

# Librarian's Lobby

## By Daniel D. Stuhlman

### The Translation of *Shofar* (שוֹפָר)

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In a recent posting on H-Judaic, a listserv for Jewish studies<sup>1</sup>, a fellow scholar asked about the translation of the word *shofar* (שוֹפָר) in the *Tanach* (Bible). This scholar noted that Jewish translations usually rendered *shofar* as *horn* or *ram's horn* while non-Jewish translations used, *trumpet*. She wondered if there is something she is missing in the understanding of the translation.

To put it bluntly—yes, she is missing an understanding of the connotation of words in their historical or local context. Missing is the knowledge that the meanings of words change over time and vary from one context to another. This query requires an understanding of 1) What is a trumpet; 2) What is a shofar; and 3) What is a translation.

When I was in the symphonic band the word, “horn” was a generic term meaning any brass instrument. The band had brass and woodwind sections but the divisions were more historic than descriptive. A clarinet is usually made of wood and a flute usually made of metal are both woodwinds. A saxophone, made mostly of brass, was in the woodwind section. Symphonic bands use coronets because the sound is mellow and tends to blend with the other wind instruments. Symphonic orchestras use trumpets because the sound is more piercing and makes a more separate sound than the other wind instruments.

When growing up we learned some Hebrew words that only had ritual meanings to us, but actually had more general meanings. For example, *bimah* (בִּימָה) only meant the platform where the rabbi sat or the Torah was read from. I was surprised to learn that in Israeli Hebrew *bimah* is used for any stage including the theaters used for performing arts. *Shofar* (שוֹפָר) only meant the animal horn used for ritual purposes with Jewish law (*halakha*) describing its material and usage.

#### Translating

If one wants to know how an object is called in another language, one would ask a native speaker to tell you. This works only if dealing with contemporary language. Translation is the act of interpreting the meaning of a text and producing an equivalent text in another language. The translated text should convey the same message as the original. For example if you hold up a *book* and ask a German speaker it will be called, *Buch*; in French *livre*; in Latin *liber*, however in Yiddish there are two words: “*Bukh*” and “*sefer*” (סֵפֶר) “*Bukh*” is for a general or secular book; “*sefer*” is for a Hebrew religious book. The German and English words are cognates. The Latin word is the root of “library.” “*Sefer*” is a Hebrew word, but when used in Yiddish the connotations are different.

Translating one language to another is not just translating words and concepts, but also translating nuance and connotation. Translating the *Tanach* is not just the work of a taking the Hebrew word and finding the English word, but also understanding word connotations. While the Hebrew text stays the same, way we use English does change. That is why every generation needs a new translation. The English of the King James Bible may not be understandable today because English has changed. Even though some of the English sentences in the King James English (1611) version have become

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<sup>1</sup> H-JUDAIC Digest - 25 Feb 2010 to 26 Feb 2010 (#2010-44) “Query: Shofar in Bible translations.” Received Feb. 26, 2010.

ingrained into our speech, no one would talk to his friends that way. When we use phrases such as, “thou preparest” or “thou art with me” we are imitating the English of the King James translation.

## What is a Shofar?

One could say that a shofar is the horn of a kosher animal except for a bull or cow. But that is not enough. On the web site of *Shofaroth Israel* (<http://www.shofarot.com/index.php/the-shofar/>) the Bar-Sheshet and Ribak families talk about the family tradition of making shofarot that dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. They import horn by the ton to Israel. They get mostly the horns of rams, which are male sheep at least one year old, and antelopes.<sup>2</sup> The native Israeli animals do not fit their standards. The horns arrive with the horn bone still attached. Fewer than 30% pass the inspection that gets rid of the cracked, broken or otherwise flawed horns. Many horns are broken in the preparation process. The company claims that the selection, straightening, sound adjustment, and preparation of the mouthpiece are professional secrets. Since the animal horn is only the raw material for the preparation of the shofar, one could claim that “*Shofar*” is a special word that is used for the finished product. Since the shofar is made from a natural animal product, no two are alike. They vary by size, shape and color. Consult the web site for the descriptions and many pictures of the shofarot for the Ashkenazi, Yemenite and other communities.

Animal horns are made of keratin, which is the same material as finger and toe nails. The raw horn is boiled and insides are removed. Then the horn is straightened so that a hole can be drilled for the air to flow. The drilling must be done very carefully, since any mistake could invalidate the shofar. The horn is then softened and given the bent shape according to the variant traditions.

In the third chapter of Talmud Rosh Hashanah (26a) is a discussion of shofar. It discusses the horn of a bull and why it is not kosher. The Mishnah on daf 26b says the shofar of Rosh Hashanah is from a “yael” 9 (a type of goat in the capra family) The Talmud also discusses the kinds of defects that would invalidate a shofar. While the discussion is great for understanding of the *halacha*, it does not help in the translation of shofar for non-ritual use. In the time of the Talmud it seems the only use of the Shofar was for ritual use. Because of the all the special requirements, a horn when valid for ritual use should only be called *shofar* and not translated. This still does not help in the translation of the Bible since by the time the Talmud was written was several hundred years after the Bible and by that time the use of the shofar was for ritual purposes.

## Shofar Examples in Tanach

The Tanach uses the word *Shofar* in at least three distinct ways: as a ritual instrument, battle or signal instrument, or instrument in a musical ensemble or performing group. Ritual means the sound is connected with a holiday or ritual activity. The coronation of a king is not ritual but rather a signal. The following chart gives examples of the uses of *shofar* and its translation. For a complete list consult a concordance. The *pesukim* (verses) are according to the Hebrew text. The Wycliff<sup>3</sup> English and Young’s concordance are not always in agreement with the Hebrew text. The Talmud is discussing the ritual use of the Shofar and does not add much to the understanding or translation of the word.

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<sup>2</sup> Horns from goats, gazelles, ibex, and big horn sheep are also acceptable as kosher, but not mentioned on the Shofarot Israel web site.

<sup>3</sup> This, the earliest English translation of the Bible, was done in about 1384. The translation was probably done from the Latin (Vulgate) translation and not the Hebrew text.

Verse in Tanach	Type (ritual, signal, musical)	JPS English (1917)	JPS English (1985)	Wycliff English	Targum onkelos	Latin
Ex. 19:16, 19	Signal <sup>4</sup>	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	Latin is <i>bucinae</i> unless noted.
Ex. 20:15	Signal <sup>5</sup>	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
Lev. 25:9	Ritual	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופר	
Jos. 6:4, 5,6, 8	Military signal	Ram's horns	Ram's horns or horns	Clariouns	שופריא	tubae
Jos. 6:9 <sup>6</sup>	Military signal	Horns	Horns	Clariouns	שופריא	
Jud. 3:27	Signal	Horn	Ram's horns	Clarioun	שופרא	
Jud. 6:34	Signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
Jud. 7:8	Not clear	Horns	Horns	Trumpis	שפריהון	
Jud. 7:16	Military signal	Horns	Ram's horns	Trumpis		
Jud. 7:18	Military signal	Horn, horns	horns	Trumpe	שופרא	tuba
1 Sam. 13:3 <sup>7</sup>	Signal	Horn	Ram's horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
2 Sam. 2:28	Military signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
2 Sam. 6:15	Ritual	Horn	Horn	Trumpe	שופרא	
2 Sam. 15:10 Hebrew is without the vov.	Signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
2 Sam. 18:16 Hebrew is without the vov.	Military signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
2 Sam. 20:1, 22	Signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
1 Kg, 1:34	signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
2 Kg, 9:13	Signal	Horn	Horn	Trumpe	שופר	tuba
Is. 18:3	Signal, music??	Horn	Ram's horn	Trumpe	שופרא	tubae
Is. 27:13	Signal	Horn	Ram's horn	Trumpe	שופרא	tuba
Is. 58:1	Signal	Horn	Ram's horn	Trumpe	שופרא	tuba
Jer. 4:5	Signal	horn	horn	Trumpe	שופרא	tuba
Jer. 4:19	Military signal	Horn	Horns	Trumpe	קרנא	
Jer. 4:21	Military signal	Horn	Horns	Clarioun	קרנא	
Jer. 6:1	Signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	קרנא	
Jer. 6:17 <sup>8</sup>	Signal	horn	Horn	Trumpe	נביא	tubae
Jer. 42:14	Military signal	Horn	Horn	Trumpe	שופרא	tubae
Jer. 51:27	Signal	Horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
Eze. 33:3, 4, 5, 6	Military signal	horn	Horn	Clarioun	שופרא	
Amos 2:2	Signal	Horn	Horns	Trumpe	שופרא	tubae
Ps. 47:6	Music	Horn	Horn	Trumpe	שופרא	
Zeph. 1:16	Military signal	Horn	Horn	*		tubae
Zech. 9:14	Ritual	Horn	Ram's horn	*		
Ps. 81:4	Music and ritual	Horn	Horn	Trumpe <sup>9</sup>	שופרא	
Ps. 98:6	Music and ritual	Horn	Horn	horn <sup>10</sup>		
Ps. 150:3	Music	Horn	Horn	Trumpe	שופרא	
Job 39:24, 25	Military signal	Horn	Trumpet	Trumpe	שופרא	tubae
Neh. 4: 12, 14	Military signal	horn	trumpet	Unclear as to the translation.	No Onkelos	tubae

\* Book not found in Wycliff's translation.

<sup>4,4</sup> These sentences are from the time of the giving of the Torah. The usage may be considered also ritual.

<sup>6</sup> This chapter of Joshua is the story of the conquest of Jericho. There are additional uses of the *Shofar* in verses 13 and 16.

<sup>7</sup> Wycliff calls the first two books of Samuel, Kings I and II.

<sup>8</sup> This example was hard to characterize. John Bright in his translation of Jeremiah (New York, Doubleday, 1965) translates the phrase as, "Give heeds to the trump of alarm."

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 80:4 in Wycliff translation.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 97:6 in Wycliff translation.

Robert Young in his *Analytical concordance to the Bible* uses “trumpet” for all these places. Wycliff uses the indefinite article “a” while the JPS versions use the definite article “the.” The use of the defiant article does not always match the Hebrew text.

S. R. Hirsch in his German translation<sup>11</sup> of the Torah use *Schofar* without a German equivalent. The Hebrew in Ex. 19:16 is **וּקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֲזָק** which Hirsh translates as **starker Schofarton**.

Hatzotzerah (**חֲצוֹצְרָה**) is a metal trumpet. In Numbers chapter 10 God commands Moses to make two silver trumpets. These instruments were designed to assemble the community.

Verse in Tanach	Type (ritual, signal, musical)	JPS English (1917)	JPS English (1985)	Wycliff English	
Num. 10: 2,8,9,10	Signal	Trumpets	Trumpets	trumpis	
Num. 31:6	Signal	Trumpets	Trumpets	trumpis	
2 Kg. 11:14	Music	Trumpets	Trumpets	trumpis	
Ps. 98:6	Music	Trumpets	Trumpets	trumpis <sup>12</sup>	Both Hatzotzrot and shofarot are mentioned in this verse.

## History of the Trumpet

The word, *trumpet* is a diminutive of *trumpe*, the word used in the Wycliff translation. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century of Wycliff and Chaucer the trumpe had two major purposes, ceremonial and military signal. Trumpis were used in the courts of noblemen to announce a special royal event. They were usually used in pairs or groups as described even in the time of the Temple. The sounds of the individual instruments were not the same. This was either to allow a wider range of notes, the lack of the ability of instrument makers to tune the instruments, or because they associated the trumpet with magical or ritual uses. The *clarioun* was a small instrument. Perhaps that is why the Wycliff translation uses both words. An army was more likely to carry a smaller portable horn than a long ceremonial *trumpe*.

Since the trumpets before 1814 (when valves were first used) could not produce the full chromatic scale of thirteen tones in an octave, composers of the romantic era and other eras before 1814 confined music for the trumpet to fanfares and filler type sounds. Trumpets in keys other than b-flat existed, but switching instruments in mid-piece was complicated. In the symphonies of Bach and Beethoven the trumpet’s role was limited. For example in the first movement of Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the trumpets have but 5 notes that imitate the melody of the strings. They are used as a fanfare. Compare this to the use of the trumpet in Verdi’s Opera *Aidia*.<sup>13</sup> The trumpet in the Grand March is a solo instrument with the orchestra muted in the background.

The cornet was invented in 1828 in France, in 1828 by Jean-Hilaire Ast (otherwise known as Halary). The root of cornet is *cor* the French or Latin word for horn. He wanted to make an instrument that could carry a melody along side the strings and woodwinds. Since both the cornet and trumpet are in the same key and the playing technique is identical, music can be played by either instrument. This means we can rule out using “cornet” as a translation for “shofar.”

<sup>11</sup> S. R. Hirsch vol. 2. page 198.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 97:6 in Wycliff translation.

<sup>13</sup> *Aidia*, composed by Giuseppe Verdi, was first performed at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo on 24 December 1871.

*Clarioun*<sup>14</sup> is a Middle English word for a musical instrument similar to a trompe, but smaller. The word, *clarioun* appears in Chaucer's Knight's Tale in *Canterbury Tales*, however, modern translations of Chaucer use "trumpet." *Clarioun* is a reasonable Middle English translation of *shofar* because the function is the same.

All the brass instruments in use today trace their origins to instruments made from animal horns. The horns in ancient times were used for the same purposes as a shofar i.e. signals, rituals, and music. Metal trumpets are at least as old as Biblical times. The trumpets found in King Tut's tomb were probably made for regal functions. Until the early 19th century the brass instruments were limited in their role in symphonic orchestras and bands because they could not produce the full chromatic scale.

## Etymology of Shofar

I suggest that the word *shofar* is based on the onomatopoeia of the sound that is made when blowing the shofar. The /sh/ is the inhalation, the /o/ is the exhalation, the /f/ is the shaping of the lips for the sound and the /ar/ is the smooth ending of the sound. Compare this to the sound of the word, *keren* meaning a bull's horn. The /k/ is an abrupt sound and the /n/ at the end is a full ending. *Keren* is not an open sound like the *tekiah* of the shofar.

A fuller etymology was published in the blog, *Balashon - Hebrew Language Detective*, on Thursday, September 21, 2006 and may be retrieved from <http://www.balashon.com/2006/09/shofar.html>. Here is a brief summary based on the blog and Brown, Driver and Briggs' s lexicon.

Sippur or sapparu is Assyrian for a species of goat.

Tsafir (צפיר): is Biblical Hebrew for a male goat, found in Daniel 8:5, 21.

A folk etymology combines the two Hebrew words: *shor* (ox) and *par* (bull), but a horn from a bull can't be used for a shofar.

The word shofar itself comes from the root sh-p-r ( ש - פ - ר ) which has the basic meaning of hollowness and in Biblical and modern Hebrew means beautiful, fair or nice.

## Suggested Translations

A shofar is as far removed from a raw animal horn as a trumpet is from a bunch of brass tubes. Both instruments require significant expert skill to prepare for the players. Since the word *shofar* in the time of the Bible had connotations and uses that do not match current use of the word, translation is difficult. The words *horn*, *trumpet*, and *cornet* as used in modern English have connotations to music, not ritual even though in earlier times these instruments were used for other purposes. Using a *ram's horn* as a translation gives the idea that the Bible *shofar* was made from the horn of a ram because of the connection to the sacrifice of Isaac story in Genesis chapter 22, but this is not always correct. A shofar could be made from several species of kosher animals. My suggestion is to use the word *horn* when *shofar* is used as a non-ritual signal horn, use *shofar* (untranslated as does S.R. Hirsch) when used ritually, and trumpet when used musically. When the translation uses shofar, there should be a footnote explaining why the words are not translated.

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<sup>14</sup> Also spelled clarin, claron, and clarion since Middle English spellings were not standardized.

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Update Sept 25, 2011. I just listen to a lecture by Rabbi Natan Slifkin entitled, "Exotic Shofars." He talks about the selection and use of shofars from animals other than a ram. This is an adjunct topic to the translation of the word and adds light to figuring out what is a shofar and what is not a shofa. The printed version may be read at his web site: <http://www.zootorah.com/> Click on "Essays" and then choose, "Exotic Shofars."