

THE SHOFAR MAKER PAUL RADER

From the tender manner with which he cradled the object in his left arm one might suppose it was a baby that Meir Bar-Sheshet was bent over. Such an impression, too, might be furthered by the low, crooning melody that softly flowed from his lips as he industriously rocked back and forth in his Haifa workshop.

But it was no infant Bar-Sheshet held in his arm. It was a curved ram's horn, easily a foot long, a horn he gently caressed with the fingers of his right hand as he paused now and then in his labors. Bar-Sheshet -- scion of the 16th-century Spanish sage "Haribash," Rav Yitzhak Bar-Sheshet -- was fashioning a *shofar* from the horns of a prize Australian merino.

"You know," said a recent visitor to his *shofar* workshop in Haifa, "there was a fascinating story in the paper the other day. The Bible tells us that seven priests circled the walls of Jericho for seven days, sounding blasts on seven *shofarot*. On the seventh day, the walls of Jericho crumbled. Our archaeologists have been busily studying the ground at Jericho where the walls once stood and they've come up with a new theory."

Bar-Sheshet continued to hone away at the horn, scarcely pausing in his song, but listening intently. "Our archaeologists now believe that Joshua's engineers undermined the foundations, which had been poorly constructed. So Joshua had the priests parade around the ramparts for seven days as a diversionary tactic while at night the engineers were busily digging and weakening the fortifications."

Was that a shadow of a smile on Bar-Sheshet's face as he rummaged through an assortment of files and picked a narrow, pointed one? One might suppose he was saying to himself, "Joshua had his secrets and I have mine."

Secrets there are in *shofar*-making and perhaps the BarSheshet family is unique in this respect. He is the only commercial *shofar* maker in all Israel, for this is a select art that has been handed down in his family from generation to generation, going back 400 years. His ancestor of that era had emigrated from Spain to Algiers, where he served as dayyan, a judge of a rabbinical court. Finding no proper shofarot available, he began to make them himself. The calling was thus passed down from father to son, each elder son succeeding to the post.

In the course of time, two closely guarded secrets have become part of the Bar-Sheshet lore: how to make the horn elastic enough so that the *shofar* can be shaped according to the wishes of the congregation, and how to give it the "proper tone."

"It's simple to bore a hole into a straight *shofar*," he said, "but try to do it with one of these curled ones. That's a BarSheshet secret.

"There are three 'Bar-Sheshet' tones," the artisan went on.

"First, there is the deep, bass note, preferred by the Yemenites. For this tone, which follows the biblical phrase, 'and the big *shofar* shall be sounded,' an antelope's horn is used -- giantsized ones, too. They are the most expensive.

"Then comes the Sephardic *shofar* -- a low and ceremonial note. Finally, there is the Ashkenazic -- a high, supplicating note."...

A careful worker, Bar-Sheshet turns out around 400 *shofarot* a year, at the rate of one to three a day, depending on the size and the curvatures desired.... He obtains the rams' horns from Australia in a consignment weighing one ton, containing enough material for approximately 800 horns. However, about half arrive unfit -- with holes or split -- or are spoiled during manufacture and become rejects....

Each *shofar* carries his family trademark and the legend: "Made in the City of Elijah the Prophet," referring to Elijah's sojourn on Mt. Carmel