Episode Book

EPISODE #5492

21 Shofar Blasts a Day: The Temple's Lost Soundscape

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SYNOPSIS

Most Jews today hear the shofar once a year. But in the Second Temple, horns and silver trumpets were part of the daily soundscape of Jerusalem — at least 21 blasts every ordinary day, scaling up to 48 on Sukkot, and possibly 57 when Passover eve fell on Shabbat. This episode digs into Mishnah Sukkah, the Bartenura, and Talmudic sources to reconstruct what the shofar actually did: how it punctuated the Levites' song, cued the people to prostrate, closed the shops on Shabbat eve, and paced the all-night water-drawing procession of Simchat Beit HaShoeva. The shofar we know is a survivor — a fragment of something much bigger.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Twenty-one. That's the number that should reframe how you hear a shofar. Not one blast on Rosh Hashanah, not the final long note at Neilah. Twenty-one, minimum, every single ordinary day in the Temple.



Herman

And that's the floor, not the ceiling. The Mishnah says forty-eight is the max.



Corn

Right. So Daniel wrote in this week. His framing is that the shofar we know today, the one that means Rosh Hashanah and the end of Yom Kippur, is a drastic narrowing of something much bigger. In the Temple period, horns and trumpets were a regular part of the soundscape of Jewish worship, not an annual event. He wants us to actually go into the Mishnah and Talmud and work out how the shofar functioned in the Second Temple. When it sounded. What the different blasts signified. How its role differed from the silver trumpets, the chatzotzrot. He's especially interested in Sukkot and Simchat Beit HaShoeva, where the Mishnah describes this extraordinary sequence of blasts accompanying the festivities and the water-drawing ceremony. And then the harder question: reconstruct what this would have sounded like to someone standing in the Temple, or anywhere else in Jerusalem. And explain how much broader the role of these instruments was than the limited ceremonial use most Jews today are familiar with.



Herman

That's a lot of question in one prompt.



Corn

He does that.



Herman

He does. But it's a good one, because the answer changes how you read the sources. The shofar we know is a survivor. It's what's left of a system that was much larger.



Corn

So let's start with the number that reframes everything. Twenty-one.



Herman

The Mishnah in Sukkah, chapter five, mishnah five. "One sounds no fewer than twenty-one trumpet blasts in the Temple, and one sounds no more than forty-eight." That's the frame. Twenty-one is the baseline for an ordinary weekday. Forty-eight is the annual maximum, and we'll get to when that happens.



Corn

And the first thing to say, before we get into the breakdown, is that shofar and trumpet are not the same instrument. That's the confusion that makes the modern picture so narrow.



Herman

The Hebrew text maintains the distinction carefully. Psalm 98, verse 6, has them side by side. First Chronicles 15, verse 28, same thing. The chatzotzrot are the two beaten-silver trumpets ordered in Numbers 10, verse 1. The shofar is an animal horn. Two different instruments, two different materials, two different roles.



Corn

And the Jewish Encyclopedia makes the point that the confusion is post-destruction. There's a line in Shabbat 36a, and the encyclopedia cites it directly: "since the destruction of the Temple the names for the shofar and the trumpet had been confused." That's the whole story in one sentence. The names collapsed because the system that kept them distinct collapsed.



Herman

Which is why the modern Rosh Hashanah shofar feels like the whole thing. It's not. It's the fragment that survived.



Corn

So the daily twenty-one. Break it down.



Herman

Three for the opening of the gates in the morning. Nine for the daily morning offering, the tamid shel shachar. Nine for the daily afternoon offering, the tamid shel bein ha'arbayim. Three plus nine plus nine. Twenty-one.



Corn

Nine is a strange number for a single offering. Where does nine come from?



Herman

This is where the Bartenura does the work. The Levites sang while the daily libations were being offered. During that song there were three pauses. At each pause the kohanim sounded tekiah, teruah, tekiah, and the people prostrated themselves. Three blasts per set, three sets, nine. So the nine isn't nine arbitrary toots. It's a choreography. Song, pause, blast, prostration. Song, pause, blast, prostration. Three times through.



Corn

So the blast is punctuation inside a song.



Herman

It's punctuation inside a song that the entire assembled crowd is responding to physically. They're not just hearing it. They're going down at each set. That's a whole-body liturgy.



Corn

And then you add layers on top.



Herman

On days with additional offerings, musaf, like the New Moon, you add nine more. On Shabbat eve you add six more. Three to stop the people from working, three to demarcate between sacred and profane. So the number isn't fixed. It scales with what the day requires.



Corn

The Shabbat eve sequence is the part that I think would land hardest for a modern listener. Because that's not liturgy. That's a public utility.



Herman

The Bartenura describes it in completely practical terms. First tekiah, the people working in the fields stop. Second tekiah, the shutters are removed and the stores are locked. At the third tekiah, quote, "he removed what had to be removed and hid what had to be hidden, what had been warmed, and they kindled the candles."



Corn

Fields. Shops. Ovens. Candles. That's a checklist.



Herman

It's a checklist that everybody in the city is running off the same three sounds. And then there's this detail I love, which is that after the first soundings, quote, "he delayed in order to roast a small fish." Then he sounded tekiah, teruah, tekiah to announce that the day was sanctified.



Corn

He paused to roast a fish.



Herman

That's the last window before Shabbat, and the Bartenura is telling you the man with the horn used it.



Corn

So the horn is the clock. And the clock is also the PA system. It's telling you when to stop working, when to close the shop, when to light the candles, and then it's telling you the day has started.



Herman

And there's a physical trace of it. A stone from the Temple ruins found in Jerusalem, inscribed "bet hatekiah lehav." The house of blasting to distinguish. That's almost certainly referring to this practice. The Mishnah's abstract blast count has a piece of carved stone behind it.



Corn

That's the thing about this material. You read twenty-one, forty-eight, nine, and it sounds like a spreadsheet. Then you find out there's a building with that name on a plaque.



Herman

The building had a job. It was where the blasts that divided the week from Shabbat came from.



Corn

So to answer Daniel's first question directly. When was the shofar sounded in the Temple? Constantly. Every day. Three times minimum before the morning offering even starts. And what did the blasts signify? Different things depending on which blast. The tekiah is a long, unbroken note. The teruah is a broken, trembling sound. The two together, tekiah teruah tekiah, is a unit. And in the daily cycle, that unit is what marks the pauses in the Levites' song and cues the people to prostrate.



Herman

Which is the mechanism Daniel was asking about. The nine at each tamid is not nine separate events. It's three events, each of which is a three-part phrase.



Corn

And that phrase, tekiah teruah tekiah, is the same phrase that shows up in the water-drawing procession, which is where this gets spectacular.



Herman

Sukkot. This is the payload.



Corn

Give me the maximum first.



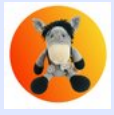
Herman

Forty-eight blasts. On the eve of Shabbat during Sukkot. That's the annual maximum in the Mishnah's count. And the breakdown is worth walking through, because it shows you how many different things were being marked.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Three at the opening of the gates. Three at the upper gate. Three at the lower gate. Three for the filling of the vessel with water. Three when pouring the water libation on the altar. Nine for the morning tamid. Nine for the afternoon tamid. Nine for the additional offerings. Three to stop the people from work. Three to demarcate sacred and profane.



Corn

That's the whole city's day, top to bottom, in one count.



Herman

And the Bartenura adds a caveat, which is that forty-eight isn't exact. When the eve of Passover falls on Shabbat, the count can reach fifty-seven.



Corn

Fifty-seven.



Herman

Fifty-seven. So the number in the Mishnah is a working figure, not a hard cap.



Corn

Now the water-drawing. Simchat Beit HaShoeva. This is what Daniel specifically asked about, and it's the part where the blasts stop being a clock and start being a procession.



Herman

Mishnah Sukkah 5:4. Two priests stood at the Upper Gate, the one descending from the Israelites' courtyard to the Women's Courtyard, holding two trumpets. And then: "When the rooster crowed at dawn, they sounded a tekiah, and sounded a teruah, and sounded a tekiah."



Corn

The rooster crows and the trumpets answer.



Herman

And then the blasts mark stages. When the people drawing water reached the tenth stair, the trumpeters sounded tekiah teruah tekiah, to signal the time to draw from the Siloam pool. Again when they reached the Women's Courtyard with basins of water. Again when they reached the ground of the Women's Courtyard. And the mishnah says they continued sounding the trumpets until they reached the gate through which one exits to the east.



Corn

So the procession is being paced by the horns. Every stage has a sound.



Herman

Every stage has a sound, and the sound is the same three-part phrase, and everybody in the courtyard knows exactly where in the route that phrase means they are.



Corn

And then the eastern gate moment, which is the part I'd put on a wall.



Herman

They turn. They're facing east, and they turn to face west, toward the Holy of Holies. And they say: "Our ancestors who were in this place during the First Temple period stood with their backs toward the Sanctuary of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east." That's Ezekiel 8:16. "And we, our eyes are to God."



Corn

So the horns are framing a pivot away from sun worship.



Herman

The blast sequence is the frame around a declaration of where the community is looking. Literally which way they're facing.



Corn

And this goes on all night.



Herman

All night. Mishnah Sukkah 5:1: "One who did not see the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing of the Water never saw rejoicing in his life." That's the line. The flute, the chalil, played on Sukkot for five or six days, depending on where Shabbat falls.



Corn

Five or six days of flute. That's not a ceremony. That's a festival season.



Herman

And the arc, as Peninei Halakha lays it out, is this. The celebration began after the afternoon tamid and continued all night. As dawn approached, an official made a declaration, and two kohanim at the upper gate blew tekiah teruah tekiah on trumpets. They led a procession descending from the upper gate. At the tenth step they blew again. At the Women's Courtyard again. Continuing until the gate exiting east. Then down to the Shiloah spring to draw water for the libation that accompanies the morning tamid. And coming back via the Water Gate, the kohanim blew again.



Corn

So the night ends and the morning begins with the same phrase, at every station.



Herman

And the celebration itself is not quiet. The pious and the men of action danced with flaming torches they juggled. Talmud Sukkah 53a. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel juggled eight lighted torches and did a handstand on two fingers. Others juggled eight knives, eight glasses of wine, or eight eggs.



Corn

Eight eggs.



Herman

Eight eggs.



Corn

The rabbi doing a handstand on two fingers is the detail that gets quoted, but the eggs are the one that gets me. Somebody stood in the Temple courtyard and juggled eight eggs and it went into the record.



Herman

And the light. The Talmud describes immense candelabra in the Temple courtyard, each holding gallons of oil, with wicks made from the priests' worn-out vestments. The light was so intense it illuminated every courtyard in Jerusalem.



Corn

So you have horns, trumpets, flute, lyres, harps, cymbals, torches, juggling, and a light that reaches across the whole city. This is the acoustically and visually maximal moment of the year.



Herman

And it's Sukkot. Not Rosh Hashanah.



Corn

That's the correction Daniel's prompt is pushing toward. Rosh Hashanah is the day we associate with the shofar. But in the Temple calendar, the loudest day was Sukkot.



Herman

There's a line from an article on shofar symbolism that puts it plainly: the shofar was performed at all the major festivals, notably Sukkot, in the water libation ceremony, and at the beginning of each month. It was one of the privileged instruments in regular use by the Levites in the Temple.



Corn

Regular use. That's the phrase that should sit next to the modern picture. Once a year versus regular use.



Herman

Now, the distinction between shofar and chatzotzrot deserves its own pass, because Daniel asked specifically, and because the sources are actually quite precise about it.



Corn

Go.



Herman

The chatzotzrot are the priestly instrument. Two trumpets of beaten silver, ordered in Numbers 10, verse 1. In Solomon's Temple, Second Chronicles 5:12, they're increased to a hundred and twenty. In the Herodian Temple they're back to two, judging from the Arch of Titus, which shows two.



Corn

Josephus describes them.



Herman

Josephus, Antiquities, book three, chapter twelve. Nearly a yard long. A little wider than a flute. A slight expansion near the mouthpiece and a bell-shaped end.



Corn

A yard. That's a serious piece of metal.



Herman

The Jewish Encyclopedia is blunt about what it was for. Quote: the trumpet was "not so much an instrument of music as one of teru'ah, noise, of alarm and for signaling." And it was "almost exclusively a priestly instrument."



Corn

Signaling. That's the word. Not melody. Signal.



Herman

Which is why the distinction matters. The shofar is an animal horn, and it's the instrument of Rosh Hashanah. The trumpet is a silver signaling device, and it's the instrument of the daily ritual and of fast days.



Corn

The Mishnah actually stages them together, which is the clearest way to see the difference.



Herman

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:3. On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar was of an antelope's horn and straight, with its mouth overlaid with gold. Two trumpets flanked it, one on each side. And here's the key line: the shofar gave a long blast and the trumpets a short one, "since the proper ceremony of the day was with the shofar."



Corn

On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar leads and the trumpets follow.



Herman

Then Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:4 flips it. On public fast days, the shofarot were curved rams' horns with silver-plated mouths, and two trumpets stood in the middle. And there the shofar sounded a short blast and the trumpets a long one, "for the mitzva of the day is with the trumpets."



Corn

Same two instruments, opposite hierarchy, depending on the day.



Herman

The Bartenura explains the logic via Numbers 10:9, which is the verse about sounding short blasts on the trumpets. And his conclusion is: "specifically in the Temple they do this, but in the country, when there is a shofar, there are no trumpets, and when there are trumpets, there is no shofar." He cites Psalm 98:6 to back it.



Corn

Outside the Temple, you get one or the other, not both. The pairing is a Temple privilege.



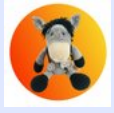
Herman

Which tells you the Temple was the only place the full sonic system operated. Anywhere else, you're hearing a fraction of it.



Corn

Now, the honest part. What does this actually sound like? Because Daniel asked us to reconstruct it, and I want to be straight with the listener about how far the evidence takes us.



Herman

There's a real gap here. No dedicated acoustic or archaeo-musicological reconstruction of the Jerusalem soundscape turned up in the research. The closest thing is Moshe Piamenta's work. His 2019 doctoral thesis is described as the first study to focus



Herman (continued)

exclusively on the trumpet in ancient Jewish history, integrating textual analysis, archaeology, and musicology. And his 2022 article in Hebrew Union College Annual looks at the War Scroll, where priests use different trumpet types to direct fighting forces and Levites and the people sound shofarot to instill fear in the enemy. He calls that description rare and rich, unmatched in any ancient work, Jewish, Hellenistic, or Roman.



Corn

Piamenta's own line about the state of the field?



Herman

"The study of ancient Jewish music is largely uncharted territory. Many musical terms are not fully understood."



Corn

That's the honest frame. We can reconstruct the schedule with real precision. We can't reconstruct the sound with the same confidence.



Herman

We know the instrument shapes. We know the length of the trumpet from Josephus. We know the material. We know when each blast happened and what it cued. What we don't have is a recording, or a model, or even a settled answer on what a teruah actually sounded like.



Corn

Which is strange, given how much of this city's life was organized around sound.



Herman

Piamenta's thesis also has a detail that's worth flagging, because it shows how differently the two instruments were read in some circles. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the shofar symbolizes the Torah, and the trumpet represents what he calls the Second Torah,



Herman (continued)

identified with the Book of Jubilees.



Corn

Even the symbolism splits. Horn equals one thing, silver equals another.



Herman

There's a sectarian edge to the whole Sukkot complex that we shouldn't skip. The water libation wasn't in the Torah. That's the point. And the high priest Alexander Jannaeus, in the first century BCE, spilled the water at his feet in contempt during the ceremony. The worshippers responded by pelting him with citrons.



Corn

With citrons.



Herman

With citrons. The blasts and the ceremony were a battleground, not just a celebration. The Sadducees and the Pharisees were fighting over whether the rite was legitimate at all.



Corn

The horns are marking the procession, and the procession is the thing some people in the room think shouldn't be happening.



Herman

The sound is the sound of an argument as well as a festival.



Corn

Let me pull the threads together for Daniel, because he asked four things and I want to make sure we answered all of them.



Herman

Go.



Corn

When was the shofar sounded in the Temple? Twenty-one times minimum on an ordinary day. Three at the gates, nine at the morning tamid, nine at the afternoon tamid. More on musaf days. Six more on Shabbat eve. Forty-eight on the Shabbat eve of Sukkot. Fifty-seven in the edge case.



Herman

What did the different blasts signify? The tekiah is the long unbroken note. The teruah is the broken, trembling one. Together they form a unit, and that unit marks pauses in the Levites' song, cues prostration, signals stages of a procession, and demarcates sacred from profane.



Corn

How did the shofar's role differ from the chatzotzrot? The trumpet was the priestly silver signaling instrument, the daily workhorse, the alarm, the thing that told the city what to do. The shofar was the animal horn, the instrument of Rosh Hashanah, and in the Temple it appeared alongside the trumpets rather than replacing them.



Herman

What would it have sounded like? A city where the horn and the trumpet were the clock, the alarm, the liturgical cue, and the festival's exclamation point. With Sukkot, not Rosh Hashanah, as the loudest moment of the year.



Corn

How much broader was the role than what we know today? The shofar we hear once a year in synagogue is a fragment of a daily, city-wide signaling infrastructure. That's the answer. What we hear once a year is what's left of what Jerusalem heard every day.



Herman

There's one detail about the teruah itself that we've been dancing around.



Hilbert

You're right. I never got it right either.



Corn

Sorry, what?



Hilbert

The teruah. I was a ba'al tekiah's understudy one season, at a small synagogue. The regular blower had a lung condition and they needed a backup. I bought a ram's horn mail-order and spent weeks on it.



Herman

Mail-order.



Hilbert

Mail-order. The tekiah I could do. The shevarim I could do. The teruah, I could not. It kept collapsing into a stutter. It's supposed to be a tremolo and mine came out like somebody shaking a jar of coins. I still have the horn. It's in a box.



Corn

The thing you never got right is the thing the sources never settled.



Hilbert

That's it. The rabbis in Sukkah 55b argued about whether tekiah teruah tekiah is one unit or three. Rabbi Judah says minimum seven blasts, maximum sixteen. The Rabbis count tekiah and teruah separately. And underneath that argument is a question nobody answers, which is whether a blast is a sound or a sentence.



Herman

A sound or a sentence.



Hilbert

If it's a sound, you count it. If it's a sentence, you count the words. The whole dispute is about which one you're doing. And the teruah itself, whether it's a tremolo or a staccato, is still not settled. I read everything I could find that year. Nobody knows.



Corn

The thing you couldn't play is the thing nobody can define.



Hilbert

Right. Maybe nobody ever could. I've got a call I'm expecting. I won't take it in here.



Herman

Understood.



Corn

Which brings us back to the stone.



Herman

Bet hatekiah lehav. The house of blasting to distinguish. A carved inscription from the Temple ruins, sitting in Jerusalem, naming a building that existed to make a sound that told a city when to stop working.



Corn

The horn was the clock. The clock is gone. The stone remains.



Herman

The open questions are real ones. The exact musical character of tekiah versus teruah is still contested. Whether the daily gate-opening blasts were shofar or trumpet is disputed, the Rishonim disagree on it, some saying trumpets only, others saying the shofar was possible. And no dedicated acoustic reconstruction of the Jerusalem soundscape exists.



Corn

Which is the thing I'd want somebody to go do. We can map the schedule down to the individual blast. We can't hear it.



Herman

The shofar we know is a survivor of a much larger sonic system. A daily, city-wide signaling infrastructure that Sukkot pushed to its annual maximum. What we hear once a year in synagogue is a fragment of what Jerusalem heard every day.



Corn

Thanks as always to Daniel for the prompt, and to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

The human-AI collaboration podcast. You can find us at my weird prompts dot com, or email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.