

The champion shofar blower of America



How Kal Feinberg got his start: 'I need a ba'al tokea. You know how to blow shofar. I bought you one. Practice!'

• By DAVID GEFFEN

In Numbers 29:1, the Torah states, "And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month... it is a day of *terua* [blowing the horn] to you."

This is the Torah's commandment describing the act of worship unique to Rosh Hashana. Jews have observed this act of worship since the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It is the only Torah-commanded act of worship that we have been able to observe since the destruction of the Temple.

During the summer of 2005, the National Jewish Outreach Program organized a shofar-blowing contest throughout the US to publicize the upcoming Rosh Hashana holy day. Of the 150 contestants who submitted videotaped entries, 10 finalists from around the country were brought to midtown Manhattan for the final blow-off.

The following is the report of the contest in the *Bergen Record* newspaper (from Bergen County, New Jersey) on September 23, 2005.

"Eleven days before Rosh Hashana, New York's first 'Great Shofar Blast Off'

tooted, bellowed and cried through tiny Herald Square Park on 34th street near Macy's. One by one, some of the nation's seasoned blowers of the ram's horn got the chance to show their style, technique and sheer sweaty popping power. They came with their ram's horn in hand, 10 men with strong lungs and weathered lips – but only one could leave as grand champion."

"When it was over, the judges chose as the winner Kal Feinberg of Teaneck, New Jersey, whose tones were especially smooth. He gets a free trip for two to Israel. He and his wife Barbara were delighted to enjoy the trip."

I asked Feinberg what motivated him to enter the contest and inspired him to win.

"My daughter had just given birth. She, her husband and our new granddaughter would be moving to Israel for the year, after Yom Kippur. A free trip to Israel was a great incentive for me to enter the contest and win. So I did."

A few years ago in the month of Av, as I was taking a walk in our neighborhood in Jerusalem, I heard a shofar being blown. I recognized the *tekia*, *shevarim*, and *terua*, and those ancient sounds carried me along until I found my neighbor, Kal Feinberg, giving the shofar life as the month of Elul and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur drew near. It was quite a surprise to me that he was blowing the shofar. I told him how much I enjoyed his efforts, especially outside where all could hear him.

Who is Kal Feinberg? He and Barbara made aliya three years ago. As I asked him questions, I realized quickly that this is a Jew who demonstrates what American Judaism can offer a person who wants to be as complete a Jew as possible.

Feinberg was born in Brooklyn. His lineage in the US began when his great-grandfather Dr. Nachman Feinberg, a true *talmid hacham*, migrated to the US from Russia in the early 1900s and set the tone for the Feinberg family. With no other academic degrees, he attended a university and earned a PhD in pharmacy. He then began to teach in colleges in Ohio and in Boston, but his true love was teaching Torah, so he moved to New York City, where he taught Talmud. He wrote scholarly books in Hebrew and served as a congregational rabbi in a synagogue on the Lower East Side. Several of his books were published, and the family has a manuscript of his final book written 90 years ago, which hopefully can be published.

Feinberg attended the Yeshivah of Flatbush in Brooklyn. After high school, he attended Yeshiva University and NYU School of Engineering in a joint program where he earned BS, BHL and BSME degrees. He continued at NYU for an MA degree in mechanical engineering. During his career as a consulting engineer, he earned professional engineering licenses in five states, as

well as many other professional certifications. After gaining significant experience, he founded several consulting engineering companies that provided services to multiple prominent private, public, industrial and institutional clients during a career that spanned more than 40 years.

When Feinberg decided in college to choose an engineering career, he was advised, "That's not a good profession for an observant Jew." However, despite the logistical challenges, he managed to pray every day and observe Shabbat and holy days strictly.

He learned how to blow shofar as a teenager on a borrowed shofar. Then his parents made a trip to Israel in May 1967 (just prior to the Six Day War). While there, they purchased a shofar as a souvenir for him.

In 1974 his parents moved to the Jamaica Estates neighborhood in Queens, NY. There was no local Orthodox shul, so his father started one. That summer he called Feinberg and told him that they would be praying for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in this new shul.

"I need a *ba'al toke'a*. You know how to blow shofar. I bought you one. Practice!"

Feinberg turned to Rabbi Stanley Fass, the rabbi of Congregation Beth Aaron in Teaneck, as his shofar coach. He blew shofar in Jamaica Estates for two years. Then, when the *ba'al toke'a* in Beth Aaron in Teaneck retired, Feinberg was asked to replace him, which he did for 36 years.

The most recent locale where he blew shofar was at a minyan in 5777 (2016) in Jerusalem. "That was the most satisfying of all," he emphasized to me.

When asked what the significance of shofar blowing is to him, he responded, "Hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashana is the only form of Torah-mandated worship that the Jewish people have observed continuously since the time of Moses. It is important to understand that the mitzva is not to blow the shofar, but to hear the shofar sounds."

He never sought to be the *ba'al toke'a*, but each year for 36 years he was asked to fulfill that role. Now that he has left Teaneck, his friends miss him both personally and for his wonderful sounding of the shofar.

Precision in sounding the shofar is most significant.

"Timing is critical," he explains. "The duration of the *tekia* sound at the beginning and end of each row must equal the duration of the sounds in the middle (which vary from *shevarim-terua*, *shevarim* and *terua*). So the duration of the *tekia* is exacting. I also strive to maintain the same pitch for each sound and consistency from line to line. I place my tallit over my head during the *musaf* service so I can concentrate fully.

"Of course the entire congregation

waits in anticipation of the last note – the *tekia gedola*. At my peak, I could hold the *tekia gedola* for 45 seconds, but my lungs are not what they used to be, so my recent *tekia gedolas* are shorter."

Feinberg married Barbara Bader in 1970 and moved to Teaneck in 1974. After their three children grew up and married, they each – one by one – made aliya with their children. So, when it came time to retire, Florida was not an option. After 40 years in Teaneck, they moved to Jerusalem to join their "pioneering" children and grandchildren.

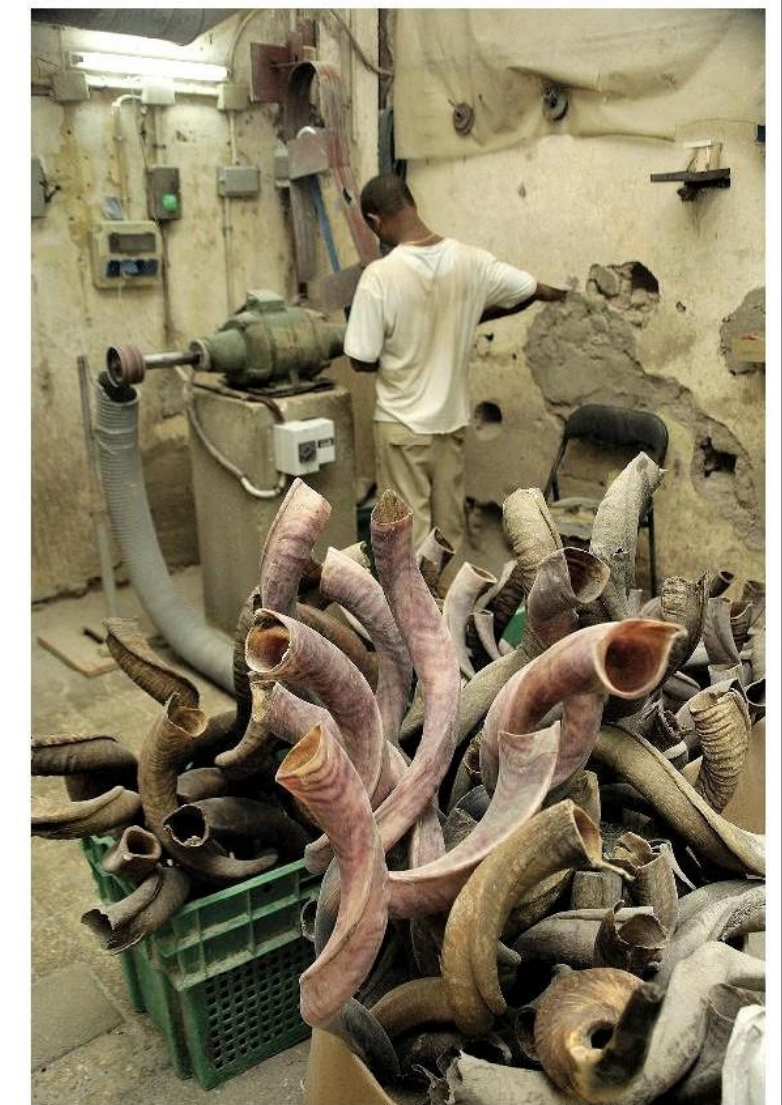
Both of their sons and their son-in-law have *smicha* from Yeshiva University. One teaches in a hesder yeshiva in Efrat, one publishes books authored by leading rabbinic scholars (both in Hebrew and English) and the third works as a financial analyst. All three continue the legacy of the patriarch of the Feinberg family, whose Torah wisdom has influenced

each new generation for more than a century.

Feinberg currently has eight shofarot on display in his home. I asked him where he buys them.

"Some of them were purchased on Ben-Yehuda Street in the tourist gift shops. One year when we were here for Passover, before making aliya, we were on Ben-Yehuda shopping for souvenirs. I decided to buy a small shofar to use during Elul. I found one that sounded promising. After a few notes, the shopkeeper said, 'That's very loud. Can you try it out outside my shop in the street?' So there I was blowing this shofar in the street, and 30 seconds later who shows up? The *ba'al musaf* from my shul in Teaneck. Of course!"

Feinberg practices his shofar blowing not just in Elul, but throughout the year – so if you hear the sounds of the shofar echoing off the hills in Jerusalem, it may just be that he is the one blowing it.



Making shofarot. (Marc Israel Sellem)