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With outdoor shofar events, Chicago Jews aim for accessible religious holidays

By Ilana Arougheti

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A man blows a Shofar, a traditional Jewish musical horn typically made of a ram's horn, while standing with others along the Mediterranean sea shore as religious Jews gather to perform the Tashlich ritual in Tel Aviv on Sept. 17, 2023, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, ahead of Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement (Menahem Kahana/AFP via Getty Images)

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Early emerging cicadas singing their last song this September faced stiff competition from a different type of seasonal sound.

Across Chicagoland, Jewish communities took to trails, parks and parking lots to blow the shofar, a ritual wind instrument associated with fall religious holidays. The rousing, echoing call of the shofar is a key aspect of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year that began last weekend, and Yom Kippur, a day of atonement when many Jews choose to fast, which begins Sunday.

Traditionally held in synagogues, these Jewish congregations have take the shofar sessions outside in an effort to make the ritual more public and accessible to those who can't get away from work, might be sick or immunocompromised or curious about the sound.

"I think it's wonderful for people who are Jewish but aren't super traditional," said Rabbi Shoshanah Conover, senior rabbi at Temple Sholom. "You can do this outdoor observance in twenty minutes."

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Temple Sholom, a Reform congregation in Lakeview, drew about 40 to its Shofar in the Park event Sept. 10. Similar celebrations took place in Bucktown, Wicker

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In Evanston, the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation hosts an annual walk along the lakefront with seven stops to hear shofars blowing. This year's walk was Sept. 15, the night before Rosh Hashana.



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The shofar, a ritual instrument typically made out of a hollow ram's horn and played like a trumpet, has been part of Jewish tradition since biblical times. Some communities blow the shofar every day in Elul, the lunar calendar Hebrew month leading up to Rosh Hashana.

Rohr Chabad House at the University of Illinois at Chicago, which also serves the Rush hospital system and Illinois Medical District, held its version of a Shofar walk on the last night of Rosh Hashana. The event, in Mary Bartelme Park on the Near West Side, included a children's singalong with props and traditional holiday snacks.

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“No matter who people were and where they were coming from, at that moment everyone is together and there’s just that feeling of the essence of the Jewish experience,” said Chani Shemtov, who leads Chabad UIC along with her husband Rabbi Bentzy Shemtov.



Rabbi Bentzy Shemtov with his shofar at Chabad UIC & West Loop in Chicago on Sept. 21, 2023. Chabad House held its version of a Shofar walk on the night before Rosh Hashana this year. (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

About 1 in 25 Chicagoans are Jewish, according to a study from Brandeis

University. Twenty percent of Chicago Jews surveyed by Brandeis described themselves as highly involved in observing holidays. Another 27% participate only casually.

A typical shofar blowing involves three rhythmic patterns. An extended note called *tekiah gedolah* is the last note heard on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, with shofar players practicing to hold the sound as long as possible.

At UIC Chabad, Shemtov found the shofar in the park events especially popular among Jewish medical students and hospital staff, as well as the families of patients at the University of Illinois and Rush hospital systems.

The shofar at UIC Chabad is played by Bentzy Shemtov. Throughout September, he also visited Jewish patients at UIC and Rush hospitals to play the shofar at their bed sides.

“So many people were really uplifted by hearing the shofar,” Chani Shemtov said.

For Temple Sholom, the idea for outdoor shofar celebrations was planted in 2020, when High Holidays celebrations took place via livestream, Conover said. In 2021, the Lakeview East congregation expanded to three parks across the North Side, plus the temple’s parking lot. That year, Conover said, outdoor Zumba classes in Loyola Park found themselves suddenly coexisting with shofar blowing events.

This year, Northwestern Law student Nia Crosley blew the shofar for congregants and residents in the Temple Sholom parking lot.

“People brought their dogs, they brought their kids,” Conover said. “The diversity in age, it was really from people in their 90s to little cuties.”

In early pandemic years, Shofar in the Park also ended with a communal prayer for the sick and injured. Conover said the event held space for community mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There’s personal loss, and then there’s personal loss that happens in a time where there’s public grieving,” Conover said.

Stanley Cohn, of Skokie, blows the shofar during the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation Erev Rosh Hashanah Shofar Walk on Sept. 25, 2022, at Dawes Park in Evanston. (Karie Angell Luc/Pioneer Press)

Opinions differ on how to make Jewish religious holidays accessible without

watering them down, Chani Shemtov said. She finds shofar blowing is one of the easiest traditions to take on the go.

“More and more people would love to connect with Judaism, but they don’t necessarily feel comfortable with, or they’re not necessarily seeking out, a synagogue experience,” Chani Shemtov said. “That kind of integration is key.”

Outdoor shofar events have also drawn curiosity from non-Jews. A member of the local parks board reached out to Chani Shemtov this year to let her know he was moved by the sound.

“I thought that was so interesting, because I know I find it to be very moving,” Chani Shemtov said. “But for him, even though he’s not Jewish himself, he senses something very special about that event in particular.”

As the final *tekiah gedolah* note brings this year’s High Holidays to a close, the experience of being conspicuously religious outdoors has a deeper meaning for those who have experienced antisemitism, Conover said.

“Being able to be publicly, Jewishly proud feels like a really nice response,” Conover said. “We’re not able to completely eradicate antisemitism on our own, but we are able to dig deeper into ourselves and what we love.”

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