

CLASS 22 - SHMINI ATZERES - SIMCHAS TORAH

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

Halacha prohibits mixing one Simcha with another. For this reason, the dedication of the Bais HaMikdash was celebrated as an independent event, immediately preceding Yom Tov (Mo'ed Kattan ga). Even today, marriages are generally not performed during Chol HaMo'ed, so as not to confuse joy of the holiday with rejoicing of a different sort.

If so, why is it appropriate to dance with the Torah on Shmini Atzeres (or Simchas Torah in Chutz LaAretz)? As every Chag, Shmini Atzeres has its own requirement of 'V'Samachta B'Chagecha'. Why do we mitigate the inherent joy of Yom Tov by dancing wildly with the Torah?

In our shiur this week, we will answer this question, examining the unique nature of Shmini Atzeres.

1

Each of the Shalosh Regalim have particular Mitzvos commanded as part of its observance. Pesach has Matza and Marror, along with the Paschal lamb. Shavuos has a special offering of Lechem Bikkurim, the first wheat of the new year, and on Sukkos, we take the four species, moving to our temporary dwellings.

Shmini Atzeres however, has no Mitzva of its own, nothing to mark the definitive aspects of this holiday. Why is that?

The Sefer HaChinuch expounds upon a general principle of Mitzvos: the submission of self, a means of directing and guiding proper intent towards a higher goal. The physical act of Mitzva performance enables man to focus his thoughts, crystallizing abstract concepts into solid form.

"...and the Mitzva of Lulav, with its three species, is similarly rooted. Since the days of the Chag are days of great rejoicing for Israel, for it is the time when the produce and fruit are gathered into the home.....G-d commanded His nation to have a holiday before Him at this time, for their merit, so that the essence of the rejoicing will be to His name."

"And, because rejoicing is a great draw upon [man's] material self, causing him to forget fear of G-d at that time, Hashem commanded us to take between our hands items to remind us that all rejoicing of our heart is for His name and honor." (Sefer HaChinuch, 324)

Man has the tendency to lose sight of the goal and purpose for which he was created. At moments of happiness and contentment, his physical side is lulled into complacency. The Mitzvos are

designed to direct man's attention back to his origin, providing a spiritual perspective that counters any distraction.

This idea makes the lack of a unique Mitzva on Shmini Atzeres all the more puzzling. Shmini Atzeres is a holiday of special joy, and the precaution of the Sefer HaChinuch would seem particularly appropriate.

Apparently, the Simcha of this day is one of a different sort, with no need for the garnishments that generally adorn spiritual moments.

Chazal describe the nature of this day.

"Rebbi Eliezer said: to whom do these seventy bulls [offered on Sukkos] correspond? To the seventy nations. Why one bull [on Shmini Atzeres]? Corresponding to the one nation."

"A parable: a flesh-and-blood king who says to his servants: 'prepare for me a great banquet!'. On the final day, he says to his beloved friend: 'Prepare for me a small meal, so that I may take pleasure from you!' " (Sukkah 55b)

The non-Jewish world has a role to play on Sukkos, each of the seventy nations offering a sacrifice as their part in the Divine service. Shmini Atzeres, in contrast, is a holiday revealed to the special few, only Klal Yisrael is identified with the unity of the One G-d.

But, if the holiday of Shmini Atzeres connotes special Simcha, why does the king request only that a small meal be prepared? Would it not be more fitting for Klal Yisrael to enjoy an especially huge banquet, more stupendous than the offering presented by the nations?

The happiness of this day is self-contained, with no accouterments and no artificial enhancement.

Each day of Sukkos we invite one of our illustrious forefathers to join our Seudah. Every guest represents the repair of a particular characteristic that we endeavor to remove from our identity, a trait more suited for the nations of the world.

For the same reason, each day we wave the four species in six directions, protecting ourselves from foreign influences carried by the evil winds. On Hoshana Rabbah, the culmination of this period, we circle the Torah seven times, crying to G-d for salvation. Much as Yehoshua circled the city of Jericho, subduing the evil standing guard over Canaan, we too claim victory over the powerful forces of the surrounding culture.

The holiday of Sukkos then, is satisfaction only in relation to outside factors, a comparative joy measured by the torment of an evil alternative. It is a happiness that can be corrupted, easily turned in an unfavorable direction. Like most earthly pleasures, its worthiness is the respite from a life of emptiness, escape from the vain pursuits engulfing our temporary dwellings.

On Shmini Atzeres we don't need to invite the Ushpizin for protection.

They come on their own.

As the one animal offered on the altar, Shmini Atzeres stands independent, alone.

"One bull, and one ram: these correspond to Israel [one nation]. Stay with me a bit longer. This is a term of endearment, as children who leave their father, who says to them: separating from you is very difficult, please stay another day." (Rashi, Bamidbar, 29, 36 - the Torah reading of Shmini Atzeres)

Shmini Atzeres needs no safekeeping.

It is not merely an alternative path in life, separate from the nations.

It is an alternative world.

A unified existence, where G-d, His Torah, and His people are One.

Let us explain.

2

"After the seven days of Sukkos, G-d says to Israel: now, I and you will rejoice together....When Israel heard this, they began to praise HaKadosh Baruch Hu, saying: This is the day that Hashem has made, we will rejoice and be glad on it."

"Said Rabbi Avin: We do not know with what to rejoice, whether with the day itself, or with Hashem, came Shlomo and explained: '...Nagilah V'Nismecha Bach - We will rejoice and be glad with You.' 'Bach' - with Your Torah; 'Bach' - with Your salvation."

"Said Rabbi Yitzchak: 'Bach' - with the twenty-two letters that You wrote for us in Your Torah, 'Bais' equals two and 'Chuf' equals twenty." (Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas, 782)

This Midrash is defining the Simcha of Shmini Atzeres - not a celebration of the day, but a rejoicing with G-d. Not a commemoration of cosmic events that occurred on this date, but a relationship with G-d, irregardless of the gifts He sometimes bestows.

This longing for the Divinity highlights the distinction between Israel and the nations, clarifying why Shmini Atzeres belongs to Klal Yisrael alone.

Many nations repent from their sins, frightened of the coming retribution. Klal Yisrael cleanses themselves for an entirely different reason. They desire atonement, but not as an escape from punishment. It is not the reward they desire, but the relationship itself, and they strive to remove the evil barrier between man and his Creator.

For this reason, Shmini Atzeres is uncorruptible. The path of the nations, though at times pointed in the right direction, has more than one purpose. At times, man performs Mitzvos for reasons of his own, minus the total commitment that is the only fulfillment of Divine glory.

Shmini Atzeres has no Mitzvos.

Just the simple pleasure of being with our Beloved. With nothing to do, and nowhere else to go, man stands alone, soaking in the honor of His presence.

3

Why do we celebrate with the Torah on Simchas Torah?

It is a common misconception that the reason for our celebration is the conclusion of the yearly Torah reading cycle; the opportunity to begin once more.

This cannot be true.

The custom of reading the entire Torah in a one-year span was not always universally observed. The Talmud cites an alternative method, wherein the Torah was completed once every three years. Since mention of celebrating with the Torah appears in Chazal, this rejoicing obviously predates the current custom of finishing the reading on Simchas Torah each year, which was initiated only during the Gaonic period.

Rather, the Simcha of Simchas Torah is the Simcha of Shmini Atzeres.

We do not sing because we have completed the Torah. On the contrary, we complete the Torah because it is a time to sing.

"Said Rabbi Avin: We do not know with what to rejoice, whether with the day itself, or with Hashem. Shlomo [HaMelech] came and explained: '...Nagilah V'Nismecha Bach - We will rejoice and be glad with You.' 'Bach' - with Your Torah; 'Bach' - with Your salvation."

Rejoicing with G-d is rejoicing with His Torah.

G-d and His Torah are One.

Much as we refer to an individual by name, attracting his attention, G-d's focus is the nation that calls out to Him, mentioning His name. By immersing themselves in His word, the Torah that is His name, the Jewish people are worthy of His care, and bearers of His honor.

This is an idea that is often misunderstood.

Simchas Torah is not for everyone.

"It is a Mitzva to amplify this Simcha. It was not observed by ignorant individuals, or anybody who wished. Rather, the greatest of the sages of Israel, and the Roshei Yeshivos, and the Sanhedrin, and the elders, and men of deeds, it was they who danced, and clapped, and sang, and rejoiced in the Temple during the days of Chag HaSukkos. But all the nation, the men and the women, all came to see and hear." (Rambam, Hilchos Lulav, 8,14)

Today, varied pretenders carry the mantle of spiritual bliss. There is the daily 'L'Chaim', the weekly kumzitz, and the 'happy minyan', which on closer inspection always resembles the local bar's 'happy hour'.

These groups forget that there is no separating G-d from His word, and the only approach to Him is the Torah that is His command.

Only Torah scholars rejoice.

There is no Simcha without Torah.

G-d is the Torah.

Dancing with the Torah on Shmini Atzeres is not the imposition of a foreign element. These two celebrations are one and the same. We clutch the Torah and dance the night away, we cleave to G-d who reveals to us His word.

"V'Amar BaYom HaHu, Hineh Elokeinu Zeh, Kivinu Lo V'Yoshienu. Zeh Hashem Kivinu Lo, Nagila V'Nismecha B'Yishu'aso" (Yeshaya 25, 9 - from the verses read aloud on Simchas Torah)

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