
EXOTIC SHOFARS

HALACHIC CONSIDERATIONS



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EXOTIC SHOFARS: HALACHIC CONSIDERATIONS

Rabbi Natan Slifkin

Although most people use a shofar made from the familiar ram's horn, there are an increasing number of exotic shofars available on the market, from such species as kudu, gemsbok, ibex and eland. But there are some serious halachic concerns relating to the advisability and even permissibility of using such shofars. This article examines these concerns, which appear to have so far gone largely unnoticed. In the course of doing so, we will also discuss various aspects regarding the ram's horn shofars that are widely used.

A. HOLLOW HORNS AND THE T'ZVI

There are two basic types of animal horn. Those of sheep, antelope, cattle and suchlike consist of a sheath of keratin (the same substance from which our fingernails and hair is made) covering a bony core. This core can easily be removed and discarded, and the keratin sheath is then a naturally hollow structure that, with the tip sawn off, becomes an instrument that can be sounded.

Other animals have horns that are solid. The antlers of deer and the horns of giraffes are made of solid bone (the antlers of deer also differ from other horns in that they are shed and replaced each year). It is theoretically possible to drill a hole through these horns and turn them into musical horns that can be sounded, although it would not be easy. But, if one were to do that, would they be kosher for use as shofars?

The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that horns which are made of solid bone and have no removable core are not kosher for use as a shofar.¹ This would apply even if one were to drill it out such that one could produce a sound from it. According to some, the basis for this ruling is that the word shofar implies something that is naturally prepared and beautiful (from the word *shafrah*, Psalms 16:6), which rules out a horn that has to be drilled in order to be turned into a shofar.² Others state that the



Left: Antler of a deer Right: Horn of a blesbok

1 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 586:1.

2 Ritva to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a citing Ramban. Cf. Aramaic *shafir* (Numbers 24:3, Targum).

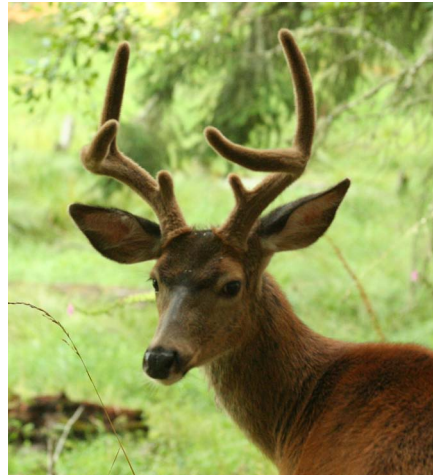
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word shofar innately refers to a naturally hollow structure, which is reflected in the word *shefoferes*, “tube” or “sheath.”³

Some confusion could arise here. There are halachic works discussing the prohibition of using a solid horn which mention that it applies to the horns of the *tzvi*. This does not refer to the animal called *tzvi* in Modern Hebrew, which is the *tzvi* of the Torah, the gazelle. The gazelle has horns that are hollow and are kosher for usage as a shofar (although, for reasons that we shall explore, they are not preferred). The animal called *tzvi* in European halachic works is the deer, the horns of which may not be used due to their not being hollow. The reason why the name *tzvi* was transferred to the deer is that there are no gazelles in Europe.



Gazelle



Deer

B. THE REQUIREMENT OF CURVATURE

I. Straight Vs. Curved

The Mishnah relates a dispute concerning which type of shofar should be used on Rosh HaShanah. One opinion is that it should be the shofar of a *yael*:

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The shofar of Rosh HaShanah is that of a *yael*, straight, and with a mouth covered in gold... and that of fast days is of rams (lit. “males”), bent... (Mishnah, *Rosh HaShanah* 3:2)

There is no doubt that the *yael* is the ibex, *Capra ibex*, a type of wild goat possessing huge, ridged horns. (Later we shall explain why the Mishnah describes its horns as being straight.) The Scriptural account of the *yael* clearly refers to the ibex:

And it came to pass, when Saul returned from following the Philistines, that it was told him, saying, Behold, David is in the wilderness of Ein-Gedi. Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel, and went to seek David and his men upon the rocks of the *yaelim*. (Samuel I 24:1-2)

³ Rashba and Ran to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a; see Mishnah, *Shabbos* 2:4, which refers to the shell of an egg as a *shefoferet*, and Baal HaTurim to Exodus 1:15.



A Nubian ibex

From Biblical times through today, one can go to the wilderness of Ein Gedi (literally “the wellspring of the goat”) and see the ibex upon the rocks, climbing them with extraordinary agility.⁴ The word *ya'al*, as a verb, means “he shall go up,” and would be an appropriate description of these superb climbers.

The other view in the Mishnah is that the familiar ram’s horn should be used for Rosh HaShanah, with the ibex horn being used for the shofar of Yovel (the jubilee year):

Rabbi Yehudah says: The shofar of Rosh HaShanah is that of rams, and of Yovel is that of ibex. (Mishnah, *Rosh HaShanah* 3:2)

The Talmud rules in accordance with Rabbi Yehudah’s opinion, and it explains the reasoning behind the dispute:

In what do they argue? Rabbi Yehudah maintains that on Rosh HaShanah, the more one bends oneself (in contrition), the better... while the first Tanna maintains that on Rosh HaShanah, the more one is outstretched (in supplication), the better. (Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 26b)

We follow Rabbi Yehudah’s opinion, and therefore we use a curved horn, symbolizing how we should be bent in contrition on the Day of Judgment. Consider too how there seems to be an association in Tanach between the verb *vayarem* and the word *keren*—a triumphal association which is the direct opposite of the bent ideal of the ram’s horn. Furthermore, animals with straight horns usually use them for potentially fatal goring, whereas animals with horns that twist back are useful only for butting and pushing, but cannot be used for goring—a further negative connotation of straight horns.⁵

4 Rashi translates *ya'el* as “steinbok.” This does not refer to the Southern African antelope known today by that Afrikaans name, but rather to the ibex, which was known as steinbok (literally, “rock goat”) in German.

5 I am indebted to Ilana Elzufon for these insights.

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It can also be pointed out that the original ram used in place of slaughtering Isaac, which the shofar commemorates, is described in the Torah as being caught in a thicket by its horns. Only the curved horns of a ram could become stuck in this way, not the straight horn of an ibex. Thus, using curved horns more closely recalls the binding of Isaac.⁶

It should be noted that while this is ruled to be the way in which one should perform the mitzvah, it is not mandatory; if one blows shofar with a straight shofar, one has fulfilled the obligation.⁷ Nevertheless, from the outset, if one has a choice between a straight and curved shofar, one is obligated to use the shofar that is curved.

This raises a problem with an exotic shofar that is gradually appearing on the market. The “gemsbok shofar,” as it is commonly called, is made from the horn of an antelope: the southern African oryx, *Oryx gazella*, which is often referred to by the Afrikaans name of gemsbok. Its horns are about two and a half feet long, straight, ridged along half their length, and deep brown or black in color. They make for a novel and striking shofar that commands a price of between \$100 and \$250. Gemsbok shofars can be purchased from shofar manufacturers under rabbinic supervision and at many Judaica retailers. They have received publicity in Orthodox publications as exotic yet kosher shofars. But since they are straight, they should preferably not be used as shofars. Later, we shall raise other concerns with gemsbok shofars.



A gemsbok horn and a gemsbok shofar, complete with kosher certification

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By the same token, other exotic shofars that are occasionally available are likewise not the preferred way to fulfill the mitzvah. Ibex horns, which are the most expensive shofars on the market, are themselves mentioned in the Mishnah as not falling under the category of bent shofars. Eland, largest of all antelopes, possess huge, thick horns that are twisted but still mostly straight along the central axis.⁸ Such shofars, beautiful and unusual as they may be, should therefore not be used when a curved horn is available.

6 Moshe Ra'anana, “*Aspektim Zoologim b’ Hilchot Shofar*,” in *Be’Rosh HaShanah Yikateivun: Kovetz Maamarim Al Rosh HaShanah* (Machon Herzog) p. 290.

7 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 586:1.

8 It should be noted that the manufacture of shofars from eland, nyala, blackbuck and other such exotics that are available today can usually be traced back to Messianic Jews or Christians, which raises its own problems. See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 586:3.



A shofar from an eland

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At least one recent authority has added a new twist to the requirement of using a curved ram's horn. As we shall now discuss, in his opinion, many commonly sold ram's horn shofars are not considered to adequately fulfill this criterion either.

II. The Problem With Ordinary Shofars

As discussed earlier, animal horns of the type suited to making shofars (as opposed to those of deer or rhinoceros) are made of a sheath of keratin covering a bony core. To turn the horn into a shofar, the bony core is removed and discarded, the tip of the keratin horn sawn off, and a hole drilled from the end to the hollow interior of the keratin. But drilling this hole can present difficulties. A ram's horn in its natural state is tightly coiled, and the hollow interior does not reach all the way to the end. There is no straight line between the end of the hollow and the sawn-off tip that can be drilled. To solve this problem, the horn is heated, thus rendering it malleable, and the end of it is straightened. A hole can then easily be drilled from the tip into the hollow interior. The result of this is that the shofar is partially straight.



A shofar made of a partially straightened ram's horn

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Rabbi Yosef Kapach, the late Yemenite authority, argued that this straightening process is problematic. It means that the shofar does not satisfactorily fulfill the Talmudic requirement of it being *kafuf*, bent.⁹ The Mishnah speaks of “ram's horns, bent” – presumably to exclude those that have been straightened.

⁹ Rabbi Yosef Kapach, “*Shofar Shel Rosh HaShanah*,” *Sinai* 69 (1970) pp. 209-212.

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An ibex shofar

One may still wonder if perhaps even a small amount of curvature suffices, such as that found on most shofars. But Rabbi Kapach points out that the Mishnah contrasts the curved (*kafuf*) ram's horn with the straight (*pashut*) ibex horn. Now, when the Mishnah describes the ibex horn as straight, it does not mean that it is absolutely straight, as ibex horns are not straight. If "straight" refers to horns that are curved, then "curved" must refer to horns that are fully twisted.¹⁰

Although *pashut* is commonly translated as "straight," it does not carry precisely the same meaning. In English, "straight" only refers to something absolutely straight, and "curved" refers to something with even a slight curvature. But in Aramaic, *kafuf* means "bent over" i.e. curled or twisted, and *pashut* includes something with slight curvature. As Meiri puts it, relative to a ram's horn, an ibex horn is straight.

Yet by the time that a ram's horn has been turned into a shofar with the technique of heating and straightening the end to make the drilling easier, it is often no more curved than an ibex horn. Since the Mishnah requires a ram's horn to be curved, and it contrasts it to an ibex horn, then it appears that the full degree of curvature is required – i.e. a horn that is curled such that it is markedly different from an ibex horn. A shofar that has been partially straightened to facilitate drilling would not fulfill this requirement.

Rabbi Kapach further states that independently of the proof from the ibex horn, there is another argument to be made. Since the Mishnah requires the ram's shofar to be curved, one must assume that any form of straightening it and removing its natural curvature is forbidden, unless one can prove otherwise. And once one permits even a small amount of straightening, it would be impossible to draw limits as to how much one can change it.

Based on this, many Yemenites use a ram's horn shofar that possesses its full curvature. Producing such a shofar is not easy; it is best done with a very large horn, such that one

10 My esteemed colleague Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky, "*Shofar MiKarnei Re'eim, Yael VeAyil*," *Techumin* 27 (5767) p. 116 offers the intriguing suggestion that the Mishnah may have been referring to the truly straight horns of the oryx, which may be classified as a *yael* under a broader definition. However, the oryx is very dissimilar to the ibex and is far more distantly related to it than is a sheep.



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A fully curved ram's horn shofar

can cut a considerable length of the tip, close to the hollow interior, thus requiring little drilling but still leaving a lengthy curved section. Such shofars are rarely on the market and command a very high price, but, as Rabbi Kapach argues, may be the only ones that satisfy the requirement of being *kafuf*.

Rabbi Kapach also argues that there is an early source which prohibits changing the shape of the horn in any way. Rav Saadiah Gaon writes:

The shofar that we blow may only be the horn of a ram and it is forbidden to alter its form. (*Siddur Rav Saadiah Gaon*, p. 217)¹¹

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch adds that these fully curved Yemenite shofars are an appropriate *hiddur* to be used for a different reason – the sound that they produce is the natural sound of the shofar, rather than the altered sound of a horn that has been artificially straightened.¹² We can also add that, given the idea that we are recalling the ram that was caught in the thicket by its horns, only the fully twisted horns of a ram could become entangled, not the straightened horns that are commonly used as shofars.

There are also other grounds for arguing that any change from the natural form of the horn disqualifies the shofar; not due to the change in sound, but for a different reason. The Talmud discusses the laws concerning various physical alterations that can be made to a shofar:

If a person scraped it down to a thin shell, it is kosher... If a person reversed the shofar and blew it, he has not fulfilled his obligation. Rav Pappa said: Do not say that it means that he turned it inside out like a shirt, but rather that he enlarged the narrow end and compressed the wide end. What is the reason why it is invalid? As Rav Masna said: “And you shall carry [the sound of] the shofar” (Leviticus 25:9) – it is required that it be in the way that it is carried [by the animal]. (Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 27b)

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11 It could perhaps be countered that Rav Saadiah only means to say that one should not use the horn of a different animal, which will have a different form from that of a ram's horn.

12 *Mo'adim u'Zmanim*, vol. 8, 1:5. However, it should be noted that the halachah specifically legitimizes various physical alterations to the shofar that alter its sound. See *Beis Yosef, Tur Orach Chaim* 586:17.

There is some dispute as to precisely what Rav Pappa means when he says that the Talmud is not referring to a case where the shofar was turned inside-out (via heating it). It could mean that such a shofar is obviously *not* kosher, as it is not in the form that it grows from the animal; or it could mean that in such a case the shofar *is* kosher, since at least the narrow end and the large end are still in the same place that they were originally. There are further disputes as to how to apply this principle to other cases of changing the shape of the shofar, such as enlarging the mouthpiece. Such discussions are intricate and are beyond the scope of this article.¹³ But there may be grounds here for concern that straightening the shofar is a violation of the requirement that the shofar be “in the way that is carried” by the animal.

Still, in light of the fact that normative practice is not to use the special fully curved shofars used by the Yemenites, we should justify the common custom. Perhaps the implication of the Talmud is that only a major reversal of the shape of the shofar disqualifies the shofar, not a lesser alteration such as straightening part of the curve in order to drill a hole. And perhaps the common ram’s horn shofars are still adequately more curved than an ibex shofar to be considered *kafuf*. This is a difficult argument to present with the shofars traditionally used in many parts of Europe, which were straight with a small curve at the end; yet that curve was a right angle and was sharper than the curve of an ibex horn. Most large shofars available today, made by one of three large shofar manufacturers in Israel, still remain with a curve and a twist, which makes them distinctively more *kafuf* than an ibex horn, even though they have been straightened along a portion of their length.

C. THE PREFERENCE FOR RAMS

I. Requirement Vs. Preference

The Talmud states why a shofar should be made from a ram’s horn:

Rabbi Avahu said: Why do we blow with the shofar of a ram? As the Holy One says: Blow before Me with the shofar of a ram, so that I will recall the binding of Isaac son of Abraham for you, and I will rate it as though you bound yourselves before Me. (Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 16a)

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The ram’s horn is reminiscent of Abraham’s binding of Isaac, in which he ultimately substituted a ram in place of his son, which is an important merit on the Day of Judgment. According to Rambam, this is an absolute requirement:

The shofar that one blows on Rosh HaShanah and Yovel is the bent horn of a sheep. And all shofars, aside from the horn of a sheep, are invalid.¹⁴ (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Shofar* 1:1)

¹³ See *Minchas Yitzchak* 8:54 for an extensive discussion, and Rav Yitzchak Shilat, *Zichron Teruah*, pp. 97-102.

¹⁴ *Kesef Mishnah* cites *Kolbo* that Rambam was only intending to rule out cattle horns and was including goats and suchlike in his category of sheep, as is the view of *Taz*. But *Kesef Mishnah* points out that this hardly seems to be the meaning of Rambam’s words. *Pri Megadim* adds that Rambam’s wording would still be inappropriate as it would rule out animals such as antelope.

According to other authorities, however, one can fulfill one's obligation with the horns of animals other than sheep. It seems that according to some authorities, from the outset one still has the obligation to use a ram's horn where it is available.¹⁵ But the mainstream view is that even from the outset one is entitled to choose the (curved) horn of other animals; using that of a ram is the ideal form of the mitzvah but is not required in any way:

...From the outset (*lechatchilah*), one should use [a shofar] that is bent, even if it is from a goat. And nevertheless the preferred form of the mitzvah is to obtain one from a ram, to recall the binding of Isaac. And the Rambam, of blessed memory, wrote that all shofars are invalid except for the horn of a sheep; and everyone challenged him about this. (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 586:1)

Most Jewish communities do not follow the rulings of Rambam where disputed by these other authorities, and therefore can fulfill the obligation of shofar with the horns of animals other than rams.¹⁶ Still, it seems strange that, given the ready availability of ram's horns, people would elect to use shofars from other animals. While other shofars may be more impressive, and using them might be a form of *hiddur* mitzvah, surely the mitzvah's own inbuilt *hiddur* – that of using a ram – should take preference.

It is also noted that, in the absence of a ram's horn, the shofar of a goat is preferable to that of other animals, since goats are referred to in the Torah with the same terminology as sheep.¹⁷ For example, an ibex shofar is preferable than an eland shofar; even though both are straight, the ibex has the advantage of being in the goat family.¹⁸

II. The Yemenite Kudu Shofar

A curious anomaly exists with the Yemenite community. As mentioned above, there is a group within the Yemenite community that is particular to use a ram's horn in its pristine twisted state. But most Yemenite Jews use a shofar made from a kudu horn. The greater kudu, *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*, is a large striped antelope with amongst the biggest horns of any creature. Sometimes mistakenly identified as "gazelle shofars," the kudu shofar is instantly recognizable by its great length (usually 30 to 40 inches but occasionally over 50 inches) and its three twists. Due to their magnificent appearance, they are also used outside of the Yemenite community and are available from almost every shofar supplier. But because they originated with the Yemenite community, they are commonly called "Yemenite shofars."

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Yet Yemenite Jews generally follow the rulings of Rambam, and Rambam ruled that a shofar made from any animal other than a sheep is invalid. How, then, did the custom arise of using a kudu horn? The answer is not clear, but Rabbi Amram Korach, last chief rabbi in Yemen, writes as follows:

15 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 586:1, and *Tosafos* and Rashba according to the explanation of Rav Yitzchak Shilat in *Zichron Teruah* pp. 16-17, 27-28.

16 Strangely, while *Shulchan Aruch* 586:1 seems to indicate that using a ram's horn is *lechatchilah* (the required choice where possible), *Mishnah Berurah* follows the *Tur* and rates it instead as *mitzvah min hamuvchar*.

17 *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim* 586:4, based on Deuteronomy 14:4. See too Ramban to *Rosh HaShanah* 26b.

18 *Pri Megadim*.

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A Yemenite kudu shofar

The shofar of Rosh HaShanah, that they were accustomed to blowing, was long and twisted, two or three twists, and its sound was pure and eerie. Some said that it was from an animal that was similar to sheep. Therefore, they did not concern themselves with [Rambam's] stringency that only sheep horns are kosher, since they saw that this shofar beautifies the mitzvah in its stature, and its sound was greater than that of a sheep's horn, and until this very day they blow the mitzvah blasts with this shofar, according to the rulings of the Geonim that all twisted shofars are kosher from the outset. (*Sa'arat Teiman*, Jerusalem 1954, p. 99)

This explanation is somewhat confusing. Was it that they thought that these horns were from an animal that was in the sheep family, and they therefore thought that they were following the Rambam's view, or was it that the beauty of the shofar made them decide not to follow Rambam's view, in which case the notion that this animal was in the sheep family was irrelevant? It is impossible to determine. But it is quite reasonable to accept that the horn was thought to be from an animal in the sheep family; kudu only live in Central and Southern Africa, so when their horns were imported into Yemen, people would not have been familiar with the animals from which they came.

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, a controversy erupted within the Yemenite community over these shofars.¹⁹ Rabbi Yechya Kapach, the illustrious scholar and founder of the Dor De'ah movement, which sought to adhere more closely to the teachings of Rambam, ruled that one may only use a shofar made from a ram's horn. Some followed his lead, while others would use a ram's horn for the shofar blasts during prayer and then repeat the blasts later with a kudu shofar. Rabbi Kapach even wrote to Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, requesting that senior rabbis sign a letter invalidating the use of kudu shofars. By way of exaggerating the problem of not using ram's horns, he described these shofars as cattle horns (which, as we shall later see, are utterly invalid as shofars). Rabbi Yosef Tzubiri, leader of the Shami group within the Yemenite community, protested these

19 For further discussion, see Aharon Gimadi, "Shofar viTekiyot biMesoret Bnei Teiman," in Aharon Ben-David and Yitzchak Glusker, eds, *Mechkarim b'Lashon Ivrit u'Mada'ai Yahadut*."

exaggerations and attempted to show that the custom of using such long, twisted shofars originated in a type of ram's horn which was of this form. But in any case these Yemenite shofars of recent history are undoubtedly all from kudu.

Ironically, it is more legitimate for other Jewish communities, which follow the *Shulchan Aruch* rather than the Rambam, to use a “Yemenite shofar” than it is for the Yemenite community.²⁰ Yet even for non-Yemenite Jews, as discussed above, using a shofar that is not from a ram is not the ideal, no matter how beautiful it may be, and one may even be obligated to choose a ram's shofar where it is available. But on the other hand, a kudu horn may well be a better fulfillment of the requirement to have a curved shofar than many ram's horn shofars that are available; if such ram shofars are considered straight, as per Rav Kapach's argument, then a kudu horn may be preferable.²¹

D. THE PROBLEM WITH GEMSBOK

I. The Gemsbok as the *Re'em*

A potentially prohibitive problem which specifically exists with gemsbok shofars, aside from that of their being straight, relates to the likelihood of the gemsbok being the *re'em* of the Torah.

God brought them out of Egypt, He has as though the *to'afos* of a *re'em*. (Numbers 23:22)

The Septuagint translates “*to'afos* of a *re'em*” as “the glory of a unicorn.” Radak and others adopted the Septuagint's translation and explained the *re'em* to be a single-horned animal.²² Rav Saadiah Gaon also seems to follow this view, translating the *re'em* in this verse²³ as the *karkadan*, which is the name of the unicorn in Arabian legend. But although the Septuagint defines the *re'em* as an animal with a single horn, Scripture itself indicates that it possesses more than one horn:

His firstborn ox, grandeur is his, and his horns are like the horns of a *re'em*; with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth; and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Menasheh. (Deuteronomy 33:17)

The verse speaks of the horns of the *re'em*, in the plural. Radak nevertheless maintains that the *re'em* possesses only one horn, and asserts that this verse is to be read loosely, as though it states *re'emim* in the plural. But this is not a straightforward explanation; and Rabbi Eliyahu Ashkenazi, in his response to Radak, instead concludes from this verse that

20 Moshe Ra'anana, “*Aspektim Zoologim b' Hilchot Shofar*,” suggests that if the prohibition of using cattle horns (due to their being *keren*) applies to all members of the Bovinae subfamily, then it would include kudu. However there is no basis whatsoever to think that this zoological classification system would have any bearing on halachah. If the kudu were to be placed within the ten categories of kosher animals mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:4-5, it would undoubtedly be classified along with the *dishon*, which is the addax – a spiral-horned antelope that the kudu closely resembles.

21 *Mishnah Berurah* (*Orach Chaim* 586:5) notes that in the opinion of most halachic authorities, a twisted horn of other species is preferable to the straight horn of a ram.

22 *Pri Chadash* (*Yoreh De'ah* 80:1:2).

23 But not in other instances where it is mentioned, as we shall later discuss.

the *re'em* does indeed possess more than one horn. The *re'em* is therefore not a unicorn, but a two-horned animal. But what animal could it be? Some further clues can be found in other places where Scripture mentions the *re'em*:

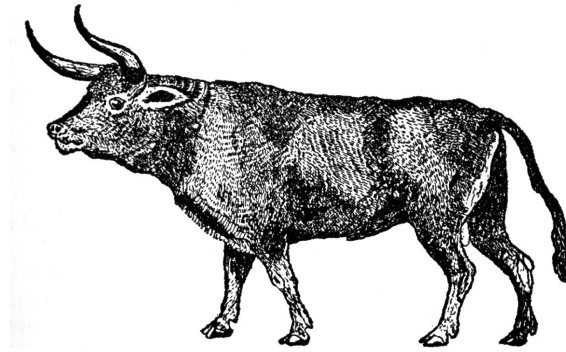
You raised my *keren* (literally, “horn”; metaphorically, “pride”) like that of the *re'em*. (Psalms 92:110)

This perhaps indicates that the horns of the *re'em* were not just magnificent, but also upwards-pointing. In fact the name *re'em* may itself be related to the word *ram*, meaning “high.” Further clues as to the nature of the *re'em* are found in the Book of Job:

Would the *raim* be willing to serve you? Would he stay at your feeding-trough? Can you bind the *raim* with ropes to the furrow? Will he level the valleys after you? Would you trust him, because his strength is great, and would you leave your labor to him? Would you believe in him to bring home your seed, and gather it into your barn? (Job 39:9-12)

Although the word used here is *raim*, the commentaries state that it is identical to the *re'em*. It is presented as an animal of great strength that cannot be pressed into the service of man. We are therefore seeking a powerful animal of great wildness with magnificent, upwards pointing horns. There are two candidates that have been proposed.

Some have suggested that the *re'em* is the aurochs (pronounced oar-ox, plural aurochsen), *Bos primigenius*. These animals, which became extinct in 1627, were the ancestors of modern cattle. They were much larger than modern cattle and far more aggressive, with horns that pointed forwards and upwards. There are Assyrian engravings of aurochs with the name *rimu*.



An illustration of an aurochs

Aurochsen were certainly qualified to earn the Scriptural description of the *re'em* as a creature of legendary power and wildness. Furthermore, the account in the Book of Job stated that the *re'em* is too wild an animal to use in agriculture. This may indicate that the *re'em* is at least superficially similar to an ox. The aurochs would well match this description.²⁴

However, the Midrash gives an additional description of the *re'em* which does not match aurochsen:

²⁴ See Seforno ad loc.

“His firstborn ox, grandeur is his, and his horns are like the horns of a *re'em*” – The ox is of great strength, but its horns are not beautiful; the horns of a *re'em* are beautiful, but it is not strong; he thus gave to Joshua the strength of an ox and the horns of a *re'em*. (*Sifrei, Vezos HaBerachah* 12)

The aurochs was extremely strong. It therefore appears that this Midrash is referring to a different animal: the oryx. It possesses magnificent horns, but it is far less powerful a creature than the ox. In several instances, Rav Saadiah Gaon identifies the *re'em* with the Arabic *rim*, which is the oryx.²⁵ More recently it has been suggested that the name *re'em* sometimes refers to the aurochs and sometimes to the oryx.²⁶

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The Arabian oryx

While the oryx of Scripture would be the Arabian oryx, there is no doubt that the term would also include the African oryx – the gemsbok. And if the oryx is the *re'em*, then there may be a problem in making a shofar from its horns, as we shall now discuss.

II. The *Keren* of the *Re'em*

There are different types of animal horns. For example, the branching horns of deer are called antlers in English. All antlers are horns, but not all horns are antlers. A similar phenomenon occurs in Hebrew. Animal horns are called *keren*. Most of them are hollow and are suitable for use as a musical instrument; these are called shofars. Thus, every shofar is a *keren*, but not every *keren* is a shofar. The Mishnah states which shofars are kosher for use in fulfilling the commandment to blow a shofar on Rosh HaShanah and other occasions:

All shofars are kosher, except for that of a cow, because it is a *keren*. (Mishnah, *Rosh HaShanah* 3:1)

25 Curiously, though, in Deuteronomy 33:17 he explains it to refer to the *karkadan*, which is an Arabic name for the unicorn; although this word can perhaps also refer to the rhinoceros.

26 Menachem Dor, *HaChai Biyme'i HaMikra, HaMishnah VeHaTalmud*, pp. 37-38. Yehuda Feliks (*Nature and Man in the Bible*, p. 263) argues that this reflects different geographical regions; the north-eastern tradition identified it as an aurochs, while the Southern-Arabian tradition identified it as an oryx.

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A (non-kosher) shofar of a cow

Cattle – including males (oxen) and females (cows) – possess horns that are hollow and can theoretically be made into a shofar. However the Mishnah states that such a shofar is not kosher, because the Torah designates the horn of cattle as a *keren*. Thus, even though it can technically be made into a shofar, its designation as a *keren* indicates that it is not considered a shofar from the standpoint of Jewish law. (Rabbi Yaakov Emden argues that the same would apply to the horns of a bison, which is essentially a wild form of cattle.²⁷)

The Mishnah then cites an objection from Rabbi Yosi that even a ram's horn is referred to in Scripture as a *keren*. The Talmud defends the Mishnah's ruling by explaining that the horn of a ram is also designated as a shofar, whereas the horn of cattle is only designated as a *keren* and is not named as a shofar:

That of a cow is called a *keren*, but is not called a shofar, as it is written, “The firstborn of his ox, grandeur is his, and his horns are the horns of the *re'em*...” (Deuteronomy 33:17) (Talmud, *Rosh HaShanah* 26a)

Since this verse refers to the horns (*keren*) of cattle (the ox), and nowhere does Scripture describe the horn of the ox as a shofar, it is therefore not kosher for use as a shofar. The Talmud then gives the supplementary reason that due to the sin of the Golden Calf, it is inappropriate to use the shofar of an ox on the Day of Judgment.²⁸

Several of the medieval commentators note that this raises a difficulty. The Mishnah stated that all shofars are kosher aside from that of a cow. Yet the verse cited by the Talmud also uses the term *keren* to describe the horns of a *re'em*, and nowhere is the name shofar applied to them. Surely, then, the horn of a *re'em* is likewise disqualified for use as a shofar. If so, why did the Mishnah state that only cow's horns are disqualified?

Tosafos suggests that perhaps the horns of the *re'em* are not hollow. Accordingly, they are in any case not suited to be made into a shofar, just like the antlers of deer.²⁹ An alternate

²⁷ Responsa *She'elas Ya'avetz* 1:50.

²⁸ The Talmud later gives an alternate supplementary reason – that the horn of cow grows in distinct stages, which makes it look like several shofars attached to each other rather than the single shofar required by the Torah. Rashi here explains this to refer to distinct rings along the length of the horn, while Rashi to *Chullin* 59a and Rabbeinu Chananel here explain it to refer to distinct layers within the horn.

²⁹ Tosafos to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a s.v. *Chutz mishel parah*; Ramban to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a s.v. *Veyesh lehakshos*; see too Ramban's *drashah* for *Rosh HaShanah*. A study of the halachic literature reveals that while *Tosafos* merely suggested that possibly the *re'em*'s horns are not hollow, others who quoted *Tosafos* took it as

suggestion is given by Ramban and Ritva, who propose that when the Mishnah states that only the horn of a cow is disqualified because it is called a *keren*, it means to include all other animal horns that are likewise referred to as a *keren* and not as a shofar. It does not explicitly mention the *re'em* because it is an uncommon animal.³⁰ But the horn of the *re'em* would likewise be disqualified for use as a shofar. Accordingly, if the *re'em* is the oryx, a gemsbok shofar would not be kosher.

III. An Argument For Permissibility

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Margolios and Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, however, take a different approach to this topic.³¹ They explain that the second answer of the Talmud, that a cow's horn may not be used because of the Golden Calf, is not a distinct answer from the first. In fact, as an independent answer it would be insufficient, since one could counter that a horn, by virtue of not being visibly part of a cow, no longer raises the memory of the Golden Calf (just as cow's blood can be used in Temple rites). Likewise, the Talmud's first answer, that a cow's horn is disqualified due to it being called *keren*, is also insufficient on its own, since the horns of all animals are called *keren*. Instead, the two answers of the Talmud are intended to work in conjunction with each other. It is not that anything called *keren* is disqualified if not called shofar. Instead, it is because the horn of cattle is called *keren* and never shofar – i.e., that it is always named as a horn, and never as an instrument – that we see that it is named after its animal origin, and therefore does raise the memory of the Golden Calf.

Following this approach, only the horn of a cow would be disqualified as a shofar. The horn of a *re'em*, even though it is called *keren* and not shofar, would be acceptable, since the *re'em* was not used in the sin of the Golden Calf. Accordingly, a gemsbok shofar would be kosher.

Nevertheless, from a halachic standpoint, those who prohibit making a shofar from the horn of a *re'em* – Ramban, Ritva, and presumably *Tosafos* – carry greater weight. Accordingly, since there are strong grounds to say that the *re'em* is the oryx, this provides further reason for the gemsbok shofar not to be used on Rosh HaShanah, aside from the problem of it not being curved and not being a ram.

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E. THE POSITION OF THE SHOFAR

There is a law concerning the position in which to hold the shofar which potentially has bearing on the species used for the shofar:

One should turn the shofar upwards, as it says, “God is elevated with the *teruah*” (Psalms 47) (Rema, *Orach Chaim* 585:2, citing Rokeach and Maharil)

a factual description. According to modern zoology, the only species of animal alive today to possess solid horns are deer, rhinoceroses, and the giraffe, none of which are candidates for the *re'em*.

30 Ramban to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a s.v. *Veyesh lehakshos*; Ritva to *Rosh HaShanah* 26a s.v. *Od hikshu*.

31 Rabbi Yehudah Leib Margolios, *Korban Reishis* (Warsaw 1911); Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, *Yismach Moshe, parshas Ki Sisa*, p. 193a.

Magen Avraham writes that “he means to say that the mouth of the shofar should be upwards rather than to the sides.” This in turn is explained to mean that the shofar should be rotated so that the mouth of the shofar faces upwards rather than sideways.³² Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe (*Levush*) writes that the shofar should be angled slightly upwards, i.e. that the mouth of the shofar should be slightly higher than the mouthpiece.³³ *Levush* and *Mateh Ephraim*³⁴ note that this is not essential, but it is a preference nonetheless.

However Rabbi Shlomo HaKohen of Vilna, best known for his work *Cheshbek Shlomo* that is printed at the back of the Talmud, points out that there is a more fundamental requirement regarding the *shofar*’s position.³⁵ With all mitzvos involving naturally-growing items, there is a requirement that the item be held in the position that it naturally grows – *derech gedelaso*. Thus, for example, a *lulav* must be held with its tip facing upwards, or else one has not fulfilled the mitzvah. Accordingly, one must hold a shofar in the position in which it naturally grows on the animal. Since this is a basic halachah, why do Rokeach and Maharil cite a verse from Scripture to allude to the requirement concerning the shofar’s position? Rabbi Shlomo HaKohen explains that the requirement of *derech gedelaso* is fulfilled as long as the shofar is not held in a downwards-pointing position. The ruling of Rokeach and Maharil is a supplementary preference to this requirement, instructing that the shofar should preferably be pointed a little upwards (or rotated so that the mouth faces upwards), and is therefore only a *remez* alluded to in Scripture as opposed to a fundamental *halachic* requirement.

We thus have an additional requirement of *derech gedelaso* which mandates that the shofar must be held in a position that approximates the way in which the animal grows its horn. Yet when we apply this requirement to the various types of shofar, a curious result emerges. The horn of a ram grows in a corkscrew fashion in a horizontal line from the head. Thus, when one holds a ram’s horn shofar in an approximately horizontal manner, one is holding it in the way that it naturally grows. Furthermore, when the horn emerges from the head, it immediately turns downwards. Thus, when one rotates the shofar such that the mouth is the top, one has even more closely approached the position in which the animal grows its horn.

ibex horns, on the other hand, grow straight up and then curve back. If one were to hold an ibex horn in its naturally growing position, this would mean that one must hold it such that the mouth points downwards. And all antelope horns grow upwards. If one is to blow a shofar made of kudu, blackbuck, eland or oryx in the position in which the animal carries the horn, this would necessitate holding it in the exact opposite position to how one would ordinarily hold it. It would have to be pointing downwards, like a saxophone.

32 *Kaf HaChaim* 585:30, citing *Machatzis HaShekel*.

33 Others cite kabbalistic sources stating that the mouth of the shofar should be lower than the mouthpiece. This appears to stand in contrast to the ruling of Rokeach and Maharil. However *Nimukei Orach Chaim* attempts to reconcile this by stating that Rokeach and Maharil were only referring to the shofar being rotated in position – a downwards position – so that the mouth of the shofar points upwards rather than to the side, as per the explanation of Magen Avraham. *Nimukei Orach Chaim* even argues that this could be the meaning of *Levush*.

34 *Orach Chaim* 585:4.

35 *Binyan Shlomo, Hilchos Lulav* 48.

This is an astonishing conclusion; surely nobody has ever held an ibex or antelope shofar in that position. It is peculiar that no mention of this requirement is made by any other authority. It is customary in such cases to suggest a reason why other authorities may not have agreed with this requirement. Perhaps one can say that the requirement of *derech gedelaso* only applies where the mitzvah is the actual physical taking hold of the item. Such is the case with *lulav* and *esrog*, and in such cases the physical position of the item is significant. With shofar, on the other hand, it is debatable as to whether the mitzvah includes physically taking the item in one's hand.³⁶ Even if it does, this is certainly secondary to the essence of the mitzvah which is the sounding of the shofar. Accordingly, perhaps the requirement of *derech gedelaso* does not apply, and kudu and ibex shofars can therefore be held in the conventional manner.³⁷



A greater kudu. Note how the tip of the horn, which is made into the mouthpiece, is at the top.

F. SHOFARS FROM NON-KOSHER ANIMALS

I. May a Shofar be Made From a Non-Kosher Animal?

Many people assume that one must ensure that an exotic shofar comes from a kosher animal. Is this a valid concern?

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 586:1) lists the basic laws of which types of shofar are not kosher – that of cattle, and those made of horns that are not naturally hollow. A parenthetical comment is appended by Rema: “And similarly, a shofar of a non-kosher animal is disqualified.” This is attributed to Ran, in his commentary on the fourth chapter of tractate *Rosh HaShanah*.

The truth is that Ran is not unequivocal about this.³⁸ The grounds for this prohibition would be if there is a principle that only kosher animals may be utilized in acts of Divine service. One might presume that such a principle does indeed exist; after all, Tefillin may only be written on parchment from a kosher animal. The Talmud introduces such a principle in order to argue that the *tachash*, whose skin was used in the construction of the Mishkan, must have been a kosher animal. But Ran points out that it is ultimately apparently rejected as a definitive principle, since the Talmud finds it necessary to use a

36 Rabbi Shlomo HaKohen argues that there is indeed such a requirement, but others seem to differ. See Tosafos to *Rosh HaShanah* 34b s.v. *na'avrei* and *Moadei Kodesh* p. 188 for a list of sources.

37 I am indebted to Rabbi Mordechai Kornfeld for this suggestion.

38 See *Shaar HaTziyon*, 586:14.

different argument to prove that the *tachash* was kosher.³⁹ This may indicate that there is no such principle, and that there is a different reason why Tefillin may only be written on parchment from a kosher animal – a reason specific to Tefillin. Accordingly, there would be no reason that a shofar would have to be made from a kosher animal.⁴⁰ Furthermore, a shofar is not an item of sanctity, as are Tefillin; a shofar can be discarded in the garbage without requiring any respectful treatment. It is simply something that is used to produce a sound.

Ran therefore leaves the question of whether a shofar can be made from a non-kosher animal as unresolved. Still, a principle that only kosher animals may be utilized in acts of Divine service may indeed exist. Since it is a doubt regarding a Biblical requirement, Rema rules stringently that the horn of a non-kosher animal may not be used.⁴¹ But, due to the element of doubt involved, some authorities point out that if there is no other shofar available, one should use such a shofar, albeit without pronouncing a blessing.⁴² In this regard, such a shofar would be superior in status to a shofar made from a cattle horn or from a solid horn, with which there is nothing to be gained by blowing it even if there is no other shofar available.

II. Do Shofars from Non-Kosher Animals Exist?

In response to the Ran's ruling that the shofar of a non-kosher animal should not be used, an interesting question is raised by Rabbi Mordechai Kraschnik of Cracow⁴³ and in Responsa *Chavos Ya'ir* (20). They point out that in any case, there is no such thing as a non-kosher animal with horns! This conclusion is based on a statement in the Talmud (*Niddah* 51b) that every animal with horns also possesses split hooves (and chews the cud). The question is therefore asked: why is the Ran's ruling relevant?

Several authorities defend the necessity of Ran's discussion. They argue that the Talmud's statement that all animals with horns are kosher was limited in application; either it was the lone view of Rabbi Dosa that the Rabbis disputed,⁴⁴ or it was not referring to domesticated animals,⁴⁵ or it was only referring to certain types of horns,⁴⁶ or that it was only referring to animals with two horns,⁴⁷ or that it does not preclude the possibility of a non-kosher animal giving birth to a mutant offspring with horns,⁴⁸ or that it was otherwise misunderstood.⁴⁹

Pri Chadash takes a different line with regard to the Talmud's statement that all horned animals are kosher. After presenting various difficulties with this position (which he

39 Talmud, *Shabbos* 28b.

40 See Responsa *Toras Chesed*, *Orach Chaim* 60:3.

41 See Responsa *She'elas Ya'avetz* 1:50.

42 *Mishnah Berurah* 586:8, citing several authorities.

43 Rabbi Meir Ravkash, *Be'er HaGolah* to *Orach Chaim* 586:1.

44 *Magen Avraham* 586:3; Responsa *Chavos Yair* 20; *Aruch HaShulchan* 586:6.

45 *Aruch HaShulchan* 586:6, based on Rambam.

46 *Tsafos Yom Tov*. Responsa *Chavos Yair* 20 challenges this at length.

47 Responsa *Chavos Yair* 20.

48 *Gilyon Shulchan Aruch*. Responsa *Chavos Yair* 20 points out that this is a great stretch.

49 Responsa *Chavos Yair* 20 claims that it only meant that horned animals possess hooves, but not that these hooves are necessarily split.

attributes as being the lone view of Rabbi Dosa) based on other sources in the Talmud, he presents a refutation based on his zoological research.⁵⁰ He notes that there are clear reports of various animals with horns that are nevertheless not kosher. In fact, all the works that he cites are referring to the same animal: the rhinoceros. This is indeed a horned animal that is non-kosher, and would seem to contradict Rabbi Dosa's principle (unless one adopts one of the interpretations suggested above; other solutions are also possible⁵¹).

While the rhinoceros does show that there are animals with horns that are not kosher, it cannot be the subject of Ran's ruling that shofars made from non-kosher animals may not be used. The reason is that the horn of a rhinoceros is not a hollow horn, like that of a ram or antelope. Instead, it is a solid mass of keratin. It is thus in any case entirely unsuitable for being made into a shofar, just as with the antlers of a deer. In fact, modern zoology, which has comprehensively catalogued over 4500 species of mammals, asserts that there is no non-kosher animal to possess hollow horns. Accordingly, Maharam Kraschnik was correct to challenge the necessity of Ran's ruling.

Yet why was it ever thought in the first place that there were non-kosher animals with horns? The answer may well simply be that people were aware that they were not familiar with every species of animal, and therefore they could not preclude the possibility that a horned non-kosher animal existed. Furthermore, reports of the rhinoceros may well have led people to believe that it possessed a hollow horn. But there may be more to it than that.

Many curio stores in the South-Eastern United States sell mounted heads of a creature that is called the jackalope. It looks like a rabbit with the horns of a goat or the antlers of a deer, and this is exactly what it is; a hoax, created by attaching horns or antlers to a stuffed rabbit.

But why is this particular chimera such a popular hoax? The answer is that it stems from a long-standing historical belief in a species of horned rabbit. Many zoological works from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century included an illustration of a horned hare called *Lepus cornutus*. The belief in such a species stemmed from a rare disease that sometimes infects rabbits and hares. The Shope papilloma virus, similar to the disease that causes warts on humans, has the effect on rabbits of causing them to grow hornlike tumors on their heads. It is also not unknown for

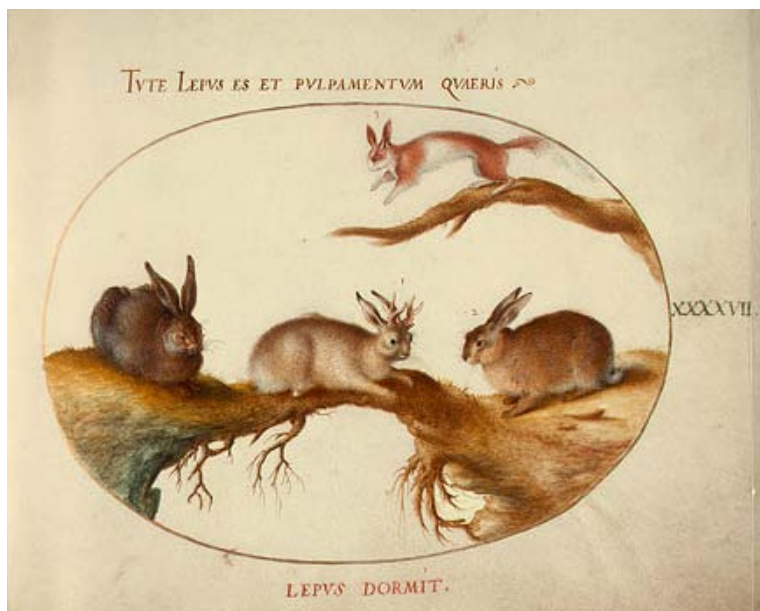


A jackalope, from the author's collection

50 *Pri Chadash, Yoreh De'ah* 80:2.

51 One could argue that since the rhinoceros is only found in remote regions, it does not present a contradiction to the principle, which was stated as a practical rule. Such an approach is presented in a different context in *Teshuvos Rivash* 192.

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An illustration of a horned hare (center) from the late 1570s

such viruses to cause horns to grow on all sorts of different animals, and occasionally even on humans. We see that the medieval belief in non-kosher animals with horns was entirely reasonable and may well have been based on actual sightings of horned non-kosher animals.

Thus, while there may be a theoretical halachic problem involved with a shofar of a non-kosher animal, in practice no such shofar could exist anyway.

G. THE GREATEST SHOFAR

In Scripture, there is reference to the “great shofar”:

And it shall be on that day, that a great shofar shall be sounded, and those lost in the lands of Assyria shall come, as well as those expelled to Egypt; and they shall bow down before God, on the holy mountain, in Jerusalem. (Isaiah 27:13)

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Is this a reference to the Messianic King blowing an actual animal horn, or is it a metaphorical allusion to the calling in of the exiles? Opinions will differ. But if it is an actual horn from a real animal, what sort of animal would it be from? If one were to seek the largest, most magnificent shofar, which species would one look at? This could even be of relevance today, if a large shofar is rated as a *hiddur mitzvah* (though one should be careful that it is not simply another expression of the male ego!).

As noted earlier, kudu horns are the largest and most spectacular horns that are currently available, but they lack the mitzvah’s inbuilt *hiddur*-recommendation of being from a ram. But as it turns out, the very largest and most spectacular horns of all are indeed from a species of sheep. This is not the famous American bighorn sheep, whose horns are enormously broad-based and heavy, but which are short and impractical for making shofars. Rather, it is the argali (*Ovis ammon*), a wild sheep from the mountains of Asia. These are the largest of the wild sheep, standing up to four feet in height and weighing up



The longest kudu horns on record, 73 inches, pictured here with Italian hunter Carlo Caldesi who killed it in 1963



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to 400 pounds. Of the several subspecies, the Marco Polo argali (*Ovis ammon polii*) has the longest horns; the longest on record measured 75" (191 cm), two inches longer than the longest recorded kudu horns and far thicker. Other subspecies of argali, such as the Altai (*Ovis ammon ammon*), have horns that are shorter than those of the Marco Polo but which are much more massive. However, due to the rarity of this species and their desirability for hunters, a horn from this species would be exceedingly difficult and expensive to obtain.



A marco polo argali

H. SUMMARY

Our discussion can be summarized as follows:⁵²

Shofar type:	Examples:	Kosher status:
Cattle	Cattle (“longhorn shofar”)	Disqualified
Solid horn	Deer antlers	Disqualified
<i>R’em</i>	Gemsbok/oryx (probably)	Probably disqualified
Straight horn	Ibex, Eland	Most opinions: Kosher if others are not available. Animals of the sheep/goat family, such as ibex, are preferred.
Partially straightened ram’s horn	Many commonly sold shofars	Acc. to Rav Kapach, only kosher post-facto
Curved horns of most species	Kudu (“Yemenite shofar”), probably blackbuck	Most opinions: Fully kosher but not preferred. Rambam: Disqualified
Ram’s horn, fully curved	“Rambam shofar”	Acc. to Rav Kapach, the only preferred shofar; acc. to Rav Sternbuch, an appropriate <i>hiddur</i>

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A final oddity: The horn of the pronghorn (top) is the only branched horn that is naturally hollow and can be made into a shofar (bottom), albeit uncurved and therefore not preferable for use.

52 For further discussion, see Moshe Ra’anan, “*Aspektim Zoologim b’ Hilchot Shofar*,” in *Be’Rosh HaShanah Yikateivun: Kovetz Maamarim Al Rosh HaShanah* (Machon Herzog) pp. 269-294; and Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky, “*Yemenite Shofarot*,” in *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* vol. LII (Spring 2007) pp. 106-123.