

WHAT HAVE WE GAINED?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Due to the fact that the seventh day of Pesach this year falls on a Friday, the Torah reading of Shmini will occur on different dates in the Jewish world. Here in Israel it will be read immediately after the conclusion of the holiday of Pesach, which is only seven days in length. In the exile/diaspora the Shabbat immediately after the seventh day of Pesach is reckoned and observed as the eighth day of Pesach and therefore the Torah reading of Shmini is postponed until the next Shabbat.

Eventually the Torah readings of the land of Israel and of the exile/diaspora will be reconciled and become simultaneous once more. The observance of the extra day of Pesach, Succot and Shavuot is an ancient custom already recorded for us in the times of the Second Temple. It has been given halachic legitimacy and emphasis for the exile/diaspora by rabbinic literature and responsa ever since then.

Though the original reason given for its observance apparently no longer applies, the tradition and custom of our forefathers is binding upon the Jewish world till now. All of those groupings that tinkered with this and other Jewish customs and traditions over the ages have sooner or later diminished or even disappeared from the Jewish world. And those who abolished the eighth day of Pesach in the exile/diaspora eventually found themselves wanting even on the seventh day.

Jewish history is harsh and unbending when it comes to unnecessary, frivolous and temporarily politically correct changes and compromises. So, to a great extent, Shmini shel Pesach - the extra eighth day of the holiday - has become a litmus test for Jewish survival and continuity in the exile/diaspora.

The Torah references this by emphasizing that the dedication of the Mishkan/Tabernacle took place on the eighth day. The eighth day represents the continuity and extension of the spirit and the lessons of the seven commemorative days that preceded it. One is charged with somehow feeling greater, more spiritual and more purposeful after the seven days of commemoration and dedication.

The eighth day is the measure of what we have gained over the seven days that preceded it. This is also true as far as holidays are concerned and is equally true with all momentous occasions in Jewish life. Living in the land of Israel has always been meaningful and challenging at the same time, and has a holiness and personality all its own. Every day in Israel is the eighth day.

The exile/diaspora does not have that quality or ability built within it. It requires a special eighth day in order to fortify the gains and attitudes that the seven days of the holiday granted. Judaism

operates on a rational but yet mystical plane of events, commandments and customs. It allows no shortcuts and frowns upon foreign imports into its spirit and lifestyle.

All of this is represented in the dichotomy that it has created between the observance of the eighth day in the land of Israel and in the exile/diaspora. This important lesson should be incorporated into our observance of this Shabbat, whether it be here in Israel where it is the Torah reading of Shmini -the "real" eighth day, so to speak - or in the exile/diaspora where it is the eighth day of Pesach itself.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com