



The Masked Shofar

Topic

Rosh Hashanah

Grade Level(s)

4th – 12th

Big Ideas

- How sound is transmitted can make a big difference in how we experience the sound.
- Sometimes things that are meaningful to us cannot be done the way they are usually done, yet they can still be meaningful experiences. In fact, the change itself can be meaningful in its own way.

Relevant Vocabulary

בְּמִדְבָּר (Bemidbar)	The Book of Numbers
מַחְזֹר (Mahzor)	Holiday Prayer Book
מִשְׁנֵה תּוֹרָה (Mishneh Torah)	Code of Jewish law written by Maimonides
כַּוְּנָה (Kavvanah)	Translation, Concentration

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Learn details about the *mitzvah* of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah
2. Evaluate how sound is different depending on how it is transmitted
3. Create a meaningful shofar experience even when the shofar cannot be heard in its typical way

Materials / Technology Needed

- [Video](#) about what happens to sound when it enters an electronic device
- Poll Everywhere (optional)

Background for Teachers

Why do we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah? The most basic answer to that question is that the Torah describes the day as one that includes a *teruah* blast (*Bemidbar* 29:1). The Mishnah details these blasts further (*Rosh Hashanah* 4:9) and associates each set of blasts to different aspects of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy: מַלְכוּיּוֹת (*Malchuyot*, sovereignty), זִכְרוֹנוֹת (*Zichronot*, remembrance), and שׁוֹפָרוֹת (*Shofarot*) (*ibid* 4:5; see also *Rosh Hashanah Mahzor*). As a result, each set of blasts can focus the listener in a particular direction for the new year. God as Sovereign, remembering the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and the shofar blasts heard originally with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai are all possible directions for reflection while hearing the shofar; and the sounds and feelings can invite further reflection.



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Hearing the shofar is such a central *mitzvah* of Rosh Hashanah that the Rambam titles his section on the laws of Rosh Hashanah after the shofar (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Shofar*, *Sukkah*, and *Lulav*). In many communities, expert *shofar* blowers go door to door on Rosh Hashanah so that people who are unable to make it to synagogue can hear the *shofar* blasts.

According to the Mishnah, one must hear a pure shofar sound in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* (Rosh Hashanah 3:7). Thus, there is a modern discussion about whether hearing an amplified version of the shofar would qualify or not (*Minchat Shlomo* 1:9, *Igrot Moshe Orah Chaim* 2:108, et al.). This discussion can also extend to hearing shofar over a video call or other electronic means as the sound of the shofar is translated into a digital form before coming out of speakers (see video for more detailed description of what happens to sound in an electronic device).*

Rosh Hashanah 5781 brings new challenges as many congregations are unable to hold in-person services. Furthermore, even the act of blowing the shofar presents challenges as the act of blowing can facilitate the spread of potentially harmful droplets. To ease this challenge, many congregations are exploring ways to enable safe shofar blowing, including putting a mask on the end of the shofar. While this solution would increase the safety of those present to hear the shofar, it could present issues if it affects the sound of the shofar and it also could cause issues of taking away people's focus if they are distracted by the unusual-looking shofar.

*Note that this discussion is separate from the one of whether video calls are permissible at all on Rosh Hashanah. The salient point here is that, even if one were to permit video calls on Rosh Hashanah, there still could be problems with hearing the shofar through electronic means.

Description of Activities

1. During a video meeting, ask students to invite someone not on the meeting to have a brief in-person conversation. This conversation can be two sentences. Students should focus on the sound of the other person's voice. Students repeat the conversation with masks on.
 - a. If doing this activity in person, students can record a short conversation into a device and listen to the difference in sound between the live conversation and the recorded one.
2. Discuss how the sound of people's voices are different in person, with and without a mask, over a video meeting, and over a phone call.
 - a. Note this conversation could also extend to other things that people hear both live and recorded like music.



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3. Show the video explaining what happens to sound when it enters and exits a digital device.
4. Ask students: How is the sound that exits the device different on a scientific level? How is it different on an experiential level?
 - a. Tech Option: Use Poll Everywhere to enable greater student participation.
5. Explain that, traditionally, one needs to hear the natural sound of the shofar in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of shofar.
6. Discuss how students experience the shofar. Some questions for discussion include:
 - a. Where do you experience the shofar usually?
 - b. What is your *kavvanah* (intention) when you hear the shofar? What do you think about while listening? Some answers might include:
 - i. Awe for God
 - ii. A wake-up call to be a better person
 - iii. Boredom because it takes so long
 - iv. Admiration for the skill of the shofar blower
 - v. Being part of a community
 - c. How is the experience of blowing shofar, which is usually done with community, different from more family-centric experiences like the Passover Seder.
 - d. How might your experience of hearing the shofar be different if blowing shofar in the traditional way presents a danger?
 - e. Why does how you focus yourself matter when hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah?
7. Students create how-to videos for hearing the shofar with appropriate *kavvanah* on Rosh Hashanah. Students also create a hard-copy guide for those who need it on Rosh Hashanah. (Note that the hard copy can be created on a device and printed.)
 - a. Remind students that they do not need to tell people to have a particular intention when hearing the shofar but rather that they are trying to help others have their own experiences. The point is the “how” rather than the “what.”
 - b. Some other things to consider include:
 - i. How does the visual of seeing something covering the shofar affect your experience? What might the covering represent?
 - ii. If your synagogue is encouraging virtual shofar, how does that change the experience?



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- c. It might be worth pointing out that not being able to hear the shofar because of something like a pandemic is a different enough experience that it might be a wake-up call of its own.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Students focus on either the video or the hard copy.
- Give students different examples of ways that people feel when they hear the shofar. Let students pick one of the examples and create a how-to guide for that particular feeling.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Students explore the sounds that different types of shofarot make and how the different horns affect one's shofar experience. Examples might include shofarot made from the horns of rams, sheep, and kudus.