

SHEMINI ATZERES

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Shemini Atzeres, 5632

Let us work with the Sfas Emes's very first ma'amar in the section entitled "Lesukkos" ('For Sukkos'). This ma'amar has much to tell us both about Sukkos and about Shemini Atzeres.

The Sfas Emes begins by telling us that the eight days of Sukkos give the world its life for the entire year. That is, on Rosh Hashana, HaShem decides the measure of chiyus (vibrancy, vitality) for the world in the year to come. But it is on Sukkos that the chiyus actually flows out to give life to all creation. The Torah provides a unique mitzva as a metaphor for this feature of reality. That mitzva is nisuch hamayim, the ceremonial offering of waters poured over the mizbei'ach (altar), on Sukkos (and only on Sukkos).

The chiyus that flows to the world on Sukkos is a life-force for olam hazeh (literally, "this world"). But the Sfas Emes is probably using the term to refer to physical/material existence in general). Obviously, non-Jews also participate in olam hazeh. For this reason, the fact that Sukkos is the time when chiyus flows out to the physical/material world has an important implication. It implies that non-Jews, too, have access to this life-force. The Torah provides a metaphor to express the connection linking the nations of the world to HaShem on Sukkos. That metaphor is the korban (sacrificial offering) of 70 bulls that we bring over the course of Sukkos. The format of this korban reflects the notion that 70 nations comprise all humankind. Thus, as we see, the Torah provides a place for all nations to participate in the celebration of Sukkos.

By contrast, the chiyus that flows out to the world on Shemini Atzeres is for the life of olam habba (literally, the "world to come," but again, probably intended by the Sfas Emes more generally to refer to the life of ruchniyus -- spirituality). That life is uniquely for Bnei Yisroel. Why? Because this chiyus hapenimiyus (inner life-force) is expressed through Torah, and Torah is the central feature of our lives.

But there is a major problem. In olam hazeh, we can perceive only the world's external appearance. Thus we see nature, but not HaShem, Who is behind nature. Because our perception of the world is misleading, we are at risk. For, as we know, bad metaphysics leads to bad physics. Fortunately, the Sfas Emes tells us, we also have available protection in our exposed, dangerous situation. The

mitzva of sukka can provide the protection we need in order to live our lives with an accurate picture of reality.

How can a sukka provide that protection? The sukka is HaShem's testimony that even in this physical/material world, the central feature of our life is Torah. How does that work? To address that critical question, the Sfas Emes cites the term that the Zohar uses to refer to the sukka. This term is crucial for our understanding of the mitzva and by extension, the yom tov of Sukkos. The term that the Zohar uses for the sukka is: "tzila di'meheimenusa".

Let us see what these words mean and what they tell us. "Tzila" is "shade" -- the sekhach which shields us from the sun's blazing heat. "Di'meheimenusa" means "of emuna". I translate "emuna" as "affirmation". That is, by dwelling in the sukka, we affirm. HaShem's Omnipresence, shielding us from harm.

Summing up, the Sfas Emes has told us that Sukkos is oriented to the physical/material world, a world to which non-Jews also have access. A key feature of that world is the misleading impression it conveys of reality. Hence, on Sukkos we need protection, as provided by our dwelling in the sukka. By contrast, Shemini Atzeres is purely Torah and ruchniyus. Consequently, on Shemini Atzeres, there is no need for the protection afforded by a sukka. For, being pure ruchniyus, Shemini Atzeres is, in effect, its own sukka.

(I suggest that you pause and take a deep breath before proceeding. Why? Because what comes next shows the Sfas Emes in an amazing, breath-taking light: being both the Gerer Rebbe and a Gaon Olam; both the Sfas Emes on Shas and the Sfas Emes on the Torah.) Return to what was said earlier: that being pure ruchniyus, Shemini Atzeres does not need the protection of a sukka. For, being pure ruchniyus Shmini Atzeres is, in effect, its own Sukka. Now the Sfas Emes continues: perhaps this is what Chazal had in mind when they said (Sukka, 47,a) that on Shemini Atzeres, we dwell in the sukka -- even though, in fact, we do not!

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