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**The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet**

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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=====Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah/Bereisheit=====

Shmini Atzeret: Celebrating WHAT?

by Rabbi Jay Weinstein

What would Hanukka be without a menorah? Pesach without matza? Rosh Hashana without the shofar? This sounds strange because the focus of every holiday is always the special mitzvoth which pertain to that day. Yet, when you read the verses in the Torah which discuss Shmini Atzeret you'll find that there is no specific commandment connected to this holiday! It is in fact a new holiday from Sukkot, and one recites the blessing of Shehecheyanu which signifies a new holiday. How can there be a Yom Tov without any mitzvot attached to it?

The Midrash describes the holiday of Shmini Atzeret by comparing God to a King whose children have come to visit him. At the end of a long and pleasurable visit, the King implores his children to stay one more day because their departure is hard on him. The High Holidays we have just marked, beginning with Rosh haShana until the end of Simchat Torah are a "long visit" we have with God. Before returning back to our daily routine and regular lives, God "requests" of us to spend one more day with Him. This day is beyond mitzvot and specific tasks, but rather a day for us to be close to Hashem.

Even though there are no mitzvot performed on this day, what makes it unique is the fact that the holiday is on the 8th day of Sukkot. Nachmanides, a 12th century Spanish commentator, explains this significance. The number seven represents the natural world. For example, a week is comprised of seven days, there are seven notes on the musical scale and there are seven directions (left, right, up, down, forward, back and center). The holiday of Sukkot is seven days and therefore represents the world of nature. Once we pass these seven days and get to day number eight, we move into the area which is beyond nature and celebrate the holiday of Shmini Atzeret.

The existence of the Jewish people and our connection to God is beyond nature. As Mark Twain wrote: "All things remain mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" The Jewish people have survived thousands of years of persecution, exile, adversity and expulsion. By every natural law, we should no longer exist, and we certainly should not be a leading people in the world. Yet, the Jewish nation has achieved and thrived far beyond their numbers.

Shmini Atzeret, is portrayed in the Midrash as the special relationship to Hashem and by being placed on the eighth day which is beyond the natural world, celebrates this idea. We continue celebrating this idea on Simchat Torah, as we dance and sing with the Torah scrolls that represent us as a Jewish people and God's chosen nation.

“The Prayer for Rain”

Rabbi Eren Tamir

What is the meaning of the prayer for rain that, G-d willing, we say on Shemini Atzeret? Simply speaking, it seems that this prayer is a request that in the coming year a lot of blessed rain will fall, which in turn will facilitate economic bounty and a good livelihood. It thus follows that in the summer when in Israel we say the words “morid hatal” [G-d causes dew to fall], we mean that we hope G-d causes material bounty to descend to our world, so that we can live graciously and not in penury, in contentment rather than in suffering.

Yet we can go further. That same rain, that same material bounty which descends upon us from On High, begins with “Mashiv HaRuach”, which can mean “G-d causes the wind to blow,” – or – G-d causes the spirit to flow. The full expression, “mashiv haruach umorid hageshem” thus means, “G-d infuses our world with spirituality by way of the rain that falls. That rain meets the earth, seeps into it, and by such means, lofty spirituality is linked together with the height of base, earthly materialism, the soil, the inanimate.

Henceforth begins a gradual process. The inanimate earth becomes saturated with water, and it rises a level, causing plant life to sprout forth. That plant life is consumed by animals, providing them with life and sustenance. Thus, the inanimate is elevated to plant life, and the plant life is transformed to part of animals. Yet it does not end there. Man continues the process, by consuming animals, raising them up another level, by transforming them into part of man. And that man – Israel – continues on and adds the next level, by way of his “mashiv haruach”, by way of his revealing his soul, the infinite, divine part of him, when he studies Torah, prays or performs mitzvoth. Then we arrive at the desirable end, in which **EVERYTHING**, inanimate, plant, animal and man, is elevated to “mashiv haruach”, to the spirituality inherent in reality, by way of the spiritual activities of man.

We start with “mashiv haruach” and we end with “mashiv haruach”. Yet along the way we elevate all materialism to the level of man, who invests real worth and meaning into it all. Thus, the purpose of the prayer for rain is not just for us to merit quantitative economic bounty, but chiefly, to merit qualitative spiritual bounty, by elevating our material world and sanctifying it, until it reaches perfection through our redemption in our land, through the advent of Mashiach and through the rebuilding of our Temple. Then, “The L-rd shall be King over all the earth. On that day shall the L-rd be One and His name One” (Zechariah 14:9).

Shemini Atzeret marks the last day of the "Yom Tov Season." While it is quite clear why we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot, the reason why we celebrate one last holiday is not quite as obvious. Indeed, Rashi seems to indicate that there is no real reason for Shemini Atzeret. Rather, God says, as it were: "Please remain with Me just one more day, for your departure is difficult for Me to endure." The Ramban suggests that the eighth day of Sukkot alludes to the idea that the Jewish people are the partner to the seventh day - Shabbat - and thus it is observed as a holiday.

I would like to share a thought advanced by Rav Ben Tziyon Ferrer in his sefer "Le-Yom Chagenu." Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel in Parashat Pinchas explains the significance of Shemini Atzeret as follows: "On the eighth day you shall gather in joy as you leave your sukka and return to your home." There is certainly much joy when we enter the sukka and bask in the presence of the Shechina, but why should leaving the sukka be cause for celebration? Rav Ferrer explains that the sukkah represents God's protection as we wandered in the desert for forty years; by living in a temporary dwelling, we reaffirm the fact that God always protects His nation. When were we able to leave the sukka, to build our permanent homes and lives? That occurred when we arrived in Eretz Israel. The joy of Shemini Atzeret is the joy of leaving our temporary dwelling and entering our final destination - the place where we can set up permanent shop together with the Shechina - in the Holy Land.

by Rabbi Joel Cohn

Simchat Torah in the Shadow of October 7

by Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Simchat Torah, October 7, will forever be etched in our hearts and minds as the day of the greatest massacre of our people since the Holocaust. The brutal, cold-blooded murder of innocent men, women and children, young and old, entire families, over 1,200 people, and the horrific kidnapping of 250 people, rocked our worlds, broke our hearts, and shattered our collective illusion of safety.

The events of that day launched a war in which our people have sustained even more casualties, more parents bereft of children, children orphaned from parents. For over a year, we have been a nation in a perpetual state of grief, mourning, and sorrow.

Any look back at a year ago, and all the days since then, begins with honoring the memory of the fallen, learning each of their unique and individual stories, gaining an appreciation for who and what was taken from us. Simchat Torah, heretofore one of the happiest and most joyful days on our calendar, is now forever complicated by the competing feelings of sadness and loss.

Beyond the unimaginable loss of life, many of our ideas and assumptions died as well. We lost more than 1,200 irreplaceable lives, but we also lost our innocence, in some cases our confidence, our optimistic view of the Jewish condition in America and the world, and for some, communities of association or identification. A year ago, so much died.

But a year later, as we reflect, we can look back and see that on Simchat Torah, October 7 of last year, so much was also born. On the brink of a civil war over judicial reform and religious differences, overnight a sense of unity, togetherness, and shared destiny was reborn.

From the resolve of the devastated communities on the Gaza border, driven by displaced families from the north and the south, powered by a record response to the IDF call up, the determined, tenacious nation of eternity was reborn. From the ashes of the Gaza communities, an unprecedented effort to provide for soldiers, support families of reservists, comfort mourners, visit displaced families and provide provisions was born, with leadership and participation from diverse communities literally around the world.

A Spiritual Awakening

A spiritual awakening, a Jewish pride burst forth in people who had never experienced their Jewish soul before or in whom it had been dormant for a long time. Throughout this year, I have regularly been “bageled,” approached by Jews simply signaling their Jewishness to a fellow Jew (and signaling their desire to signal that Jewishness) in airports and on airplanes, in supermarkets and at stores, at a baseball game and even in a bathroom. Jews are returning to study, practice, proudly display their identity. The Jewish people are alive, reborn, proud, practicing, growing and united.

To be sure, things are far from perfect. There are important differences and disagreements and there are forces seeking to divide us again. The war continues to rage, our heroic soldiers are still fighting on multiple fronts, and our precious hostages are still not home.

But with all the problems and challenges, with all the lives that were prematurely and tragically snuffed out, so much has come alive. Moshe Naaman, a soldier in the IDF, wrote the following inspiring story (translated from Hebrew):

Two weeks ago, we were called up by Order 8 to the northern border. Today, we had the privilege of holding Yom Kippur prayers at Kibbutz Beit Zera. For 93 years, the kibbutz existed without agreeing to have a Yom Kippur minyan. But we, as soldiers, set one up in the company area at the kibbutz.

There were 12 religious soldiers among us. We sent a casual WhatsApp invitation to the kibbutz members. When the holiday started, we were shocked—dozens of members came for Kol Nidrei and Maariv. In the morning, elderly members came for Yizkor. The climax came with many dozens of people, including children, women, and toddlers, arriving for the closing Neilah service and shofar. People were moved to tears.

What can I say? I never imagined this would happen. The verse “Master of Wars, Sower of Righteousness” took on a new meaning for me today. Two weeks ago, I never imagined I wouldn’t be in the beit midrash for the High Holidays. I found myself as the shofar blower, gabbai, cantor, and speaker... The members kept thanking us after Yom Kippur and tearfully asked us to return next year...

Last year, I had tears of pain and sorrow at the end of Yom Kippur, but this year, those tears turned into excitement and joy.

“And seal all Your people for a good life.” Moshe Naaman - 5035 גודל הבוקע

"I am a Jew!"

To mark the year since October 7, Danny Wise of Ami Magazine conducted 38 interviews focusing on the rebuilding efforts of the Israeli communities in the Gaza envelope. Among his interviews, he met with a woman named Dafnah from Kibbutz Re'im. She had been the cultural director of the kibbutz and was one of the organizers of the Nova Festival.

Touring the kibbutz, she showed him her charred house and the room in which her mother and children, Shira and Meir, were found murdered together. She is the lone survivor of her family. Wise writes that throughout the conversation he thought of Kristallnacht and the destroyed shuls. He asked her if the terrorists destroyed any shuls in the communities along the Gaza envelope.

Dafnah responded, "Of course not. Not a single synagogue was damaged in all 21 Gaza kibbutzim." Wise didn't understand, how could no shul have been attacked, no Torah Scroll burned?

She explained, "It wasn't a miracle. How could they damage something that doesn't exist?"

Most of the communities didn't have designated or active shuls. Dafnah explained, "If you want to understand the day after, you have to understand the day before."

Wise writes:

Rabbi Shlomo Raanan runs an organization called Ayelet Hashachar which seeks to bring outreach to irreligious kibbutzim. He came up with the idea of a basketball game between yeshivah students and the kibbutzniks of Reim. The game was set to take place on Sukkot Chol Hamoed, October 2, just days before the massacre. Dafnah had led the charge to cancel the game. To her, the match wasn't just a friendly contest; it was a Trojan horse, a way for religious influence to creep into the kibbutz.

"I was furious," she told me. "This was outrageous. We didn't need outsiders telling us who a good Jew is," she said, pulling out her phone and scrolling through old messages. She showed me the texts she had sent to Rabbi Raanan, warning him not to bring his religious mission to her doorstep. "Cancel this game immediately," she wrote. "If you don't, we'll all block the entrance with our bodies."

In the spirit of peace, Rabbi Raanan canceled the game.

Five days later, the massacre came. Just over the border, in the tunnels of Gaza, Dafnah found herself held hostage, face to face with the forces that had torn her world apart. "I said to an older guard in Arabic, why do you torture me? For 20 years, I've made programs for Arabs and Jews. The Jews are your cousins." As she pleaded in the darkness for some recognition of their shared humanity, she was met not with empathy but with a cold dismissal.

"You are not a descendent of Ibrahim! You are not a Jew!" he spat. "You are a European colonialist who stole our land! It was in that moment, Dafnah said, that something broke. Or perhaps, something began to be repaired. The accusation hit hard. Like many in the kibbutz movement, Dafnah had spent her life defining herself more as an Israeli than a Jew, and more dedicated to reconciling Arabs and Israelis than healing the divides between different groups of Jews.

Religion had always been secondary to her identity. But now, in the depths of that tunnel, being denied her Jewishness by a Hamas fighter, she experienced a crisis of self. "I started screaming, Ana Yahudim, Ana Yahudim, I am a Jew I am a Jew!" The guards restrained her, taping her mouth. But for Dafnah, the internal shift had already occurred.

"For the first time in my life I saw my soul; I saw that I am a Jew. All my life," Dafnah reflected, "I've been part of this community. We didn't see ourselves as Jews, in the traditional sense. When I traveled overseas and someone asked if I was Jewish, I'd correct them. 'No, I'm Israeli,' I'd say.

"But when he called me a colonialist, it hit me. He didn't see me as a Jew because I didn't see myself as a Jew."

Dafnah paused for a moment, her eyes wandering over the ruined landscape. "Every Arab village has a mosque. Christian settlements build churches. And here, we have nothing. Nothing to say that we are Jews. And in that moment, I realized that if we were going to rebuild, we needed to reclaim our identity. I will tell you," Dafnah said, "I took upon myself the new beit knesset (synagogue) project. When we rebuild, our beit knesset will be the most beautiful structure on the kibbutz."

On Simchat Torah, Dafnah lost her family, but she found herself. They died, and her Jewish identity was born.

Rejoicing in the Shadow of Death

The holiday and festivities of Simchas Torah are unusual in their origins. They are not mentioned in the Torah or in the Talmud. It was never enacted as a full rabbinic holiday like Purim or Hanukkah. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l writes:

On Simchat Torah, without being commanded by any verse in the Torah or any decree of the Rabbis, Jews throughout the world sang and danced and recited poems in honor of the Torah, exactly as if they were dancing in the courtyard of the Temple at the Simchas Beis HaSho'evah, or as if they were King Dovid bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. They were determined to show God, and the world, that they could still be ach same'ach, as the Torah said about Sukkot: wholly, totally, given over to joy. It would be hard to find a parallel in the entire history of the human spirit of a people capable of such joy at a time when they were being massacred in the name of the God of love and compassion.

A people that can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still rejoice is a people that cannot be defeated by any force or any fear... Simchat Torah was born when Jews had lost everything else, but they never lost their capacity to rejoice... A people whose capacity for joy cannot be destroyed is itself indestructible.

The year since Simchat Torah has been a fulfillment of the saying, "They tried to bury us; they did not know we were seeds." Simchat Torah was born against a backdrop of hate and tragedy. A year ago, we lost so many, we buried heroes of our people. But over this year, we birthed a new era, a new chapter for our people. It is still being written and we determine what it will say next.

How can we honor all those who died? On a day marked by so much death, the only proper response is to birth a better version of ourselves and our people.

TO START THE TORAH PORTION: "All the Tribes of Yisrael Together" [Devarim 33:5]

by Rabbi David Lau

It is clear from the Torah portion of "Vezot Haberachah," the last portion of the Torah, that the nation was divided into different groups and tribes before entering Eretz Yisrael. Every tribe received its own blessing, one that emphasized its unique traits, expanding on the blessings given by Yaakov. One might have the impression that there is no hope of ever seeing the people gathered into a single unified nation.

However, a look in depth will show that this is not the case. As an example, take the relationship between Yehuda and Binyamin. Yehuda is the tribe of monarchy, while Binyamin was privileged to have the Temple built on its land ("He will dwell between his shoulders" [Devarim 33:12]). There can be no government without a Temple. This was understood by Yeravam Ben Nevat, the king of the kingdom of Yisrael, who closed the border and did not allow his subjects to travel to Jerusalem. His authority, and the kingdom of Yisrael as a whole, did not continue for very long.

The opposite is also true - The Temple cannot stand for long without a government. Bnei Yisrael were told that the Temple should be constructed by a king they would appoint when they enter the land, who would provide the authority for its operation. Yehuda cannot prevail without Binyamin, just as Binyamin cannot last for long without Yehuda.

Intermingled with the tribe of Yehuda is that of Shimon ("G-d, listen to the voice of Yehuda" [33:7] - see Rashi). The tribe of authority takes responsibility for the tribe that teaches young children (the issue of education takes top priority!). Shimon is known for fanaticism, but when it is controlled by the authority of a king, it can be channeled to a good purpose.

With the combined strength of these three tribes, the kingdom of Yehuda has managed to survive. Today, we are the remnants of this nation, after all the other tribes were sent into exile.

Yissachar and Zevulun are also mentioned together: "Zevulun, be happy in your travels, and Yissachar in your tents" [33:18]. Yissachar can dwell in the tent of Torah only when Zevulun travels to take care of his merchandise, in order to help his brother's economic situation. One without the other will not be able to continue. When they cooperate, they will be able to survive.

Tribal loyalty is a good thing if each tribe knows how to maximize its own potential for the benefit of all. If every tribe can learn to fulfill its potential and combine this with the traits of the others, there is some advantage to having separate tribes. If, on the other hand, every tribe remains in its own small niche and cares only about its own needs, there is no benefit at all. In fact, in such a case every individual loses, since he cannot achieve his maximum potential if he remains isolated.

As the year comes to an end and a new one starts, let us hope and pray that we will all understand that an individual will be blessed only when he expresses himself by his contribution to the community as a whole. Let us all join together in cooperative giving, with the hope that this will lead to "Vezot Haberachah," a blessing for all, starting anew from "Bereishit," from the beginning.

The Potential for Greatness and Lowliness

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Parshat Bereishit describes the Creation of the first man, Adam. Adam represents the totality of the human race and since every human being in existence is his descendant, any lesson that can be learned about him will apply to mankind as a whole. There is a fascinating dichotomy that arises a number of times in the account of Adam's creation, the first time being the opening verse that discusses God's plans to create Adam: "And G-o said, let Us make man in Our Image and Our likeness, and **he will rule** [vayirdu] over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, the animals throughout the land, and all the creeping things that creep on the land."

Rashi quotes the Medrash that notes the use of the word, 'vayirdu' which in this sense means exercising power over other things. However, the root letters of the word (yud, reish and dalet) can also be expressed to refer to the word, yerida (which implies a descent or fall). The Medrash explains the contradictory double meaning of this word: "If man is worthy, then he will rule over the animals; but if he is unworthy, then he goes down below them, and the animals will rule over him."

A similar idea is expressed in the Medrash at the beginning of Parshat Tazria. The previous section in the Torah (in Parshat Shemini) dealt with the laws involving animals, and the following section focuses on laws involving human beings. The Medrash points out that the Torah's ordering here mirrors that found in Creation; When God created the world He first created all the animals, and only then did He create man. Likewise here, the Torah first discusses the laws relating to animals and only then moves on to the laws relating to man. The Medrash then explains why God created the animals first; It is to teach us, "if man is worthy, we say to him, 'you come before [in importance] all of creation; but if he is not [worthy] we say to him, 'the gnat came before you'".

This theme that man can elevate himself to great heights or bring himself down to the depths is also so central to mankind that it features in the very essence of man's name, Adam. We know that the name of a being reflects his Essence, therefore the meaning of his name is of great significance. The Shelah HaKadosh writes that the name, 'Adam' has a dualistic meaning. It can relate to the word, 'adama' (Earth) indicating that Adam was so named because he originated from the dust of the earth. However, it can also relate to the words, 'adameh l'Elyon' which means, "I will make myself similar to the Almighty" The Shelah explains that if man connects to His Creator and tries to emulate Him, then he merits to be called 'Adam' in the sense that he makes himself similar to the Almighty. However, if he separates himself from God, then his name reflects his lowly physical nature. He concludes that man's purpose is to make his name reflect his lofty nature through his cleaving to God.

These sayings of the Sages discussing the creation of Adam teach us that man has the potential to rule over the whole animal kingdom. This is a reflection of the well-known concept that the whole purpose of creation was for the sake of mankind. Therefore, if he fulfills his purpose, then all other creatures will become subservient to him. However, if he fails then he not only falls from his lofty position, but he becomes lower than all other creatures.

It still needs to be understood why this stark dichotomy is only found with regard to man. One approach is that man is unique amongst all creations in that he has the power of free will, the ability to choose to do good or evil. Animals do not have this choice; rather they are totally dominated by physical desires and instinct. Angels also do not have free will; rather they are completely driven to spirituality. Only man constitutes a combination of the soul with its spiritual drive, and the body, with its physical desires. Therefore, only he can make the choice of clinging to God or attaching himself to physicality. Consequently if he makes the right choice and emphasizes his soul then he is deserving of far higher praise and reward than Angels because he overcomes the challenges that he faces to attain his closeness to God, whilst for Angels there is no such challenge. Similarly, if he makes the wrong choice and focuses on his body, then he is considered lower than the animals; for they have no choice as to whether they are totally engrossed in physicality, however he does have the option to take a different path.

A second approach to this issue is based on a fundamental tenet in Judaism that is mentioned in the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): "This opposite that did God make". The commentaries explain that this means that there is a balance in this world. Goodness or evil can never become so powerful that there is nothing to check its progress. Therefore, the greater the potential of a person to do amazing things, the greater the risk that he cause great damage as well. In this vein the Talmud states that the greater a person is, the stronger his evil inclination. To maintain the challenge of this world, the higher the level a person attains, the higher the stakes of life must be. Accordingly, Adam was created with the potential to attain unparalleled greatness, but if he would fail, then he would plumb to great depths.

Through the course of history, Adam's purpose of connection to God was rejected by most of the nations, and assumed by Abraham and his descendants. As part of this legacy, it seems that the Jewish people inherited the great dichotomy that characterized Adam's creation. The Jew can attain incredible heights and do great good in the world if he connects to the 'Adameh L'Elyon' aspect of his personality. However, if he chooses the wrong path, then he can cause great damage, more than others are capable of. One example of this is the number of Jews who featured in the forefront of the development of Communism, one of the most harmful ideologies that ever plagued the world, causing untold suffering to millions of people. This is because they misapplied their natural Jewish desire at Tikun Olam (fixing the world) and instead replaced the Torah way with an atheistic approach to life.

We have seen how Adam was created with the choice of being extremely great, or being extremely low. The Jewish people have assumed that mantle – may we all merit to make the correct choices and thereby make ourselves similar to God.