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BS"D

INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON Shmini Atzeres / Simchas Torah / Vzos Habracha - 5784

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from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Oct 5, 2023, 7:39 PM subject: Tidbits - Shemini Atzeres 5784

In Memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz z"l Shemini Atzeres 5784

Hoshana Rabbah

On Leil Hoshana Rabbah, there is a custom to stay up late, for some, throughout the night, to learn Torah and daven. Many gather in Shul to lein Mishneh Torah (the entire Sefer Devarim) • Hoshana Rabbah is an auspicious day - the final chance to influence the divine judgment of the Yomim Nora'im. It is customary to wish one another Ah Gut Kvittel or Piska Tava, referring to inserting a good note into the final judgment • During Shacharis, the Pesukei D'Zimra of Shabbos is said, with the addition of Mizmor Lesoda, and the exclusion of Nishmas. The Shliach Tzibbur wears a kittel • Many have the minhag to remove the upper rings from the lulav. Some do this even before reciting the berachos on the lulav, others before Hallel and some before Hoshanos • Seven hakafos of Hoshanos are performed, encircling the Sifrei Torah held at the bimah. Following hakafos, there is a Minhag Nevi'im of Chibbut Aravos, to klapp (bang) a bundle of five aravos on the ground. There is no need to bang any leaves off. Women should recite some of the hoshanos and perform Chibbut Aravos. Some shake the bundle to the six directions (like the lulav) prior to banging them. It is permissible to reuse a set of Aravos, provided that some leaves remain • As Hoshana Rabbah is a Yom Tov, one should have a proper Yom Tov meal. Since it is also Erev Yom Tov (Shemini Atzeres), the meal should be held before tesha sha'os (the end of the 9th

halachic hour of the day, approximately 3:35 PM in NYC). Many have the custom to eat kreplach during this meal • The final opportunity for reciting Tashlich is on Hoshana Rabbah. Yizkor is said on Shemini Atzeres. For those who have the custom, a Ner Neshamah should be lit on Erev Yom Tov. Additionally, as a new fire may not be lit on Yom Tov, a two-day candle is commonly lit to have a source for Hadlakas Neiros on the second night and other permitted Yom Tov uses. Daf Yomi - Friday: Bavli: Kiddushin 54 • Yerushalmi: Kilayim 83. The Siyum on Kilayim is on Shemini Atzeres, Mazal Tov! Next is Masechta Shevi'is • Mishnah Yomis: Moed Katan 2:2-3. The Siyum on Moed Katan is next Thursday, Mazal Tov! Chagigah begins next • Oraysa - Next week: Yoma 16b-18b.

Be sure to show appreciation for all those who helped prepare for Yom Tov. Also, one should take the opportunity on Erev Yom Tov to call one's parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rabbi to wish them a Gut Kvittel and Chag Sameach. Shemini Atzeres

Similar to the first days of Yom Tov, the first day of Yom Tov is Shabbos. All Shabbos prohibitions in regards to cooking and carrying (outside an Eruv) are in effect • An abridged Kabbalas Shabbos is said. The additions for Shabbos are added in the davening. The Yud Gimmel Middos before Kerias Hatorah are omitted as well as the prayers during Bircas Kohanim.

Additionally, as there was no Shabbos Chol Hamoed, Meggilas Koheles is leined on Shemini Atzeres instead • Seudah Shelishis should be eaten before tesha sha'os (the end of the halachic 9th hour of the day [midpoint between chatzos and shekiya]). Many fulfill seudas shelishis through splitting up the day meal (Bircas hamazon is recited in between courses, followed by a halachic break [e.g. by taking a walk] and then washing again for bread before completing the meal) •

Preparations for the second night of Yom Tov may not begin until after nightfall (tzeis hakochovim) and reciting baruch hamavdil bein kodesh lekodesh Shehecheyanu is recited on Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah. One who inadvertently said "Chag HaSuccos" instead of "Yom HaShemini Chag HaAtzeres" in Shemoneh Esrei or in Bircas Hamazon need not repeat it. Yizkor is recited following Kerias Hatorah • Some (Nusach Sefard) have the minhag to hold an abridged hakafos on Leil Shemini Atzeres • There are different opinions regarding eating in the succah. Regardless, the berachah of Leisheiv is not said and the stringency of limiting all eating (non-mezonos) to the succah is relaxed. The prevalent minhag is not to sleep in the succah • For the seudos, honey and round challoos are used for the final time on Shemini Atzeres • Some are stringent and discourage marital relations on Leil Shemini Atzeres except for a leil tevilah (many extend this to Hoshana Rabbah and Simchas Torah as well) • A tefillah of Yetziah Min HaSuccah is said on Shemini Atzeres afternoon

Tefillas Geshem. We begin saying Mashiv Haruach u'Morid HaGeshem during Mussaf on Shemini Atzeres. If the Gabbai announces "Mashiv Haruach u'Morid HaGeshem" before the silent Shemoneh Esrei (as is the practice of Nusach Ashkenaz), an individual must say it in his quiet Shemoneh Esrei (even though the Shliach Tzibbur has not yet said Tefillas Geshem). If the Gabbai makes no such announcement, an individual does not say Mashiv Haruach. One who forgets Mashiv Haruach, and also does not say Morid Hatal (i.e., Nusach Ashkenaz) needs to repeat Shemoneh Esrei. If one realizes his error before beginning "Atah Kadosh," he may immediately say "Mashiv Haruach..." and continue "Atah Kadosh" etc. If one is unsure if he said the correct formula, for the first 90 Tefillos we assume he followed what he was accustomed to and did not say Mashiv Haruach (the 90th tefillah will be Mincha on Sunday, November 13th). If one repeats the phrase "Mechayei meisim attah rav l'hoshia mashiv haruach u'morid hageshem" 90 times, he is halachically presumed to be accustomed in saying it properly and therefore would not repeat if unsure. LeDavid is recited on Shemini Atzeres for the final time.

Simchas Torah

Vatodieinu is added to Shemoneh Esrei on the night of Simchas Torah and Kiddush includes Havdalah of Motzaei Shabbos (Yakneha"z)

Bircas Kohanim takes place during Shacharis instead of Mussaf (Ribbono Shel Olam and Yehi Ratzon are omitted). If one is given the opportunity to hold a Sefer Torah during hakafos it is considered disrespectful to decline this honor. However, after holding the Sefer for a bit one may give over the opportunity to another person.

KIBBUDIM:

Many Shuls auction these honors.

Evening Hakafos: Atah Hareisa, Chazzanus [and Neiros] at the Hakafos, Pesicha, Hotza'ah V'Hachnasa, 3 or 5 Aliyos, Hagbahah/Gelilah.

Daytime Hakafos: - Atah Hareisa, Chazzanus and Neiros at the Hakafos, 4 Aliyos, 5th Aliyah - Kol Hane'arim, Chasan Torah - the final aliyah in Sefer Devarim, Chasan Bereishis - the aliyah which begins Sefer Bereishis), Maftir, Hagbahah and Gelilah for each of the three Sifrei Torah.

The aliyah of Chasan Torah is considered by many to be the most prestigious and the Chasan Bereishis second in prestige. Kol Hane'arim is considered by some to be a segulah to have children. For these three aliyos, in many Shuls everyone gathers around the bimah and talleisim are spread over those assembled. In many shuls Hamalach hagoel is said after the aliyah of Kol Hane'arim. The minhag is for every person to receive an aliyah (minimum age of oleh varies based on individual shul policy) before the official five aliyos and Chasanei Torah and Bereishis are leined.

Kerias Hatorah

Hoshanah Rabbah: The leining is similar to Chol Hamoed; four aliyos (Bamidbar 29) are leined from one Sefer Torah. Shemini Atzeres: Seven aliyos are leined from Devarim (14:22-16:17) that discusses the Yamim Tovim. Maftir is the korbanos of the day (Bamidar 29:35-30:1). The haftarah describes the berachos that Shlomo Hamelech blessed the nation at the culmination of the Chanukas Habayis of the first Beis Hamikdash (Melachim Alef 8:54-9:1). This took place on Shemini Atzeres.

Simchas Torah: At night three or five aliyos are leined from Parashas V'zos Haberachah. In the daytime we lein Parashas V'zos Haberachah in six aliyos, finishing the Torah. We then begin the Torah anew, by leining one aliyah from the beginning of Bereishis (1:1-2:3). Maftir is the korbanos of the day (Bamidar 29:35-30:1). The haftarah is the beginning of Sefer Yehoshua (1:1-18). After leining V'zos Haberachah, that speaks of Moshe Rabbeinu's passing, we discuss his disciple Yehoshua and his rise to leadership. With every sunset, Klal Yisrael recognizes the dawn of its divine appointed leader.

V'ZOS HABERACHAH: Moshe Rabbeinu blesses each Shevet individually • Blessings for Bnei Yisrael as a whole • Hashem shows Moshe the land from afar • Moshe Rabbeinu's passing; his burial place remains unknown • Klal Yisrael mourns for thirty days • Moshe's greatness and supremacy in prophecy • Chazak! Chazak! Venis'chazeik!

BEREISHIS: The Seven Days of Creation. Day 1 - the world, starting with light (day and night) • Day 2 - the sky, separation of waters • Day 3 - earth and seas, vegetation, and seeds • Day 4 - sun, moon and stars • Day 5 - fish and birds • Day 6 - animals of the land, Adam (and Chavah) • Day 7 - blessed and holy rest

Isru Chag

Tachanun is not said on Isru Chag. Some do not say Tachanun until after Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan.

For the Yom Tov Table

The Rambam writes that, aside from a person's responsibility for his own Simchas Yom Tov, he must ensure the Simchas Yom Tov of his wife and children. Furthermore, the Rambam writes one that must ensure the Simchas Yom Tov of the needy such as widows and orphans as well (Hilchos Yom Tov 6:18). The Rambam writes further: "But someone who locks the doors of their house, eating and drinking with their children and spouse [alone], and doesn't provide food or drink to the poor and depressed, is not participating in the joy of Hashem's commandments but rather the joy of his stomach, and about them it says, "their sacrifices are like bread for the dead; all who eat of them will become impure, for their food is for themselves" (Hoshea 9:4)"

As the Rambam writes this Halacha as part of the laws of Yom Tov, and not as part of Hilchos Tzedakah, it is clear that one fails to fulfill his personal Simchas Yom Tov obligation by falling short in donating to the poor! How so? Additionally,

what is the meaning of the Rambam's comparison of selfish indulgence to sacrificing flawed Korbanos?

Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock zt"l explains that the Simcha of Yom Tov celebrates our closeness and unique relationship with Hashem which is derived from a person being a part of Am Yisrael. Therefore, celebrating isn't possible as an individual, rather only as a nation in its entirety. We must ensure the celebration of those around us to properly fulfill this mitzvah. Furthermore, the concept of a korban is that one is coming closer to Hashem and it is as if one is sacrificing himself. If a donor is unfit and fails to seek to come closer to Hashem, the korban is mere food and lacks its holy essence. So too, if the Simchas Yom Tov lacks its essence, a unified celebration together with Hashem's nation, it is mere frivolity and not a holy celebration of unity. Shemini Atzeres is the climax of Succos and the season of Z'man Simchaseinu. The simcha is complete when we celebrate b'achdus and show how special we are as a nation and our pride in our endearment to Hashem.

Please reach out to us with any thoughts or comments at: klalgovoah.org

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The Mule & the Salt: The Secret of Torah

When the Soviet Soldier Placed the Child Survivor on His Shoulders

Rabbi YY Jacobson

October 5, 2023 | 20 Tishrei 5784

Rabbi Leo Goldman with Abe Foxman in 2010. Dedicated by Michael Brand, in honor of Batsheva Pessil bas Shaina, for a refuah shlaima, and good health, both physically and spiritually.

Dedicated in memory of Avrohom Zev ben Tzvi Offenberg

Class Summary: The Mule & the Salt: The Secret of Torah:

When the Soviet Soldier Placed the Child Survivor on His Shoulders

The Grand Debate

Let me explore a fantastical and enigmatic story in the Talmud. Some 1900 years ago, during the first century CE, only a few years after the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE, a great debate took place between the Jews and the Greeks.

The Talmud[1] recounts the fascinating confrontation that occurred between the Wise Men of Athens and the great sage of Israel, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya. Athens was known in the ancient world as the seat of wisdom and philosophy, and its sages saw themselves as the representatives of progressive thinking. Amongst the sages of Israel, Rabbi Yehoshua stood out as the sharpest and most quick-witted, a fearsome debater and a brilliant scholar, though to earn a livelihood he would sell charcoal.[2]

He was a Levite who played music back in the Second Temple[3] (the Levites would perform a daily morning concerto in the Temple), and witnessed its destruction. In the following decades, one of the worst periods in all of our history, Rabbi Yehoshua served as the most prominent spokesman for Judaism.[4]

When the Roman Caesar demanded to test who was wiser—the Jews or the Greek philosophers—Rabbi Yehoshua was the clear choice to represent the Torah of Israel.

A Conflict of Riddles

Sixty sages of Athens challenged the lone Jewish sage and the battle of wits began. The Talmud records the back and forth dialogue between these sages, that took the form of a cryptic exchange of riddles. The Athenian scholars would throw a challenge in front of Rabbi Yehoshua, and the Jewish sage would come back with an answer each time, usually in the form of a counter-question. Part of the exchange went like this. בכורות ה, ב: ורצוצא דמית מהיכא נפיק רוהיה? מהיכא דעל נפק.

The sages of Athens asked: "If a chick dies while in the egg, before the egg is hatched [and it is sealed from all sides], from where does its soul escape?" Rabbi Yehoshua's response: "The soul escapes through the same place it entered [into the sealed egg]."

Here is another one:

משרא דסכיני במאי קטלי? בקרנא דחמרא! ומי איכא קרנא לחמרא? ומי איכא משרא דסכיני?

They further asked, "How do you harvest a field of knives?"

Rabbi Yehoshua answered: "You use a donkey's horn." The elders: "But donkeys do not have horns!" Rabbi Yehoshua: "And knives do not grow in fields!"

Each one of these exchanges—and there were many of them—begs explanation. What do these bizarre questions really mean, and what lies behind the answers?

The various Talmudic commentaries agree that the conversations between the Rabbi and the Greeks were allegorical. They were discussing lofty issues of the spirit, the meaning of life and death, G-d's role in the universe, human destiny, the meaning of existence, the concept of the "chosen people," the cardinal principles of Judaism. They spoke in symbolic terms.

Salting Salt

Today I want to discuss the one of their other seemingly absurd exchanges.

מילהא כי סריא, במאי מלחי לה? אמר להו בסילתא דכודניתא. ומי איכא סילתא לכודנתא? ומילהא מי סרי

They asked him, "When salt gets spoiled, what do we use to preserve it?" His response: "We use the afterbirth of a mule." (This is the embryonic sac which shelters and preserves the developing fetus.) "Do mules have an afterbirth?" they asked. [A mule cannot give birth.] "Does salt spoil?" he retorted.

Is this an intelligent conversation between the representatives of the house of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, with the representative of Judaism?

In truth, this exchange symbolized a profound debate—one that endured for thousands of years and continues to this very day. It deals with the important question: What is the relevance of Torah and Judaism in the modern world?[5]

Time to Update the Religion

When the Elders of Athens spoke about salt, they were referring to Torah, the preservative of the Jewish People. They considered this preservative to be spoiled; they argued that it had become rancid, obsolete and irrelevant.

Judaism, the Greeks maintained, was old; it needed a tune-up. After all, those were the glorious days of Greek culture, and even many Jews were seeing the Torah as being old-fashioned. Rather than observe Shabbos, they wanted to join the Greek Gymnasiums. Rather than study Torah, they wanted to study Greek philosophy. Rather than sit in a Sukkah, shake a lulav or put on tefilin and daven, they gravitated to Zeus and Olympus, to Homer and Plato.

It was time, said the Elders of Athens, to alter Judaism to ensure its popularity. Judaism was ready for an upgrade, to make it more fresh, exciting and relevant to a new age inspired by Greek esthetics, philosophy, culture, athleticism, art, drama and literature. Mikvah, tefilin, kosher, Torah study, Torah education, Shabbos candles, Mezuzah, a ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah, crunchy matzah, the laws of modesty, and the 613 Mitzvos of Torah would not cut it. In one word, the salt needs to be salted.

The Mule

Rabbi Yehoshua replied that they should use the afterbirth of a mule. It was a brilliant reply. What is a mule? The hybrid offspring of a female horse and a male donkey. At first sight, a mule seems like an awesome animal: it is strong, sure-footed, more resistant to disease, and long-lived. By taking elements of the donkey and of the horse, we seem to have the best of both worlds. It has been claimed that mules are "more patient, sure-footed, hardy and long-lived than horses, and they are considered less obstinate, faster, and more intelligent than donkeys." [6] What a powerful combination. It's just like a Hellenized, modernized Judaism – hybridizing the two cultures in order to have the best of both worlds.

But mules can't breed; they are sterile.

Rabbi Yehoshua was conveying this message: If you try to alter Judaism, to "update" it and combine it with the latest

fads, it will look great, it will doubtless be popular, the new show in town. But it won't endure. It's not authentic and it can't perpetuate. When the sages of Athens explained to him that mules are sterile, Rabbi Yehousha responded, that salt cannot go rancid. Torah, the preservative of the Jewish People, will continue to preserve them, as long as it is left pure and unadulterated.

Torah is salt and salt does not get rancid. It will endure forever, because it is rooted in the source of all life and history. Torah is always relevant because its truths span and pervade all cultures, milieus, and circumstances. When we attempt to present a new Judaism, less ancient and more modern, it may be appealing for the short term, but it will prove sterile in the long term. It will not last. The grandchildren will be lost.

The Results

Who was right?

1900 years later, we know the answer. Samuel Clemens, popularly known as Mark Twain, famously wrote: "The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, and then passed away. The Greek and the Roman followed. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

What is more, all movements within Judaism which have advocated (as a philosophy) that we alter the Torah and its mitzvos, in order to make it more appealing to the youth, have proved sterile. Perhaps they had good intentions, they wanted to preserve Judaism, but their preservatives have proven counter-productive: You don't try to preserve salt with superficial preservatives. Salt itself is its own best preservative!

The secret of Judaism lay not in the fact that it addresses the fad of the day, that it accommodates the political sentiment of the hour; the true power of Judaism lay in the fact that it addresses the transcendent needs, yearnings and passions of the human being, truths that transcend a particular time or location; aspirations that are eternal.

Shabbas refreshed souls and sanctified homes 3,000 years ago, and it still does so today; tefilin synchronized minds and hearts to our mission in life 2000 years ago and it still does so today; mikvah gave intimacy its holiness and freshness 1000 years ago, it still does so today; Torah study gave moral vision and spiritual inspiration 500 years ago, it still does so today.

When I put on tefillin in the morning, I know that these very same tefillin were donned by Jews in Eretz Israel in 1200 BCE; by Jews in Babylonia in 500 BCE; by Jews in Iran in 100 CE; by Jews in Spain in 1000; by Jews in Poland and Austria in 1600; by my great-great-grandparents in Russia in 1850; and by millions of Jews from Sydney to Los Angeles in 2018.

If Moses enters New York today, he will recognize almost nothing. It's a new world. If he enters our shul today, he will be familiar with so much: the same mezuzah, the same tefillin, the same talis, the same Torah scroll, the same Sukkah, the same shofar, the same lulav and esrog; 3,330 years, and the same Torah that Moses taught his people, we are teaching our children.

The Story of Henryk-Abraham[7]

Henryk was very young in 1945, when the War ended and solitary survivors tried frantically to trace their relatives. He had spent what seemed to be most of his life with his nanny, who had hidden him away from the Nazis at his father's request. There was great personal risk involved, but the woman had readily taken it, as she loved the boy.

Henryk's nanny did not imagine that the father, Joseph Foxman, would survive the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto. He would surely have been transferred to Auschwitz — and everyone knew that nobody ever came back from Auschwitz. She therefore had no scruples about adopting the boy, having him baptized into the Catholic Church and taught catechism by the local priest.

The nanny saved his life—but also taught him to spit on the ground when a Jew walked by.

It was Simchat Torah when his father came to take him. The heartbroken nanny had packed all his clothing and his small catechism book, stressing to the father that the boy had become a good Catholic. Joseph Foxman took his son by the hand and led him directly to the Great Synagogue of Vilna. On the way, he told his son that he was a Jew and that his name was Avraham.

Not far from the house, they passed the church and the boy reverently crossed himself, causing his father great anguish. Just then, a priest emerged who knew the boy, and when Henryk rushed over to kiss his hand, the priest spoke to him, reminding him of his Catholic faith.

Everything inside of Joseph wanted to drag his son away from the priest and from the church. But he knew that this was not the way to do things. He nodded to the priest, holding his son more closely. After all, these people had harbored his child and saved the child's life. He had to show his son a living Judaism. They entered the Great Synagogue of Vilna, now a remnant of a past era. There they found some Jewish survivors from Auschwitz who had made their way back to Vilna and were now rebuilding their lives. Amid the stark reality of their suffering, in much diminished numbers, they were singing and dancing on Simchat Torah.

Only 3,000 of Vilna's 100,000 Jews remained.

Avraham stared wide-eyed around him and picked up a tattered prayer book with a touch of affection. Something deep inside of him responded to the atmosphere, and he was happy to be there with the father he barely knew. He held back, though, from joining the dancing.

A Jewish man wearing a Soviet Army uniform could not take his eyes off the boy, and he came over to Joseph. "Is this child Jewish?" he asked, a touch of awe in his voice.

The father answered that the boy was Jewish and introduced his son. As the soldier stared at Henryk-Avraham, he fought to hold back tears. "Over these four terrible years, I have traveled thousands of miles, and this is the first live Jewish child I have come across in all this time. They were all murdered. This is the first live Jewish child I have come across in all these years... Would you like to dance with me on my shoulders?" he asked the boy, who was staring back at him, fascinated.

The father nodded permission, and the soldier hoisted the boy high onto his shoulders. With tears now coursing down his cheeks and a heart full of real joy, the soldier joined in the dancing.

"This is my Torah scroll," he cried, as he danced with the five year old Jewish boy.

The Abraham in our story came to be known as Abe Foxman (who is 78 today), the former national director of the Anti-Defamation League and presently serves as the head of the Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.

The Reunion

But this is not the end of the story.

For 65 years, the boy and the soldier carried that moment in their hearts. Unknown to each other, they told the story to family and friends.

But then something happened. The Jewish composer Abie Rotenberg put together a song, "The Man from Vilna," about the story. Foxman heard the song and he learned that the Jewish Soviet soldier was a man named Goldman, still alive and living in the United States.

In 2010, they met and embraced for the first time since 1945. As it turns out, the Soviet soldier was Rabbi Dr. Leo Goldman from Oak Park, Detroit, an Orthodox rabbi and an educator, who died in December of 2013 at the age of 94.

The two men hugged and recited the blessing of "Shecheyanu vekeymanu vehaganu lizman hazeh." [8]

Dance With Your Children

On Simchas Torah, we hold the Torah and dance. In a world where every fad turns into a mule, we celebrate the "salt" which never grows old, sour or rancid.

We are not in Vilna in 1945. We are, thank G-d, living in freedom. Abe Foxman's life was changed because of that single dance. We ought not to deprive our children of that dance.

This Simchas Torah, lift up your children—or your friend's children—or your grandchildren on your shoulders and dance with them. Dance with millions of Jews the world over, who will celebrate the Divine gift of Torah which becomes more fresh, relevant, and exciting each year.

Don't let the ultimate preservative of history slip through your fingers.

[1] Bechoros 8b [2] Talmud Berachos 28a [3] Talmud Erkin 11 [4] See Talmud Chagigah 5b [5] The following explanation is based on Maharsha to Bechoros 8b and Sefer Dorash Moshe derush 32. Cf. Chidushei Agados Maharal, Perus HaGra, and Likkutei Mahran for alternative explanations to this exchange. [6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mule_footnote_3 [7] http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/159889/jewish/This-Is-My-Torah-Scroll.htm [8] www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/cc-survival-to-service-spring-2003.pdf

SIMCHAS TORAH AND ITS CUSTOMS

By Eliezer Brodt
Seforimblog.com

At the end of the Yom Tov of Succos there is a special Yom Tov called Simchas Torah. While in Eretz Yisroel it's celebrated on the eighth day of Succos, Shmini Atzeret; in Chutz L'Aretz it's celebrated the day after Shmini Atzeret. Simchas Torah is a day of great Simcha and like all of our Yom Tovim is replete with its own unique customs. This article is in no way an attempt to cover all of the many aspects of this Yom Tov, but rather to touch upon some of its rich minhagim, an intellectual smorgasbord of sorts.[1] The Name of the Chag The Tur and other Rishonim write that the reason behind the name Simchas Torah is that on this day we complete our weekly reading of the Torah and as such it is proper to be BeSimcha. The Tur also points out that the custom is to begin reading Parshos Bereishis on this day to prevent the Satan from denigrating the Jewish people. The Hagahos Haminhagim on R' Issac Tirnah's Sefer Minhagim expands this point thusly: the Satan berates the Jews before Hashem with the claim that they study Torah but never complete it, and even when they finish the Torah, they do not begin their study anew.[2] Therefore, the minhag is to begin the Torah anew immediately upon its completion in order to preemptively silence the Satan from offering any critique. The Tur continues by noting that in some communities many Piyutim are said, some of them having the custom to take out all of the Sifrei Torah from the Aron Kodesh while doing so. Other communities make a big Seudah to celebrate the Simcha of completing and starting the Torah anew.[3] From other Rishonim it appears that those responsible for the Seudah are the Choson Torah and Choson Bereishis.[4] The Rama adds to above explanation of the Simcha on Simchas Torah as a celebration of completing reading the Torah by correlating the minhag to circle the Bima with the Sifrei Torah to that with the Daled Minim on the earlier days of Succos.[5] However, in a late-antiquity work called Chilukim Bein Bnei Bavel L'bein Bnei Eretz Yisroel we find that while Bnei Bavel celebrated

Simchas Torah every year, the custom in Eretz Yisroel was to finish the Torah once every three and a half years (or so), and only then did they celebrate 'Simchas Torah'. [6] This custom is mentioned by the Rambam who notes that most communities finished once a year but some had a custom to do so only once every three and a half years. The famous traveler, R' Binyomin of Tudela, mentions [7] seeing these two customs still in practice in Egypt in the 1160's-1170's, as does R' Avraham ben HaRambam a few years later. [8] [I deal with this last aspect in my Presentation on All Daf Here (<https://alldaf.org/p/135177>).] ...

Simcha and Dancing One of the ways to find data and get a glimpse of how Yom Tovim were celebrated in the past is through personal memoirs and autobiographical accounts. Rabbi Elozor Reich described Simchas Torah in Eretz Yisroel in 1953, while he was learning there, thus:

...

Why is Dancing Permitted?

An important Halachic question that needs to be addressed is, how is all aforementioned dancing etc. permitted if the Halachah rules [15] is one may not dance on Yom Tov? The Rama, in his Darchei Moshe (OH 699), cites a Maharik who quotes the Geonim as having ruled to permit dancing on Simchas Torah since it is for the Kovod of the Torah. [16] It is worth noting that the original German Minhag was not [17] to perform any sort of Hakofos with the Sifrei Torah [18] or dancing on Simchas Torah, neither by night or by day! However, The Arizal and Gra did dance with great Simcha with Sifrei Torah. [19] As the Chayay Adam writes: [The Gra would circle 7 times and say the nusach in the sidurim and afterwards Ata Hu Elokeinu and Haaderes Vihaemuna as printed in the machzorim and he would dance before the sefer torah with all his strength (Klal 153)

R' Nochumka of Hordona would also show tremendous simcha on Simchas Torah and even sang special niggunim. [20] R' Yaakov Ettlinger writes that one should not say that it's not befitting my Kovod and Kovod Hatorah, to dance as this was exactly the sin of Michal, Shaul's daughter. [21] Since the Mishna Berurah cites this ruling, [22] it is quite interesting to find in his son R' Aryeh's glowing biography of his father, the Chafetz Chaim, a description of the Chafetz Chaim's display of intense Simcha during the Hakofos; encouraging all present to take an active part, he himself danced with the Sifrei Torah each Hakafah... he also wanted everyone to get a chance to dance with the Torah and avoid fights. [23] In Rav Chaim Stein's World War II diaries (quoted above) he describes how in 1941 he and his friends danced with great simchah; having no Sefer Torah, they danced instead with Chumashim. [24] In a similar vein, it is reported that R' Meir Shapiro of Lublin would dance with Gemaras printed by the Slavita publishing house. [25] R' Aryeh Kagan, son of the Chafetz Chaim, recalls how in his youth the children would dance with the Megilot of

Neviyim, but this led to physical fights among the children at which point the Chafetz Chaim gave his son R' Aryeh a copy of the Semag to dance with, explaining to him this is an important work that included both the written and oral Torah.[26]

Strange custom of Bowing

In 1921, Yitzchak Rivkind described a strange custom he saw when he was learning in Volozhin (after it was reopened and headed by R' Rephael Shapiro); they would open the Aron when saying Aleinu and then, with the Niggun reserved for Mussaf of Yom Kippur, they would sing and bow on the floor exactly like we do on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. When he asked for the source of the Minhag he was told it comes from the Gra. Upon visiting Vilna, sometime after, he found the only place where this unique Minhag was observed was in the Gra's Kloiz, and nowhere else in Vilna.[57]

In 1933, R' Meir Bar-Ilan printed his memoirs in Yiddish; there he describes the great Simcha in Volozhin on Simchas Torah, both his father, the Netziv's and the Talmidim's. Amidst this recollection he relates that when they reached Aleinu the Aron was opened and then, with the Yom Kippur Mussaf Niggun, they would sing and bow on the floor exactly like we do on Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur – just as Rivkind described.[58] Curiously, this custom is not mentioned in the Maaseh Rav or any of the other collections of the Gra's Minhagim.

Recently, R' Dovid Kamenetsky printed a very important manuscript related to the Maaseh Rav, which sheds light on how this important sefer of the Gra's Minhagim was written. The Gra had a very close talmid named R' Saadyah who wrote down various customs he witnessed by his Rebbe, which formed the basis of the Maaseh Rav. He then embellished his work with material from other sources. The original work was recently discovered by Rabbi Kamenetsky who subsequently published it. Within, we find that R' Saadyah writes that on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur the Gra would prostrate fully when saying Aleinu and did the same when saying Aleinu Simchas Torah night. ...in ... manuscript called Sefer LiKutim written in Vina during the life time of the Gra we find about RH and YK But not about ST. ... A possible explanation for this Minhag is when things were getting a bit wilder, i.e. too Lebidick, this served to remind those gathered of Kedushas Yom Tov. This is not the only Simchas Torah minhag based upon the Yomim Noraim; in one account we find: “The Musaf was chanted with the music of the New Year's ritual”.....

Leining at night

Returning to the Night of Simchas Torah. After the dancing and after the Sifrei Torah are returned, Rav Isaac Tirna writes in his Sefer Minhagim that the custom was to again take out the Sifrei Torah and make sure they are prepared for the next day's leining. However, the Rama both in his Darcei Moshe

and in his Mapa writes they the minhag is not so; rather Parshas Nedarim was read. This statement is very puzzling for a few reasons: One there does not appear to be any early sources that mention such a custom; in point of fact, we never find any Leinig from the Torah at night the rest of the year.[64] Two, what does he mean by ‘Parshas Nedarim’? Three, does he mean to do so with a Beracha and call up others.

The Chayay Adam writes that in Prague they did not lein at night. In the various numerous collections of Minhagim of German Jews we do not find any of them mentioning such a Leining. Neither did the Chasam Sofer Lein in his minyan. [65] The Orach Hashulchan says it's a strange custom and thus many do not lein at night.[66] However, the Gra did do so [67] and R' Efrayim Zalman Margolis brings it down in his classic work, Sharei Efrayim.[68]

A possible suggestion as to where this Minhag came from could be based on the fact that some Rishonim bring a custom that some had to finish leining the whole Torah on Simchas Torah night while some had the custom to do so Hoshana Rabbah at night (others did just Sefer Devaryim).[69] In a recent manuscript printed for the first time just a year ago called Emek Succos we find that at the beginning of the fourteenth century there was a custom in Provence to Lein the whole Torah on Simchas Torah at night in front of the men, woman and children.[70] Most possibly this Minhag has to do with what the Rama brings and eventually they just leined only a small part.

...

Rabbi Nisson E. Shulman

Sample drasha @ rabbis.org

SHMINI ATZERET: HOLD ON!

Today is Shmini Atzeret. What does Atzeret mean?

Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary to the Torah, offers some remarkable insights into this word, and through the word, into this holiday. He points to a primary and secondary meaning.

The primary meaning is “to gather”; to gather, not only people, but also ideas and ideals. We can see this best from its usage in connection with other holidays. Thus, the word is used to describe the seventh day of Passover. On the seventh and last day of Pesach, we are to gather all the lessons of the holiday from the first Seder night and through the holiday, and relive them all. The abolition of HAMETZ, the lesson of freedom, faith in God, trust in His prophet Moses, ATZERET, take them to heart. Review them, so that they stay with you.

Shavuot is also called ATZERET, because it is connected with Passover. The freedom lesson of Pesach is not completed till Shavuoth when we received the Torah. For freedom has meaning only when we accept the responsibilities it demands. The path from Egypt leads directly to Sinai. So on Shavuoth we take to heart the lessons of both holidays, Pesach as well as

Shavuoth. They go hand in hand. That is why Shavuoth is also called ATZERET, because it is a time to gather together the lessons we have learned during the nine weeks from Pesach to Shavuoth.

Now let us consider SHEMINI ATZERET. If, like on Pesach, the word ATZERET had been used for the seventh day, then like on Pesach ATZERET would be a command to gather the lessons of the entire Sukkoth. And there is, indeed, a great deal to learn from Sukkoth: God's Providence; the Clouds of Glory that protected us in the desert and stand for God's watchfulness in history that we survive, as we have till now; Thanksgiving, through the ETROG, LULAV, HADAS and ARAVA; transience of material things, that everything can fly away, HAVEL HAVALIM.... so we go out of our permanent solid home and live for the week in a flimsy hut with silly walls and no roof. All this we would learn if the SHMINI ATZERET fell on the seventh day of the holiday, like the ATZERET of Passover does.

But SHEMINI ATZERET does not fall on the seventh day of the holiday. It falls on the eighth day. And it therefore is not the additional day, but an eighth day YOM TOV all to itself. That's why there is no ETROG and LULAV on SHMINI ATZERET. That is why some don't eat in the Sukkah today, and even those who do, omit the beracha because it is not a mitzvah of the day.

The Talmud describes how different from the seventh day of Sukkoth was the Temple service on this day. The eighth day has its own special character. Why? Because the lesson of SHEMINI ATZERET does not refer to Sukkoth alone! It refers to the entire holiday season! We are commanded on this day to gather and to take to our hearts all the lessons of all the holidays of the entire season, including Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot! Lessons such as: That G-d is One; that He is our King; that we are accountable to Him. That we are commanded to look into our own hearts, judging ourselves as He judges us all; the lessons of TESHUVA; KAPARA, SELICHA, the confidence in man that he can improve; given a second chance, start again, from YOM HAKIPURIM, washed clean again. And the joy that must follow, expressed in Sukkot. Life then is truly joyous, when a man is pure and blameless. All the holidays are gathered here today, and all their lessons. Holy days to be sure; MIKRAEY KODESH: but also good days, YAMIM TOVIM, good days if we make their inspiration last throughout the coming year.

All the holidays: and in fact not from Rosh Hashana on. Because in counting the holidays, the Torah tells us to start from Pesach! So that SHEMINI ATZERET, this gathering festival, is the last holiday of the entire year till we begin the yearly cycle again from the coming Pesach. So all the lessons of all the holidays must be gathered by us this day. Gather lessons, gather strength from them all. That is the first meaning of the word, to gather.

ATZERET has another meaning too. ATZOR means to stop. If you have seen a red stop sign in Israel, you know the word ATZOR. Put on the brakes. Stop. And in addition to stop, it also means, "Hold tight!" Don't let go! And for us that meaning is obvious. Don't let these lessons go, but hold on to them throughout the coming year. Let them last. Let them persist.

Rashi cites from the Talmud, a beautiful picture inspired by the name ATZERET. It is as if the Lord tells His beloved people, "I cannot part with you. Tarry yet a while longer." Does Rashi mean to say that God wants one more day with us in Jerusalem? As if He, KIVEYACHOL, was begging for our presence? Hardly. Rashi was teaching this lesson: that it is as if the Lord says to Israel, "Wherever you are going this year, stay in My presence! Hold tight to the Holiday lessons! Don't let go!"

The same lesson can be applied to YIZKOR, for after all, since YIZKOR is said on each holiday, then this is the last YIZKOR of the holiday year till Pesach, when we begin again. So if YIZKOR is to have a lesson and message for us, it is to gather the lessons our parents taught; make them our own – and hold on to them – lessons of martyrdom and sacrifice, of course. We are too close to the holocaust. Our parents, brothers, sisters, some times even children lost in that holocaust. Make the lessons of martyrdom so real that we should not need reminders; reminders of that which is seared across our consciousness more indelibly than pogrom and massacres of Chmielnicki or the Inquisition or Crusade or even Churban of Israel of old could ever be.

We remember their martyrdom till this very day. But we remember more. We remember heroism, scholarship, virtues of loving-kindness. We remember their love of family, and the beautiful society they created, the princely bearing the queenly beauty of fathers and mothers on Friday night surrounded by their beloved children. Truly, when compared to our forefathers, who can say, "We are better than they? Do we not suffer by comparison? AVAL ANACHNU VAAVOTENU, CHATANU. But in spirit they are here today. Their ideals are here. Their teachings are with us freshly remembered. Hold on. Keep their strength, their love, their ideals. Make it part of your lives. Don't lose it.

Yesterday, someone complained to me with the often-heard words, "Rabbi, isn't it too bad that so many of our Jews are only seen in shul at YIZKOR and YAHRZEIT? How sad must their idea of Judaism be. How little they have of our faith." It is "too bad"? No! It is wonderful! At least they come for YIZKOR and to say KADDISH. At least they have this connection, be it ever so little. What might otherwise happen to such Jews with utterly no connection to Judaism? Our precious YIZKOR and YAHRZEIT have kept countless Jews connected to Judaism, and even made better, more faithful Jews of many. From the next world our parents call to us and

hold on to us, and cry out to us. ATZOR! "Hold on!" Remember our parents and their parents before them. Gather their lessons. Make it part of yourselves. Hold on to synagogues, to community, to Israel. It may sometimes seem to be a fragile link, but it is a lifeline. Hold on! This is a YIZKOR in a critical time in our history. Once again our people are threatened, especially within their borders, but also by anti-Semitism world wide. We don't need a special command at this YIZKOR to hold on to the memories of our recent martyrs, those whose sacrifice we share with our tears, our anguish. Their sacrifice is so fresh, so close to our hearts. But we do need the message that just as we recite YIZKOR for them, so we have for countless years recited YIZKOR for previous martyrs, great souls whose lives were sacrificed so that the people of Israel shall live; live even to this time and to years to come AD BIAT HAGOEL. So YIZKOR can give us strength. Just as SHEMINI ATZERET contains the values of all our holidays, so YIZKOR can give us the courage and the ideals of all our ancestors! Moses, and the Torah; Aaron, with his Priestly vestments and holiness; Elijah and his fiery zeal, the Maccabees and their heroism. They can all strengthen us through this moment, from Abraham and Saran and their vision that spans the centuries, their faith and trust. Their lives and ideals are with us at this moment. Hold on! Hold on to their words, their spirit, their valor, their strength, and their power. It is our power too, if we make it ours. And if Providence requires that nowadays we have new martyrs and heroes to add to the list, LO BECHAYIL, VELO BEKOACH, KI IM BERUCHI, AMAR HASHEM TZEVAKOT, The power that comes, not by force of arms, but from the spirit of God of Israel, in the words of David the King, FOR IT IS G-D WHO WILL GIVE OUR ENEMIES INTO OUR HANDS, FOR THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S!

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The Wars of the Peaceful Levites

Rabbi Moshe Tzuril

20 Tishrei 5784

The time-honored custom among the Jewish People is to publicly read aloud the final Torah portion, Parashat V'zot HaBracha (Deut. 33,1-34,12), not on a particular Sabbath, as all the other portions, but on the holiday of Shmini Azeret/Simchat Torah. (This year, this festival falls out on Sabbath, this very week.)

With all the excitement and great joy at completing the annual Torah cycle, accompanied by singing and dancing, not everyone gets the chance to study this portion as they do the other portions. Let us therefore discuss one particular verse, which appears at first glance a bit hard to understand. It is part of Moshe Rabbeinu's parting blessing to the Tribe of Levy: "May he smash the loins of those who rise up against him, so

that his enemies rise no more" (Deut. 33,11). Our question is: When did Levy participate in a war? The Rambam (Laws of Shmittah 13,12) that the Levites are separated from the "ways of the world" and do not wage war or even inherit like the rest of Israel. They were consecrated for prayer and Torah study, and did not engage in battle. What then was Moshe referring to in this blessing?

The Sforno explains that the verse is referring to the Levites' "battle" against those who wished to take over the Priests' Temple service, such as during the "battles" of Korach and King Uziyahu. This does not appear to jibe with the straightforward explanation of the verse, however.

HaRav Kook explains that the Levites took part in wars outside the Land of Israel, as the Rambam himself states (ibid., 11). They also took part in defensive wars, as Rashi to this verse explains, citing the example of the Hasmoneans [of the Tribe of Levy] who fought against the Greeks and the Hellenists.

It occurred to me to explain that the Levites' wars were against the heretics of Israel, especially those who worshiped the Golden Calf. When Moshe declared war on them, the Levites gathered together to the cause (see Sh'mot 32,26). In his final blessing to Levy, Moshe stated, "He said of his father and mother, 'I do not see them,' not recognizing brother or child" – meaning that the Levites fought against these people as well. Rashi explains that this refers to unrelated family members, such as stepbrothers, stepchildren, or even maternal grandfathers. The only reason the Levites were able to fight and kill them was because of their sin of heresy with the Golden Calf – just weeks after the Torah was given! – which disqualified them from membership in the Israelite nation. Clearly this was a dangerous task for the Levites, for the heretics certainly fought back and sought to kill them. The verse therefore continues, "May he smash the loins of those who rise up against them, and his enemies will rise no more." The word used here for "enemies" is as in Psalms 139,21, where it refers to those who rebel against G-d – and here as well.

We find another case where the Levites were willing to wage war for G-d's honor. The Jerusalem Talmud (Sotah, end of Chapter 1) states that there appears to be contradictory verses as to where Aharon HaCohen died – in Moserot, or in Hor HaHar? The Talmud explains that when Aharon died, the Clouds of Glory left the Israelites, and the Canaanites saw an opening to threaten them. They therefore reversed course away from the Land of Israel and sought to return to Egypt. They reached Moserot, where the Levites caught up with them and killed eight families, losing four families themselves in the battle. The Israelites asked themselves: "What has caused such loss of life among us?" And they answered that it was because they hadn't shown honor to Aharon upon his death [in Hor

Hahar], and so they made a special memorial and eulogy for him there [in Moserot], and so it was as if he had died there. But, we ask: Why did the eight families deserve to be killed by the Levites? After all, they were running away in fear of the Canaanites!

Actually, we find in the Torah capital punishment for those who refuse to inherit and settle in the Land. The Torah tells us that during the Exodus, only one-fifth of the Jews left (Sh'mot 13,18) – and Rashi explains (there, and Sh'mot 10,22) that the other 4/5 died during the plague of Darkness, because "they were wicked and did not want to leave Egypt." Yes, they were righteous in not assimilating into Egyptian culture in other ways – but they were lacking the sense of sacrifice necessary to come to the Holy Land and take it over from its hostile populace. We thus see that the refusal to accept the Divine gift of Eretz Yisrael is a form of rebellion against G-d, rendering them liable to death!

In addition, when the people chose the Spies' appraisal of the Land and did not want to enter, they were told, "Do not rebel against G-d [in this way]!" (Bamidbar 14,9) For only in the Holy Land do we truly accept G-d's kingship. And as the Gemara states (Ketuvot 110b): "Whoever leaves the Land, it is as if he has no G-d." Such a sin is clearly a capital one, deserving of the death penalty. The entire generation of the Desert thus died in the desert – except for the Levites, who did not take part in the Sin of the Spies.

The blessing to Levy states further: "They [the Levites] kept Your [G-d's] word, and safeguarded Your covenant." The Talmud states (Yevamot 72a) that the Levites were the only ones to fulfill the commandment of ritual circumcision in the Desert; the others feared the danger of the great heat and the lack of a north wind. Thus, the Levites were totally dedicated to G-d's word.

For other examples of the Tribe of Levy's ultimate dedication to G-d, see our work *Otzrot HaMussar*, I, p. 662-4; here we simply explained the examples of such that can be derived from the blessing of Moshe to Levy. Translated & adapted by Hillel Fendel.

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Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky **An Abundance of Joy**

A fundamental transformation takes place during the month of Tishrei, as we shift from the mood that permeates the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to that which is felt on Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres - Simchas Torah. The Rambam (Hilchos Chanuka 3:6) paraphrases the reason given by Chazal as to why no hallel is recited on the Yomim Noraim. Chazal (Rosh Hashana 32b) state that it would be inconceivable to celebrate with hallel at a time when the books of life and death are open. The Rambam describes these days as days of teshuva and fear

and therefore not days of abundant joy. Although the Rambam does not take the approach that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have no aspect of joy associated with them, he does emphasize that the joy is mitigated by the solemnity of this time. Concerning Sukkos, however, the Rambam (Hilchos Lulav 8:12) invokes the identical phrase "abundant joy" in describing the celebration of Sukkos; what was absent during the Yomim Noraim defines the essence of the Sukkos. The transformation from a time of non-abundant joy to a time characterized by abundant joy is a result of the proper observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. If the awe of these days inspired one to teshuva there is a tremendous sense of relief following Yom Kippur. The uncertainty about the outcome of one's judgment is resolved[1] and there is an abundance of joy that is now felt. This feeling transforms Sukkos into a time of "zman simchasenu" to the greatest degree.

During Sukkos we reach the height of simcha in the Beis Hamikdash. The Rambam cites the passuk (Vayikra 23:40) that highlights the ultimate celebration of Sukkos as occurring in the Beis Hamikdash. As such, it appears that we, who live in a time when there is no Beis Hamikdash, lack the ability to properly observe the dimension of simcha which is so integral to this yom tov. Perhaps the celebration of Shemini Atzeres - Simchas Torah has a special meaning for us who live during a time of churban Beis Hamikdash. What aspect of avodas Hashem do we still have that remains from the Beis Hamikdash? During Neila we recite a tefilla which concludes that after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, we only have the Torah. This tefilla is emphasizing that the Torah was a feature of the Beis Hamikdash that is still present. Torah was actually the central theme of the Beis Hamikdash - the aron housed the luchos and the Sanhedrin sat in the Lishkas Hagazis. Thus, the Written and the Oral Torah were the heart and soul of the Beis Hamikdash. The only part of the Beis Hamikdash that remains is the Torah itself. As Sukkos comes to an end and we celebrate the last yom tov of Tishrei, the abundant joy that was once felt in the Beis Hamikdash accompanies the Torah itself. Klal Yisrael adopted the minhagim of Simchas Torah as the most appropriate way to conclude this inspiring month. Abundant joy as we celebrate with the Torah itself completes the transformation from the Yomim Noraim to Zman Simchaseinu.

It is particularly fitting that talmud Torah be the expression of our greatest joy. In the beracha we recite every morning before beginning our study of Torah we insert a unique request: we ask Hashem that our Torah study be enjoyable. Although all mitzvos should preferably be performed in the state of joy, talmud Torah is unique in that simcha is an integral part of our study of Torah. In the introduction to the sefer Eglei Tal the theme is developed that the amount of joy one experiences during talmud Torah impacts on the mitzva proper. Thus, a

plea for success in reaching that simcha is incorporated into our Birchas haTorah. As we dance with our sifrei Torah at the culmination of Zman Simchasenu, we prepare for the year ahead. We look forward to a year of simchas haTorah and daven for the opportunity to celebrate our time of abundant joy in years to come in the place of simcha, the Beis Hamikdash, may it be rebuilt soon in our days.

[1] Editor's note: see An Attitude of Confidence, by Rav Hershel Schachter, for more on this point. © 2023 by TorahWeb Foundation. All Rights Reserved

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VeZot Haberachah

Adapted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

On Simchat Torah, the day of Rejoicing with the Torah, we complete our yearly reading of the Torah and begin the cycle again. What is the connection between the day itself and the Sidra we read on it, VeZot Haberachah? And why do we celebrate the Torah on this day instead of on Shavuot when it was first given? In the Sicha that follows, one point must be made clear to avoid confusion. Shemini Atzeret—the eighth day of Succot and a festival in its own right—and Simchat Torah, the day following, were originally a single festival. Outside the land of Israel, however, where we celebrate two festive days instead of one, they are separated. But they are in essence a single religious event, and they are treated as such in the Sicha.

1. Shemini Atzeret—the Day and the Reading

Basing himself on the Talmud,¹ Rambam writes² that on every festival we read a passage from the Torah relating to that day, for “Moses instituted for Israel that they read on every festival its appropriate section.” He continues by specifying the readings for the individual festivals, and says, “On the last day (of Succot) we read the section beginning Kol Habechor, ‘All the firstling males...,’ and on the next day we read the Sidra VeZot Haberachah, ‘And this is the blessing...’”

Thus the reason that we read VeZot Haberachah on the second day of Shemini Atzeret is not merely, as has been suggested, to end the cycle of the year's festivals with Moses' concluding blessing to Israel.³ Nor is it to couple the celebration of the festival with that of completing the annual reading of the Torah.⁴ Nor again is it to join Moses' blessing with the blessing that Solomon pronounced over the people on Shemini Atzeret.⁵ These are all reasons, but they are incidental. The main one is, as Rambam implies, that the Sidra of VeZot Haberachah directly concerns the festival itself.

But what is the connection between them?

2. The Unique Nation

In the Talmud⁶ we find an explanation of the symbolism of the sacrifices made on Succot and Shemini Atzeret. “To what do the seventy bullocks (that were offered during Succot) correspond? To the seventy nations. To what does the single bullock (of Shemini Atzeret) correspond? To the single (i.e., unique) nation (Israel).”

Shemini Atzeret is therefore the day when Israel's uniqueness is revealed.

This is its connection with VeZot Haberachah. For Moses begins his blessing with the words, “The L-rd came from Sinai, and rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mt. Paran.” Rashi explains the reference to Seir and Paran in this way: “He first addresses Himself to the sons of Esau (the inhabitants of Seir) that they should accept the Torah, but they refused. Then He went and addressed Himself to the sons of Ishmael (who lived in Paran) that they should accept it, and they too refused.” The descendants of Esau and Ishmael here stand for the whole non-Jewish world, and the meaning of Moses' words is therefore that the whole world⁷ had the opportunity of accepting G-d's law at the time of Sinai, but only Israel, “the unique nation”—took it upon themselves.⁸ Yet, although this emphasis of Israel's uniqueness links VeZot Haberachah with Shemini Atzeret, it surely connects it more strongly with another festival, Shavuot, the “season of the Giving of our Torah.” For Moses was referring to the events which surrounded Mt. Sinai, and these took place on Shavuot.

3. The Breaking of the Tablets

The explanation lies in the last words of the Sidra, with which the Five Books of Moses close: “There has not since risen a prophet in Israel like Moses... in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel.”

Rashi is prompted by the question, what precisely was the act referring to in the phrase “which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel?” He says it was the moment when “his heart inspired him to shatter the tablets (of the Ten Commandments) before their eyes.”

But why should this act have been counted amongst Moses' virtues? It was, on the face of it, connected with an episode of Divine displeasure. Indeed Rashi writes elsewhere⁹ that “the death of the righteous is as grievous before the Holy One blessed be He as the day on which the tablets were broken.” Rashi himself answers this question, by saying that when Moses broke the tablets, “the Holy One blessed be He agreed with Moses' opinion” and congratulated him.

But this does not solve our difficulty. The Talmud¹⁰ tells us what was Moses' reasoning. He argued, a fortiori, “If, about the Passover sacrifice, which is only one of the 613 precepts, the Torah says,¹¹ ‘no alien shall eat thereof,’ here is the whole Torah, and the Israelites are apostates—how much more so.” In other words, Moses was defending the honor of the Torah in not wanting to transmit it to “apostates,” but he was, at the

same time, stressing the unworthiness of Israel. How then can Vezot Haberachah—Moses' blessing to Israel—end with their dispraise? Indeed, the Sidra's ending would contradict its beginning, for it opens by stating Israel's uniqueness in accepting the Torah, and ends by suggesting their unworthiness to do so. It is stranger still that the final words of the Torah, whose whole purpose was to be addressed to and accepted by Israel, should concern the shattering of the tablets on which its laws were inscribed.

4. The Second Tablets and the Path of Return

We are forced instead to say that G-d congratulated Moses for the breaking of the tablets, because his act was in honor not only of the Torah but also of Israel.

Here we must remember that G-d did not congratulate Moses immediately. He waited until forty days had passed, until He gave the command, "Hew thee two tablets of stone like the first which you broke."¹² And Rashi does not give his interpretation that G-d's words were a congratulation until Vezot Haberachah, on Moses' death, forty years later. This in itself suggests that the full virtue of Moses' act was not apparent until the end of his life.

The explanation is this. The Talmud¹³ tells us that "the Israelites only made the golden calf to place a good argument in the mouth of those who return and repent." G-d allowed the Israelites to be tempted into making the calf only for the sake of their ultimate repentance, which was an unprecedented type of repentance: One which would bring them to an even higher level of spirituality than they had achieved before the sin.¹⁴ Thus the breaking of the first tablets because of the sin of the golden calf prepared the way for the second tablets which were greater than the first¹⁵—the perennial reminder of the power of repentance not merely to efface the sins of the past, but to bring man to new spiritual heights.

This, too, was Moses' ultimate intention in refusing to give the Torah to "apostates." He did not wish simply to defend the Torah's honor, but rather to awaken in Israel a desire to return to G-d. He was like a father who drives his errant son from his house, not to cast him off, but to create a longing to return.¹⁶ This is why Moses broke the tablets "in the sight of all Israel."¹⁷ He was making a public gesture, directed towards the Israelites; something they would witness and by it be changed for good.

This is why the fast of the 17th of Tammuz, the day when the tablets were broken,¹⁸ will be transformed in the Time to Come into a day of gladness and rejoicing.¹⁹ At the present we see only the immediate consequences of the golden calf, the sufferings of exile, several of whose major tragedies also occurred on the 17th of Tammuz. Therefore we fast. But when Israel's return to G-d is complete, it will be seen to have begun on the day when the tablets were shattered, and it will be a day of rejoicing.

But only when the second tablets had been commanded—the sign of the power of repentance—did G-d congratulate Moses. And this congratulation was not made explicit until the end of Moses' life, when he was granted a vision of the "final day" and saw "all that would happen to Israel in the future until the resurrection of the dead."²⁰ For it was then that he saw the final triumph of repentance, the Messianic fulfillment of what he had begun at Sinai.

5. The Rejoicing with the Torah

This, then, is the connection between Vezot Haberachah and Shemini Atzeret.

On the face of it, we should celebrate Simchat Torah Rejoicing with the Torah, on Shavuot when the Ten Commandments were first given. But our greatest rejoicing belongs to the second tablets, which were given on Yom Kippur. And Shemini Atzeret is the end of the festive cycle which begins with Yom Kippur.²¹

However, we must also remember that the opening words of Moses' blessing, "The L-rd came from Sinai..." refer to the first occasion of the Giving of the Torah, so that this too must have relevance to Simchat Torah.

6. The Righteous and the Repentant

The difference between the first tablets and the second is like that between the righteous and the repentant. When the first were given, Israel was still righteous; by the time of the second, they had sinned and repented.

The righteous are men whose virtue consists of the fact that they live according to the Torah. But repentance reaches even higher than Torah.²² It rests on the bond between G-d and man which survives even when man transgresses G-d's law. Thus at the time of the first tablets, Israel received a revelation from the Torah. But at the time of the second, they themselves gave revelation to the Torah. They had reached beyond it, to the essential union between G-d and Israel.

This is the relation of Vezot Haberachah to Simchat Torah: The Sidra begins with the first tablets, when Israel rejoiced in the Torah. And it ends with the second tablets, when the Torah itself rejoiced in Israel. Similarly, Simchat Torah means "rejoicing with the Torah," and also means "rejoicing of the Torah."²³

7. The Day and the Year

The Festivals were not instituted as self-contained events, days of light and joy. Our task is to bring what we feel on these days to the whole of the year. They form a sanctuary in time, whose light is to spread to every corner of the calendar.

But when confronted with this mission, the Jew may feel intimidated by its enormity. How can the secular world, from which G-d is so heavily hidden, be made receptive to its opposite, the light of holiness?

Here the Sidra gives us the precedent and the strength. For even that seeming calamity, the breaking of the tablets, was potentially the beginning of the path of return to G-d, the

opening of a new and higher access to the heights of the spirit. This is why, as soon as we have read the phrase about the tablets, “in the sight of all Israel,” we begin again with the Torah’s opening words, “In the beginning, G-d created...” For by the G-dly powers within him, the powers he discovers by returning to G-d, the Jew can stand in the darkest confines of a secular order and create a new world. He can be architect and builder of a world in which “every creature knows its Creator, and where every dominion recognizes the sovereignty of G-d.”²⁴

(Source: Likkutei Sichot, Vol. IX pp. 237-243)

FOOTNOTES 1. Megillah, 31a. 2. Hilchot Tefillah, 13:8. 3. Ran, Talmud, Megillah, Ibid. 4. Machzor Vitri, 385. 5. Ibid.; Avudraham. 6. Sukkah, 55b. 7. Avodah Zarah, 2b. 8. Cf. Likkutei Sichot, Vol. IV, p. 1309. 9. Devarim 10:7. 10. Shabbat, 87a, quoted in Rashi, Shemot 32:19. 11. Shemot 12:43. 12. Ibid. 34:1; Devarim 10:2. 13. Avodah Zarah, 4b. Rashi, ad loc. 14. Cf. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah, 7:4. 15. Shemot Rabbah, ch. 46. 16. Cf. Or Hatorah, Vaera, p. 123. 17. Cf. Devarim 9:17. 18. Mishnah, Taanit, 26a. 19. Zechariah 8:19. 20. Sifri and Rashi, Devarim 34:2. 21. Or Hatorah, Shemini Atzeret, p. 1779 ff. 22. Cf. Likkutei Torah, Acharei, 26c; Derech Mitzvotcha, Mitzvat Vidui Uteshuvah. 23. Sefer Hamaamarim 5699, pp. 68 and 72. Cf. Zohar, Part III, 256b. 24. Rosh Hashanah prayer.

these two parshiyot of the Torah, the last one and the first one, are intimately joined in the great seamless Torah that is our inheritance. Each one accurately describes the other. The rabbis teach us that each individual person must always believe and say to one’s self that this entire wondrous universe was created only for me. By this they meant to reinforce the idea of the purposefulness of creation itself and of the role that each and every human being can play in determining the destiny of that process of creation. By fulfilling our role as devoted Jews, with a moral understanding of life and good behavior patterns, we inherit the blessings of our teacher and leader Moshe as well as becoming partners, so to speak in God’s handiwork of creation. Nothing in life is wasted and even acts that we may deem to be somehow insignificant are important in God’s cosmic scheme of human existence. The blessings of Moshe are individual and particular. No two of them are alike. So too are human beings – no two of them alike. It is one of the many wonders of creation. Since the blessings are individual and human beings are unique, it is obvious that each of us has a role in the human story - each one of us individually. Thus our own individual lives take on greater purpose, influence and meaning. And that is the true blessing of creation itself.

Chag sameach Shabat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Home Weekly Parsha ZOT HABRACHA

Rabbi Wein’s Weekly Blog Because of the intricacies of the Jewish calendar, the end of the Torah – Zot Habracha – and the beginning of the Torah – Bereshith – follow each other in rapid succession this week. This is a timely reminder to us of the seamlessness of Torah – an understanding that will help us appreciate all of the Torah portions that we will hear and study in this new and blessed year. The rabbis of the Talmud have taught us that words of Torah which seem poor and unimportant in one Torah text contain rich and meaningful information and insight when viewed in the perspective of another text. Thus, the Torah has to be viewed in its totality and not only in analysis of individual and particular words and phrases. The immortal greatness of Rashi’s commentary to Torah lies in its ability to present both the trees and the forest at one and the same time to its readers and students. Without knowing Bereshith, Zot Habracha descends into poetry and narrative devoid of its ultimate spiritual content and purpose. And without knowing Zot Habracha, Bereshith itself remains an unfathomable mystery of creation and primordial life without apparent purpose and relevance to later human generations. That is what Rashi is driving at in his initial comment to the Torah. Creation had a purpose; God is not a random force in human existence, and Torah – the Torah of Moshe – and the continued existence of the people of Israel are integral parts of the purpose of creation and human life. Thus,