evolve. The great Jewish anthologist, R. Y.D. Eisenstein ³ cites a few of them:
To frighten an enemy.	
To proclaim victory.	
To terminate a battle.	
To proclaim a rebellion.	
To warn of an approaching enemy.	
To install the Ark in David's tent.	
To coronate kings.	

A summons to repentance on fast days.
To declare a fast, especially during drought.
When issuing a declaration of excommunication.
When issuing a decree of law.
To summon people to help with a burial.
When declaring a New Moon.
To announce the arrival of Shabbat and Festivals.

Not to mention the numerous interpretations that are associated with Rosh Hashanah.⁴ It is easy to understand

*reflected that his financial troubles were providential since they spurred him to change his path in life and engage in scholarly pursuits. Eisenstein's magnum opus was the ten-volume encyclopedia **Otzar Yisra'el**, the first Hebrew encyclopedia, published in New York between 1907 and 1913. He had 9 children, and his grandson, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein (1906-2001) was the son-in-law of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan the founder of Reconstructionism. www.yu.edu/library/2022/02/01/judah-david-eisenstein-encyclopedist-par-excellence.*

⁴Among them: To arouse God's mercy: **When Israel take their shofars and sound them before the Holy One blessed be He, He rises from the throne of justice and sits on the throne of mercy.** Lev. Rabbah 29:3: And to get us to wake up: **Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber! Search your ways and return in teshuvah and remember your Creator!** Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:4. To crown God as King. To remember the Akedah. To confuse Satan.

how the call of the trumpets would be associated with assembly and movement of the camp. Trumpet calls were most likely a feature in every ancient culture.



This is a photo of trumpets that were discovered in the tomb of King Tutankhamun (c.1341-c.1323 BCE).

Today sirens have replaced trumpets. We identify first

responders - police, fire, and ambulances based on their sirens. In Israel over the last two months, the siren has become a common feature of life, especially in the north. But what interests us from our parasha is the sounding of the trumpet on *joyous occasions, fixed festivals and new moon days, over burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being*. **Why were they instructed to do that?** To answer, let us offer some thoughts about the instruments listed in the Torah. They can be grouped into three categories:

String Instruments	Lyre and harp.
Percussion Instruments	Drum and timbrel.
Wind Instruments	Pipe, flute, shofar and trumpet.

In the broadest terms, string instruments accompany the human voice; percussion instruments accompany dance, the human body. *But wind instruments substitute for the human, the animal, and, in the case of the trumpet/shofar, even the Divine voice.* Let us offer some suggestions as to why the trumpets were sounded. **1. To summon a reaction of joy.** Joyous days call for joyous sounds, for cheering and shouts of joy. An analogy: we find ourselves in the midst of the Stanley Cup Finals. Every time the home team scores a goal, an annoyingly loud "goal-horn" is sounded. While it began in the 70's in Chicago,⁵ by the end of the 90's it (unfortunately) became a universal feature of the modern hockey game. The rationale is that because the game moves so fast, it is possible for fans to miss a goal. The goal-horn alerts the crowd of the goal and triggers an eruption of noise and the playing of each team's unique "goal-anthem."

2. To summon a reaction of awe. A sacrifice represents a liminal point between life and death and the slaughter, the spilling of blood and the turning of the animal into smoke is intended to express a set of emotions that are impossible to encapsulate with words and liturgy. The trumpet blast may indeed have been a way of elevating a violent act to

⁵ This is according to www.horncentral.com. Yes, a whole website devoted to this nonsense. OMG.

⁶ Talented trumpet players can hold it for over a minute.

⁷ Gen. 4:21. Yuval was the seventh-generation descendant of Adam. He was born to Lemekh and Adah. **He was the father of all those who play the lyre and the pipe.** In other words, the inventor of musical string instruments and woodwinds.

⁸ Gen. 31:27. **Why did you secretly flee and steal away on me, without even telling me, —for I would have sent you off with joy and with song, with drum and with lyre.** This indicates that there was a rich musical culture in the patriarchal era. Arguably Lavan was more distressed that

the realm of the sacred and the realm of awe. Perhaps it may have even functioned as a distraction to what may have well been a cacophony of unpleasant sounds and sights, drowning it out with what we would all identify as an awe-inspiring sound. **3. An act of memory.** To quote the verse again: the sounding of the trumpet is to act *as a reminder - or alternatively - as a remembrance before your God.* A **reminder** or **remembrance** of what? On the one hand we can argue compellingly that the trumpet sound is a message to God - **God, remember us!** On the other hand, we can argue compellingly that it serves as a reminder of something else: *the most important time the shofar was sounded: the revelation of God at Mount Sinai.* (See footnote 8).

At Mount Sinai the people stood before God totally enveloped in shofar/trumpet sound. *If trumpets were to be sounded at each festival or new moon sacrifice, at each thanksgiving or burnt offering, then the remembrance of Sinai would be layered onto each sacrifice. Each sacrifice would thus become a reminder of the covenant and a summons to the Ten Commandments.* Trumpet blasts can be sustained for quite a while⁶ but they always end with silence and a pause for a new breath. As worshipers brought their sacrifices to the Temple they would hear the long blasts of the silver trumpets. And perhaps in the post-blast stillness, they would apprehend a still-small-voice speaking directly to them, addressing them with the words spoken at Mount Sinai: **אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ - I am the Lord your God...**

SHABBAT SHALOM!

P.S. The Torah does not depict an elaborate musical culture.

ANSWERS TO JEOPARDY
Who is Yuval? ⁷
Who is Lavan? ⁸
What is the Shofar? ⁹
What is the tof-timbrel? ¹⁰
What is the hatzotzra-trumpet?

But by the end of the book of Psalms, we are loaded with musical instruments. Psalm 150 lists seven of them: *shofar, harp, lyre, drum, lute, pipe, and cymbals. Voice/breath surpasses them all.*

הללו יה
הללו אל בקדשו הללוהו ברקיע צוהו.
הללוהו בגבורתו הללוהו קרב גדלו.
הללוהו בתקע שופר הללוהו בנגבל וכנור.
הללוהו בתוף ונחול הללוהו במנצח ונענב.
הללוהו בעלצלי שמע הללוהו בעלצלי תרועה.
כל הנשמה תהלל יה הללו יה.

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Jonathan Funk in memory of his beloved parents, Rabbi Julius and Pearl Funk, z'l, and to commemorate the 20th yearzeit of Rabbi Funk, z'l.

Jacob had escaped. But the mention of a musical send-off is a significant detail.

⁹ Exod. 19:16, **Now it was on the third day, when it was daybreak: There were thunder-sounds, and lightning, a heavy cloud on the mountain and an exceedingly strong shofar sound. And all of the people that were in the camp trembled.** Also 19:19, and 20:14. In 19:13 the instrument is referred to as a **yovel** from which we derive the word Jubilee (see Lev. 25:9 where instructions are given for a shofar to be sounded to announce the Jubilee year).

¹⁰ Exod. 15:20. **Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her, with timbrels and with dancing.**