The Torah commands “And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month…it shall be a day of terua for you” (Bamidbar 29:1). The Rabbis (Rosh HaShana 33) understand that this verse refers to the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Ha-Shana. Furthermore, the Torah teaches that the day should be a “zikron terua” (Lev. 23:24) or “yom terua” (Bamidbar 29:1), a “remembrance” or “day” of terua. The blowing of the shofar is not only the mitzvat ha-yom (the central mitzva of the day), but it apparently defines and characterizes the day.

On Rosh Ha-Shana, the shofar is blown before and during the special and unique Mussaf prayer, in which three blessings, malkhuyot, zikhronot, and shofarot, are added to the tefilla.

What is the reason behind this mitzvah, and why is it performed during the Mussaf prayer?

Reasons for the Mitzvah of Shofar

The fourteenth-century Spanish scholar Rav David ben Yosef Abudraham records that Rav Saadia Gaon (tenth century) enumerates ten reasons for the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShana. Many Machzorim (High-Holy-Day prayer books) include these reasons before the blowing of the shofar. We will focus on three of them.

Coronation

According to Rav Saadia Gaon, one function of blowing the shofar, as it appears in the Bible, is to praise God and to crown Him as our King. When a king is crowned at the beginning of his rule, trumpets and horns are blown to announce his coronation. Similarly, we coronate God through the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShana. Indeed, the Book of Tehillim states, “With trumpets and the sound of the shofar, shout before the King, God” (Tehillim 98:6) and, “Praise Him with the blowing of the shofar, praise Him with the psaltery and harp” (150:3).
Furthermore, Bilaam tells Balak, “Nor has He seen perverseness in Israel; God, his God, is with him, and the king’s shout [teruat melekh] is in him (Bamidbar 23:21).

The Gemara, discussing the three central blessings of the Mussaf prayer, also implies that this is a function of the shofar blowing:

And you should recite before Me Malkhuyot, Zikronot, and Shofarot. Malkhuyot, in order that you should coronate Me for you; Zikronot, in order that your remembrance should rise to Me with favor. And how? Through the shofar. (Rosh HaShana 16a)

Elsewhere, the Gemara relates a debate between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua regarding whether the world was created in Tishrei or Nisan (Rosh HaShana 10b). The Gemara records that our prayers follow the opinion of R. Eliezer, as we say in the Mussaf prayer, “This is the day, the beginning of Your work, a remembrance for the first day” (27a).

This reason for blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShana may be indicated by a comparison to another command to blow the shofar. Interestingly, the Torah never states explicitly that we blow the shofar on Rosh HaShana; rather, it simply describes the day with the term “terua” (Vayikra 23:23–25; Bamidbar 29:1). The Torah only explicitly commands us to blow a shofar on Yom Kippur of the Yovel (jubilee) year:

And you should number seven sabbaths of years for you, seven times seven years; and there shall be for you the days of seven sabbaths of years – forty-nine years. Then shall you make proclamation with the shofar of terua on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement shall you make proclamation with the shofar throughout all your land. (Vayikra 25:8–9)

The Gemara derives that all of the laws of the shofar in “the seventh month” (i.e., those written regarding Yom Kippur of a Yovel year) apply equally to Rosh HaShana (Rosh HaShana 33b).

Is the relationship between Yovel and Rosh HaShana merely coincidental, or do they share a common theme? Rambam writes:

And it is known that this blowing on the Yovel is to publicize the freedom [of the slaves]…as it says, “And you shall proclaim liberty” (Vayikra 25:10) – and it is not similar to the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShana, which is a remembrance before God; whereas this [Yovel] is to release the slaves, as we have explained. (Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Commandment 137)

According to Rambam, we should not search for the meaning of the shofar in the laws of the Yovel.

The Sefer HaChinukh, however, a work that systematically discusses the laws, and some reasons for the 613 mitzvot, offers a different perspective. The Chinukh offers the following reason for blowing the shofar on the Yovel:

The reason for this mitzva, according to the simplest understanding, is that God wishes to declare to His nation that everything is His, and that everything which He wishes to bestow will ultimately be returned, because the land is His…. The message of Yovel is similar to that which
earthly kingdoms practice, that the lord of the land periodically takes control of the fortified cities he has given to his vassals, in order to instill in them fear of their lord. (*Sefer HaChinukh*, Mitzvah 130)

The *Chinukh* does not believe that this is the reason for the *shofar* on Rosh HaShana, but based upon this reason, we might suggest that just as the *shofar* on Yovel is meant to declare the kingship of God, the *shofar* of Rosh HaShana similarly crowns Him.

**Repentance**

Rav Saadia Gaon offers a second reason for the *shofar*:

The second reason is that the day of Rosh HaShana is the first day of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* [the Ten Days of Repentance], and we blow the *shofar*… as if to warn: whoever wishes to repent should do so; and if not, he will suffer the consequences.

The prophet Amos’s description of the blowing of the *shofar*, “Shall a *shofar* be blown in the city, and the people not tremble?” (*Amos* 3:6), illustrates the potential impact of the *shofar* upon those who hear it. Similarly, Rambam writes:

> Even though the blowing of the *shofar* on Rosh HaShana is a decree of the Torah, there is a hint in it, as if to say: Awake, sleepers, from your sleep, and slumberers from your slumber! Search your actions and repent, and remember your Creator! …Because of this, the entire house of Israel maintains the custom of increasing their charity, good deeds, and involvement in mitzvot from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur, above the level of the rest of the year. (*Rambam, Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:4)

The *Ḥinukh* elaborates on this, describing the impact of the *shofar* sound:

> Because a physical being will only awaken to certain things upon being called…on Rosh HaShana, which is a day designated from antiquity for judging all creatures…the sound of the *shofar* wakes the heart of all who hear it, and certainly the sound of the *terua*, that is, the broken sound. And not only should a person be aroused, a person should remember to break his evil inclination to desire the pleasures of the world and to sin when he hears the broken sounds. (*Sefer HaCnukh*, Commandment 405)

**Prayer**

*Shofar* blowing fulfills a third function: its serves as a vessel or instrument of prayer. The Torah relates the numerous functions of the trumpets in the desert (*Bamidbar* 10:1–10). For example, they were sounded in order signal the camps to move, or even merely to assemble the people. It is in this context that we first encounter the scriptural term “to blow” – “litko’a” – from which the talmudic word for a straight note, *teki’a*, is derived. It appears only as a verb in Tanakh; in fact, the Torah even uses the verb form of *teki’a* to command us to blow a *terua*!

> When the Torah describes the preparations before going out to war, it relates that the trumpets are also blown:
And when you go to war in your land against the adversary that oppresses you, then **you shall sound a terua** with the trumpets; and **you shall be remembered** before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies.

Apparently, the sounding of the trumpets in this context is meant either to arouse the nation to repent or possibly to serve as the vehicle of prayer itself. In fact, the Ramban (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Commandment 5) derives from this verse that prayer in times of crisis is a biblical obligation. Rambam similarly writes:

> There is a positive commandment to cry and call out with the trumpets upon every crisis which confronts the community….This is the way of repentance, that during a crisis they should cry and call out; they should know that their condition is a function of their bad behavior….This is what will allow them to avert the crisis. This is the way of repentance, that when a crisis comes, [the nation] should cry and call out, and all should realize that because of their deeds, their situation has worsened. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta’aniyot* 1:1–3)

This may be the intention of the Gemara that describes the *shofar* as the tool for bringing our remembrance before God (*Rosh HaShana* 16a).

The reasons behind the mitzvah to blow the *shofar* may help us to understand its place in the Musaf prayer.

**The Relationship between the Shofar and Musaf**

Why do we integrate the *shofar* blasts into the blessings of Mussaf at all? Why did the sages insist that both mitzvot be performed together, and what role does each component play in this combination? We may propose two possible understandings.

Perhaps the *shofar* blasts are employed to enhance our prayers. Indeed, we have already seen that a major aspect of the mitzvah of *shofar* is prayer. Indeed, the Ramban explains explicitly that although we may not fulfill our mitzvah of *shofar* during the Musaf blasts, they “[fulfill] the mitzvah of communal prayer, to raise prayer with the blast [of the *shofar*], as is done on communal fast days” (Cited by Ritva 34b). If the *shofar* is an instrument of prayer, it makes sense to incorporate the blowing of the *shofar* into the Musaf. Apparently, the wordless *shofar* blasts contribute something that the three lengthy, articulate blessings do not. What the *shofar* adds may be the sense of emergency that is expressed by the sounding of an alarm. Alternatively, it may be that after verbal prayer expresses all that it has in its power to express, the *shofar* articulates those prayers and hopes that transcend words.

Alternatively, a second approach to explaining why we incorporate blowing *shofar* into Musaf suggests that although mitzvot are generally fulfilled even if lacking an awareness of the reason behind the mitzvah (see Rosh HaShana 26a), nevertheless, some mitzvot may be elevated or enhanced when fulfilled within a certain understanding and context. For example, the Bach insists that mitzvot for which the Torah explicitly mentions a reason should preferably be fulfilled while aware of that reason (*Bach, Orah Hayim* 625). Therefore, he rules that one should think about the redemption from Egypt while fulfilling the mitzvah of *sukka* on the first night of Sukkot, as it says in the verse, “in order that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (*Vayikra* 23:43).
Along similar lines, Ramban (Milḥamot Hashem, Berakhot 2b) explains R. Gamliel’s famous statement about the first night of Pesach – “Whoever did not say these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation. And these are they: Pesach, matza, and marror” (Pesachim 116a) – in an innovative way. While we generally assume that R. Gamliel refers to three essential components of the mitzvah of sippur yetzi’at Mitzrayim, the mitzvah to relate the story of the exodus from Egypt, Ramban suggests that without fully comprehending these components, one’s fulfillment of the mitzvot of eating the Pesach, matza, and marror are lacking!

Similarly, perhaps the mitzvah of shofar should ideally be performed while reciting the berakhot of Mussaf, as the berakhot provide the proper mindset for the performance of the mitzvah.

How do the berakhot of Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot enhance the mitzvah of shofar? The themes of these berakhot – the coronation of God (Malkhuyot), reward and punishment (Zikhronot), and divine revelation (Shofarot) – are central themes of the mitzvah of shofar. Thus, reciting these berakhot together with the shofar blasts may heighten one’s performance of the mitzvah of shofar itself!

Interestingly, the fifteenth-century Spanish哲学家, Rabbi Yosef Albo, in his Sefer HaIkkarim (Sefer HaIkkarim 1:4), claims that the berakhot of Mussaf on Rosh HaShana correspond to three basic principles of faith: The existence of God, the divine origin of the Torah, and reward and punishment. Malkhuyot affirms the existence of God, Zikhronot relates to sekhar ve’onesh (reward and punishment), and Shofarot recalls the divine revelation. In our Mussaf of Rosh HaShana, in the opening prayer of the New Year, we affirm our belief in these three fundamental principles, through the blowing of the shofar.

What emerges from our discussion is an understanding of a truly unique ritual – the Mussaf blessings of Malkhuyot, Zikhronot, and Shofarot accompanied by the blowing of the shofar.