

“A Positive Act of Jewish Identification”

Shabbat Shalom. And yes, Shana tovah.

Some things are more noticeable in their absence than their presence.

Today, this first day of Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is absent.

Today, Yom Truah, the day of sounding the horn, the shofar is taking the day off.

The question is why. Why are we not sounding the shofar today?

We all know that we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah: We read in the Torah, in the book of Numbers, *In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded* (Numbers 29:1).

But we also know from the Ten Commandments, *six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work* (Exodus 20:9-10).

So which is it? A day of sounding the shofar or a day of rest?

The Mishna (Rosh Hashanah 4:1) addresses this conflict: With regard to the **Festival day of Rosh HaShana that occurs on Shabbat, in the Temple they would sound the shofar** as usual. **However, they would not sound it in the rest of the country outside the Temple. After the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai instituted that the people should sound the shofar on Shabbat in every place where there is a court** of twenty-three judges.

So, it seems there are places and instances (the Temple, or after its destruction, a place with a court of twenty-three judges) where the shofar can be sounded on Shabbat. The shofar, as it turns out, is not something inherently prohibited on Shabbat. The Talmud describes it as a חכמה, ואינה מלאכה, “it’s a skill, not work” (Rosh Hashanah 29b).

So why is it prohibited on Shabbat now?

The Talmud (in the name of Rabbah) explains: **All are obligated to sound the shofar** on Rosh HaShana, **but not all are experts in sounding the shofar**. Therefore, the Sages instituted a **decree** that the *shofar* should not be sounded on Shabbat, **lest one take the shofar in their hand and go to an expert to learn** how to sound it or to have him sound it for them, **and** due to their preoccupation **they might carry it four cubits in the public domain**, which is a desecration of Shabbat (Rosh Hashanah 29b).

So the reason we don’t sound the shofar on Shabbat, for the last almost 2,000 years, is just in case someone who is not an expert carries their shofar to an expert for lessons on Shabbat, and violates the Shabbat prohibition on carrying objects from a public domain to a private domain, vice versa, or between private domains. Is this satisfying to you? Me neither.

You’re probably thinking now, what about an expert shofar sounder who already has their shofar at shul. Why can’t they bring their shofar before Shabbat, and then sound their

shofar here today? You would be in good company. Many, many rabbis over the last thousand years have asked the question. But the dominant position of forbidding it has held sway.¹

We use instruments here at Kol Rinah on the High Holidays and Shabbat. We don't police what people are carrying with them on their way to shul on Shabbat from quite a distance away. We can easily ensure that the shofarot being used are here before Shabbat. And there are many people who are here today, who will not be here tomorrow at shul, so it's now or wait till next year for the shofar.

There is no "sound" halakhic argument against shofar on Shabbat.

But.

Not sounding the shofar today is a silent but clear prioritizing of Shabbat over Rosh Hashanah. This is the spiritual, values-based reason for no shofar on Shabbat.

We are saying as a community, as an institution, that Shabbat is actually more important to us than Rosh Hashanah. And saying that on a day when many more people are here than on a regular Shabbat, when most folks are here not because it's Shabbat, but because it's Rosh Hashanah, it makes the point even more strongly. It's the regular, the daily, the weekly, that is prioritized – because, it is the regular, the daily, the weekly that sustains, rather than the once-a-year.

How does Shabbat sustain us? In many ways: the rhythm of the week, the designation of a day that is different, the rituals, the foods, the modes of interaction that are special on Shabbat.

In our family, creating a norm of no screens on Shabbat was, I think, the single most transformational Jewish parenting decision Tammy and I made. Now that our kids are older, they have more autonomy over how and when they disconnect from technology. But even as they assert their own values and priorities, they recognize that they need Shabbat. And I believe this fully: we need Shabbat; our kids need Shabbat, and it's a cliché but I'll say it because I believe it: now more than ever. If you are considering bringing a bit more Shabbat into your home on Shabbat, I would love to talk to you.

But as we've seen, sounding a shofar is not in itself forbidden on Shabbat! It's allowed! If I were to pick up a shofar and sound it (poorly, because I'm not too good at it), your protest would not be because you were so offended at the violation of Shabbat.

Rather, it would be because for so many of us, *not sounding shofar on Shabbat is a mitzvah*. What do I mean by that?

My colleague Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove recently wrote the following: "The Jews I serve are not *halakhic* Jews living lives bound by Jewish law. "Non-*halakhic* as my Jews may be, their lives are nevertheless filled with *mitzvot*. Here, I am referring to *mitzvah* neither as a 'good

¹ The Rif, Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, the leading halakhic authority of his time in North Africa (1013-1103) permitted shofar to be sounded in his shul, because there was a beit din (religious court) there to make sure it would be done properly, with no violation of Shabbat. See Tur, O.H. 588. In the early 20th century, Reform rabbis permitted the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah when it fell on Shabbat for congregations that observe one day of Rosh Hashanah. See <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/14435.11?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>. For much rich conversation and thought on this topic, see *When Rosh HaShanah Falls on Shabbat: Sound the Shofar? Hear the ALEPH In Your Heart?*, edited by Rabbi Daniel Siegel, published in 2002 by Aleph Canada, <https://alephcanada.ecwid.com/WHEN-ROSH-HASHANAH-FALLS-ON-SHABBAT-p22504016>.

deed' like volunteering for a local food-pantry, nor according to its literal meaning of 'commandment.' Instead, I am defining *mitzvah* as a positive act of Jewish identification."²

Not sounding shofar on Shabbat is *an act of Jewish identification*, it's a very Jewish thing to do. My friend, Rabbi Daniel Stein, pointed out that not sounding shofar on Shabbat is an especially Jewish thing to do because it's an act of delayed gratification, a setting aside and a temporary denial, which are very Jewish ideas and sensibilities indeed.

I think Rabbi Cosgrove has put his finger on what motivates so many of the Jewish things I do, and, I would venture to say, you do.

We light Shabbat candles and come to shul and listen to Jewish music and read articles about Israel and eat challah and falafel and Hebrew National hotdogs and pastrami dogs from the Kohn's stand at Busch Stadium because they feel like Jewish things to do, and we like how we feel when we do Jewish things. Dressing like Polish nobles from the 18th century is also a Jewish thing to do—a chasidic Jewish thing to do. Sounding shofar on Shabbat when it's the only day of Rosh Hashanah we have services for is also a Jewish thing—a Reform Jewish thing to do.

But we are our own kind of Jews, each of us as individuals and families, and us here at Kol Rinah, with our things that we do to feel Jewish. What are some of the things you do that make you feel Jewish? Putting on a tallit or kippah? Lighting Hanukkah candles? Donating to a Jewish organization?

I feel good and Jewish when I put on my tefillin, when I can explain a Jewish thing to someone who's curious, when we light Hanukkah candles, when I read Jewish novels, listen to Jewish podcasts, read Jewish media, watch *You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah* on Netflix and notice all the things that are so close but just not quite exactly right with the Jewish details, and when I bless my kids on Friday nights.

I feel more like myself when I do these things.

One way of thinking of teshuvah is about turning to become the best version of ourselves, about *returning to be, once again*, the best version of ourselves. Living, positively, our Jewishness, makes us feel like ourselves. What that might look like for you or me is going to be different. But I don't want you to be me. As they say, you do you.

Some rabbis might lament how we don't feel the same sense of obligation, of commandedness anymore. That theological ship sailed decades and decades ago.

Instead of lamenting, let's lean in. Let's lean in to feeling Jewish, doing Jewish. Because feeling Jewish is feeling like ourselves. Doing Jewish is being ourselves.

Now, just a couple of caveats and footnotes and addendas.

I haven't talked about things like giving tzedakah (charity), honoring parents, not stealing, standing up for the vulnerable. Our faith, our tradition, our Jewishness, may and should nurture and inform and flavor and shape our pursuits of justice and the way we interact with and care for people and the world.

But the bottom line is everyone should give charity, not steal, and stand up for the vulnerable. Because they are the right things to do.

But Shabbat, holidays, Jewish music, connection to Israel, studying Torah, davening, Jewish media, challah—they're not the right things to do. But they are very Jewish things.

² <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/a-choosing-people>. Thanks to my friend and colleague Rabbi Ephraim Pelcovits for suggesting this approach.

Here's the other caveat, addendum, or footnote. There are lots of other benefits and reasons to "do Jewish." The biggest epidemic in America isn't Covid. It's loneliness. And we here have the panacea, the vaccine, for loneliness—it's community, shul. Feeling like part of a community, supporting people in that community, delicious food, comfort and familiarity, intellectual interest and curiosity, memory, peacefulness, quiet, energy, joy, solace, consolation, friends. These are all powerful and good reasons to do Jewish. Yes and amen to all of them.

Those reasons may all get you to show up or do something when you are needed, or when you need to. But they are not about being and expressing who you are at your core, in your soul.

Imagine that you are looking at yourself in the mirror, and the image of yourself that you are seeing is blurry. What will make it clearer? Other than a new pair of glasses and Windex?

Being more and more yourself, the best version of yourself, will bring your image into focus. Being the good, decent, kind person you have been and often are will help. Being generous, and patient, and doing your part to make the world better will help. Making life choices that meet your needs and express your values, so that you are living with integrity. And doing things that express who you are—playing music, if you're a musician, making art if you're an artist, watching reality shows if you love reality shows, and doing Jewish if you're Jewish. And the more you do the things that express who you are, the more you will feel like yourself. The more your image will come into focus.

Every time we skip something in the machzor today because it says "omit on Shabbat," know that we are doing something very Jewish, something that prioritizes the every-week blessing of Shabbat; that teaches us to find meaning in the delay of gratification; that connects us to the rightness of the feelings in us when we do Jewish, when we engage in a positive act of Jewish identification.

If you want to hear the shofar, please come back tomorrow.

Have a sweet, and very Jewish, New Year.