

NEWS

Accidental Talmudist comes to Downtown Disney to blow his shofar (ram's horn) ahead of Rosh Hashana



As requested by sisters Lisa, left, and Heidi Loucks of Las Vegas, filmmaker Salvador “Sal” Litvak, 52, of Los Angeles blows his Shofar in Downtown Disney in Anaheim, CA on Friday, September 15, 2017, as his assistant Daniel Windsor, right, video tapes for Youtube live. (Photo by Ken Steinhardt, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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3 COMMENTS

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It wasn't long before Salvador "Sal" Litvak realized a fact of life: You can't just walk through security at Downtown Disney with a ram's horn slung over your shoulder.

"What's that sir?"

"It's a shofar, an animal's horn — a ram's horn," Litvak said.

"Well, we don't allow musical instruments inside, sir."

Litvak paused for a couple of seconds and then responded. The date was Sept. 15, a few days before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, which begins at sundown on Sept. 20, and Litvak told the security guard he hoped to blow into the trumpet-like shofar as a way to celebrate.

"It's not a musical instrument," Litvak said. "It's a spiritual instrument."

And just like that, the 52-year-old Los Angeles filmmaker and his shofar were in.

Litvak, a soft-spoken man dressed in a long blue-sleeved shirt, burgundy slacks, a flat cap and metal-rimmed glasses, made his way to the Lego Store as "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" played loudly in the background.

The shofar, attached to a thick, white string, rested on his back. His wife, Nina, bought it for him a few years ago as a birthday present, getting it from an online Judaic store. But this year was when Litvak decided to put the shofar to work, taking it with him to public places where he blasts away and records the reactions for worldwide distribution via Facebook Live.

This last part — the recording for posterity — is no small thing. Litvak has more than [1 million Facebook followers](#) in more than 80 countries.

So in the days leading up to Rosh Hashana he's blown the horn on Hollywood Boulevard, on the sand at Venice Beach, and even at the LA Zoo, where he was shushed for "upsetting" the animals.

Litvak's assistant, Daniel Windsor, records via iPhone as Litvak walks and blasts and talks about his faith, the shofar, and the significance of the Jewish New Year.

But as Litvak made his way around Downtown Disney, and saw security guards in every corner, he wasn't sure if he would be allowed to blow.

What if they thought he was disruptive? What if, in mid-broadcast, he was urged to leave?

"We don't know what's going to happen," he said, shrugging.

"This is going to be interesting."

Lost, then found

Litvak was not always religious. He said he didn't even reconnect with Judaism until about 20 years ago.

The transformative moment occurred in 1997 in Bethesda, Md. as he held his dying grandmother's arm.

Decades earlier, during the Holocaust, the 88-year-old Hungarian native and her then-infant daughter survived the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Nazi-controlled Czechoslovakia. Only 100 children are believed to have survived there, and Litvak's mother was one of them.

His grandfather, a veterinarian, was captured by the Nazis and killed at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

After the war, the family moved to Chile and, later, to the United States.

Litvak says that as he sat with his dying grandmother he saw a shimmering portal open, and that his grandmother's soul was welcomed to the afterlife by his grandfather's soul.

“It was like the end of a Hollywood movie,” he said. “My grandmother had never remarried after he died. This was the moment she was waiting for. And it happened. And I saw it.”

When his grandmother died, Litvak added, he “had a huge smile and happy tears streaming down my face.”

Litvak said his life has never since been the same. He also began to study Judaism, learning, he said, how to “pray with my heart and soul.”

“My grandmother had given this wonderful final gift to me; a glimpse into the unknown.”

In 2005, he picked up the first volume of the Talmud, the central text of mainstream Judaism, while shopping at The Mitzvah Store on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. He was there to pick up a gift, but bought the book in the hope of learning more about his faith.

The store manager told him about Daf Yomi, a worldwide program for people who want to read the entire Talmud, which consists of 63 treatises and is more than 6,200 pages long in standard print. So, over the next seven-plus years, Litvak completed his study of the Talmud.

That’s why he calls himself “Accidental Talmudist,” also the title of his popular Facebook Page.

Horn of the people

As Litvak walked around Downtown Disney, he explained to his Facebook audience about the significance of the shofar blast during Rosh Hashanah.

“The sound of the shofar is hard-wired into the soul,” he said. “When the soul hears the shofar, it knows it’s getting help from above. It’s a joyful reminder to the soul. And it’s also a beautiful sound.”

Litvak then stopped, pointed his shofar skyward and blew. The first blast — a soft but celebratory wail — lasted about seven seconds. The three blasts that followed were much shorter.

He stopped and blew again, each time, dedicating the sound to someone or something. There were requests in memory of the dead, for loved ones who were ill, for hurricane victims, for survivors of the day's terror attack in London. And for peace in Israel.

As Litvak blew the horn, a woman wearing a Halloween T-shirt turned and looked him over, amused. She smiled and walked on.

But a 12-year-old boy, Cameron Wilson of Eastvale, was more direct. After Litvak blasted, Wilson ran up with a simple question: "Hey, what's that?"

Litvak talked a little shofar with Wilson, who ran back to tell his mom.

"I've never seen it before," the boy said later. "I thought it was cool; the way it looked and sounded."

Scott Judkins of Ogden, Utah, wanted to know where one might buy something like that.

"Well, I'm a (Minnesota) Vikings fan," he said, referring to the NFL team whose mascot blows an ox horn. "This was a good sound. It could've been louder, though; needed more oomph."

For a few others, Litvak's shofar held a deeper meaning.

Heidi Loucks, visiting from Las Vegas with her sister, Lisa, said the sound made her feel something "deeply spiritual."

"When I hear it, something in me stirs," she said.

Sara Karg of Irvine came to Downtown Disney to buy a Moana costume for her daughter, but came away with an experience.

"I walk in here and the first thing I see is a man blowing the shofar, days before the Jewish New Year," said Karg, who described herself as a Christian. "I couldn't have planned this. Jesus Christ made it happen. It was meant to be."

Litvak said a prayer with Karg and prepared to head home to Hancock Park.

"No one stopped us, no one told us to leave," Litvak said.
"This was a miracle."

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Deepa Bharath

Deepa Bharath covers religion for The Orange County Register and the Southern California Newspaper Group. Her work is focused on how religion, race and ethnicity shape our understanding of what it is to be American and how religion in particular helps influence public policies, laws and a region's culture. Deepa also writes about race, cultures and social justice issues. She has covered a number of other beats ranging from city government to breaking news for the Register since May 2006. She has received fellowships from the International Women's Media Foundation and the International Center for Journalists to report stories about reconciliation, counter-extremism and peace-building efforts around the world. When she is not working, she loves listening to Indian classical music and traveling with her husband and son.

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