



Rabbi Amy Small, left, and Eric Freedman lead the crowd in the record-blasting shofar blow on Sept. 21.

Photos by Elaine Durbach

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Drums thrummed, walls stood firm, but a record fell as more than 1,000 people gathered in Whippany for the largest-ever gathering of shofar blowers.

If confirmed, Sunday's "Great Shofar Blowout" at the Alex Aidekman Family Jewish Community Campus drew enough people to set a new Guinness World Record, snapping the "largest shofar ensemble" record of 796 set in Swampscott, Mass., in 2006.

The Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life, which sponsored the Sept. 21 event, counted some 1,043 men, women, girls, and boys, all blasting in unison on shofars of all shapes, sizes, and materials.

Partnership president Rabbi Amy Small and Eric Freedman, president of Congregation Ahavas Sholom in Newark, led the record-breaking blast.

Meant to inspire community members in the week preceding Rosh Hashana, the run-up to the day's events included a number of workshops on making and using the traditional ram's horn, a centerpiece of the High Holy Day services.

Robert Lichtman, executive director of the Partnership — the Jewish identity-building organization of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ



Rabbi Cecelia Beyer, in a ram's horn headdress, with Nira Bresler, rear right, and young members of Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael, a Conservative synagogue in Springfield.



Mark Bloomberg and his daughter Mia came to blow their horns.

— said that it wasn't until Friday that the number of registrants was on pace to surpass the Massachusetts record.

"But you still don't know if everyone will turn up," he said.

The day dawned grey and damp, with forecasters warning of possible showers. Lichtman and his crew had no alternative plans; it was a "rain or shine" scenario. There was also a competing event: the massive climate march in New York City, for which Jewish groups had, coincidentally or not, encouraged marchers to bring and blow shofars.

But the crowds came, by bus and car and minivan, from synagogues — of all the major streams — and Jewish day schools, youth groups, and even churches. As Lichtman pointed out, blowing the shofar in this kind of setting had no Jewish ritual significance and was therefore free of any controversy about the gender or denomination of the blowers.

But it still packed a lot of power. "This was about the whole community getting together to share the mitzva of shofar blowing," he said. It

served to bring together the diverse parts of the community — people of different denominations and levels of observance — for a unifying, edifying shared experience in the run-up to the High Holy Days, said Lichtman.

Adding to the carnival atmosphere, in the hours leading up to the big blowing session at 11 a.m., there were craft activities; reading sessions organized by the PJ Library; group warm-ups; and vendors selling food, clothing, and Judaica.

You could buy shofars there, too, but most people came toting theirs — family heirlooms and newly purchased horns, some very basic, others adorned with braid and artwork, and some made of brightly colored plastic.

Mark Bloomberg of Elizabeth had two of his family's six horns in hand and was blowing them simultaneously. "I've been able to do that almost since I learned to blow one," he said.

Rabbi Cecelia Beyer of Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael in Springfield brought the elaborately decorated shofar her husband bought her as an early Hanukkah gift.

The event, said Lichtman, "has put shofars into the hands of hundreds of people who have never blown one, and into households that never owned one before."

Getting official confirmation from the Guinness organization will take a few weeks. They will review the accounts of the two expert witnesses, check the forms detailing registrations, and watch the video of the final big blow to confirm it lasted five minutes and really did involve that huge crowd.

"And then — only then — I encourage other Jewish communities to try to break our record!" Lichtman said.

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Robin Ratliff, left, a member of the Reconstructionist synagogue Bnai Keshet in Montclair, invited her mother Marilyn Rubinstein from Monroe Township. Marilyn holds the shofar Robin's father used for years, blowing shofar for people in orphanages and nursing homes.

Mighty fine horns

AMONG THE SPONSORS of the Great Shofar Blowout was Newark's New Jersey Performing Arts Center, which donated three pairs of tickets to an upcoming performance of *Golda's Balcony*, starring Tovah Feldshuh, that were given to participants chosen through a drawing.

John Schreiber, its president and CEO, said NJPAC recently formed a Department of Community Engagement. "The gathering of everyone for the Shofar Blowout shares the spirit of fun we see

at NJPAC practically on a daily basis, especially in arts education. The sounding of the shofar represents one of the most ancient forms of music-making."

And then he added, "Oh, and we want to blow away the competition."

He had high praise for the organizers.

"The Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life has cleverly and effectively created an arts-friendly, entertaining way for chil-

dren to join their elders in commemorating the High Holy Days," Schreiber said. "Storytelling is a form of entertainment, but it's such an integral part of Jewish heritage. From the notes emitted by a simple horn, we also hear the sounds of ceremony, strife, reverence, and jubilation."

Asked if he'd ever blown a shofar, he said, "No, but as a lifelong jazz aficionado, I've test-driven some mighty fine horns."

— ELAINE DURBACH