

Message for Simchat Torah

Today is Simchat Torah, which literally means 'rejoicing over the Law' and Jews all over the world are doing exactly that - rejoicing! Wherever Jews, or at least the vaguely religious ones, live in the world today there will be much merry making, with music and dancing in the streets as throngs of people process the various sifrei Torah. It's an important festival in our calendar. And yet, interestingly, it must be noted that Simchat Torah is not mentioned in the Torah. In fact today is technically Shemini Atzeret, a day which *is* commanded in Torah. So how come we focus on this day as Simchat Torah and focus less on it as Shemini Atzeret? Let's see...

The command to observe a Yom Tov on this day is found in Vayikra 23:36, which states, "On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation you shall do no work on it." We note that the Torah here commands a Yom Tov on 'the eighth day' but doesn't actually give this day a name. In the absence of a specified name Jews therefore came to call this eighth day Yom Tov 'Shemini Atzeret' - two Hebrew words which mean the 'eighth day of assembly'. Hardly a catchy title and one which tells us very little as to the actual nature of this Yom Tov! Indeed, all that this title tells us is that it is 'the eighth day' which logically means that there have been seven days before it. These seven days are of course the days of Sukkot when we are commanded to build booths and dwell in them and rejoice before the Lord with 'boughs of goodly trees'. And yet Shemini Atzeret isn't technically a part of Sukkot since the Torah specifically tells us that Sukkot lasts for only seven days. So what then is Shemini Atzeret if it is not part of Sukkot, and what are we supposed to do on this day if the rites of Sukkot do not apply? You'd think that Scripture would be full of detail here, but alas it gives us very little! In fact Shemini Atzeret is only mentioned twice in the whole of Scripture outside of the initial commandment to gather together on this day in Vayikra 23:26. The first of these two references is found in Divrei Hayamim Bet 7 in relation to Shlomo's construction of the First Temple. As we read, "So Shlomo celebrated the festival at that time for seven days, together with all Isra'el, an enormous gathering; [they had come all the way] from the entrance of Hamat to the Vadi [of Egypt]. On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, having observed the dedication of the altar for seven days and the festival for seven days. Then, on the twenty-third day of the seventh month, he sent the people away to their tents full of joy and glad of heart for all the goodness Adonai had shown to David, to Shlomo and to Isra'el his people." According to this text Shlomo the dedication of the Temple coincided with Sukkot and sacrifices were offered on the new altar during every day of that festival. Afterwards on the 'eighth day' they held a 'solemn assembly'. So not much to go on there. What did they do at their 'solemn assembly'? We don't know. The only other reference to Shemini Atzeret is found in the parallel account of the Temple's consecration in Mlkakhim Alef 8. Here we are told, "So Shlomo celebrated the festival at that time. All Isra'el, a huge gathering [that had come all the way] from the entrance of Hamat to the Vadi [of Egypt], celebrated with him before Adonai our God for seven days and then for seven more days — fourteen days in all. On the eighth day he sent the people away. They blessed the king and returned to their tents full of joy and glad of heart for all the goodness Adonai had shown to

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David his servant and to Isra'el his people." Interestingly this passage, in contrast to the former passage, does not mention that the people held a 'solemn assembly' on the eighth day, but rather that Shlomo sent the people away on this day. So did the people celebrate Shemini Atzeret or not? This is one of the many small but important details that Chronicles and Kings are in apparent contradiction with each other over. An interesting point to note in relation to this is that Kings and Chronicles were written in different periods of time. Kings was written before the Babylonian exile in the late Judean period while Chronicles was written after the return from Babylon. As such we often find differences not only of record but of interpretation between them. One example of this difference between pre and post exilic texts is fairly stunning and certainly challenges the way that we read Scripture and understand the evolution of theological ideas within it. In the account of David's taking a census which brought down upon Israel God's wrath we find it written in Shmuel Bet 24 that, "The anger of Adonai blazed up against Isra'el, so he moved David to act against them by saying, "Go, take a census of Isra'el and Y'hudah." In this account it is the Lord that seeks a pretext to judge Israel so he moves David to take a census. However in the post-exilic account in Divrei Hayamim Alef 21 we read that, "The Adversary [Heb. HaSatan] now rose up against Isra'el and incited David to take a census of Isra'el. David said to Yo'av and the leaders of the people, "Go, take a census of Isra'el from Be'er-Sheva to Dan; then report to me, so that I can know how many of them there are." Differences in the theologies of pre and post exilic Judaism are evidenced in many other texts too. The point of this in relation to the account of Shlomo's observance or non-observance of Shemini Atzeret is that it was among the exiled Babylonian community that the system of the annual cycle of Torah readings originated and the 'eighth day' became the day upon which the annual cycle both ended and recommenced. Perhaps this is why the post-exilic text, reflecting the attitudes of the Babylonian community, makes more of Shemini Atzeret than the pre-exilic one? The particular practice followed by most modern Jewish communities today of dividing the Torah into 54 weekly parashiyot or sections for public reading is actually derived from this Babylonian practice. It stemmed from the fact that in certain years there are 54 days of Shabbat. This is possible only in a leap year which contains 13 lunar months, and even then provided that hardly any festivals occur on Shabbat. In a year that has fewer Shabbat days, as is the case in most years, two consecutive parashiyot are joined in accordance with predetermined rules so that the entire reading will be concluded within one year and by a fixed date in the calendar, i.e. Shemini Atzeret. Not that the annual reading cycle was practiced everywhere. There is some evidence that in other places, even in the land of Israel during the period of the Sages, a different mode of reading from the Torah was practiced, referred to somewhat inaccurately as the 'triennial cycle'. Here, too, the Torah was read publicly in sequence, but it was divided into a greater number of readings called sedarim - derived from the Hebrew word for 'order'. The length of each seder and the overall number of sedarim in the Torah varied from one synagogue to another. That which was read in one synagogue on Shabbat was not necessarily identical to that read on the same Shabbat in another synagogue. While this flexible reading system might have fitted the needs of individual synagogues it was awkward in the sense it could not meet the requirements of the

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Galut where a national religious system was required which held together communities spread over distant locations. This, then, seems to be the reason that the Babylonian cycle of Torah readings eventually won out over the Triennial one, in the Twelfth Century CE. From then on all any Jew attending synagogue anywhere in the world would hear the entire Torah every year, and this is why we here today are celebrating Simchat Torah as we too complete the annual cycle of readings and begin it again. Not that, as is apparent from Divrei Hayamim Bet, this day would have been known to our ancestors as Simchat Torah. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that this title came later and that in antiquity this day was still known as Shemini Atzeret. As in fact we find in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 31a), "On the last Festival day of Sukkot, i.e., the Eighth Day of Assembly, they read the portion of "All the firstborns," starting with the portion of "You shall tithe," since it includes many mitzvot and statutes relating to gifts for the poor, who should be helped during this period of rejoicing, and it concludes with the halakhot governing firstborns (Deuteronomy 14:22–16:17). And they read as the haftara the portion of "And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying" (I Kings 8:54–9:1), which occurred on that day. On the next day, the second day of the Eighth Day of Assembly in the Diaspora, they read the portion of "And this is the blessing" (Deuteronomy, chapters 33–34) until the end of the Torah, and they read as the haftara "And Solomon stood" (I Kings 8:22–53)." What is noticeable here is that as late as the Babylonian Talmud which dates to the fourth century the eighth day was not referred to as Simchat Torah but as Shemini Atzeret - literally the 'eighth day'. It is also apparent that in lieu of direct Biblical commandment as to what to do on that day Judaism had developed traditions, the foremost of which, as we have heard, was the end of the old and the beginning of the new annual cycle of readings. It wasn't until perhaps medieval times that the name Simchat Torah began to be used and would eventually replace Shemini Atzeret in common usage. This name, 'rejoicing over the law' appropriately summed up the by now developed practices and traditions. Thus where Torah and Scripture gave no detail as to the practices of this day our Jewish people had innovated and given additional meaning and purpose. The reading of the end of Devarim and the beginning of Bresheet effectively became part of a covenant ceremony akin to that described in Devarim where Moshe enrolled a later generation into the covenant with God. As we read, "Today you are standing, all of you, before Adonai your God — your heads, your tribes, your leaders and your officers — all the men of Isra'el, along with your little ones, your wives and your foreigners here with you in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water. The purpose is that you should enter into the covenant of Adonai your God and into his oath which Adonai your God is making with you today, so that he can establish you today for himself as a people, and so that for you he will be God — as he said to you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov. But I am not making this covenant and this oath only with you. Rather, I am making it both with him who is standing here with us today before Adonai our God and also with him who is not here with us today."

As you will perhaps know the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai had long since been interpreted by the sages as a marriage service between God and Israel, with the

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commandments serving as the keutbah or marriage certificate. The cloud which Torah states hung over the mountain for many days was thereby understood to be akin to the chuppah or canopy under which Jewish men and women marry. Indeed, according to the traditional marriage service a bride will walk seven times in a circle around groom under the canopy. This circling is said to correspond to the Sheva Brakhot or seven wedding blessings and demonstrates that the groom is the centre of the Brides' life. The seven circles are also said to recall the seven times Yehoshua had to walk around the ancient city of Yericho before the walls fell and the Israelites were able to capture it. So, too, after the bride walks around the groom seven times, the walls between them will fall and their souls will be united. The circling represents a seven-fold bond which marriage will establish between the bride and groom and their families. This act also recalls the seven times that the Tefillin straps are wrapped around a man's arm. Just as a man binds himself in love to God, so is his bond in love to his bride. The number seven also has spiritual power and significance in Judaism. It is the number of God and therefore of completeness or perfection. The number seven represents the completion of the seven day process in which earth was created. During these seven days, the earth revolved on its axis seven times. Since marriage reenacts the creative process, the Kallah's encirclement symbolises the repetition of these seven earthly rotations. In view of this and with the purpose of constituting Simchat Torah as a covenant ceremony like marriage it is the practice in many congregations for the Torah to be encircled seven times by the congregation, with all of this taking place under a chuppah erected in the synagogue especially for the purpose. Moreover, those invited to read from Devarim, completing the previous year's cycle of readings, and from Bresheet, beginning the next, are known as the Chatan Torah and Chatan Bresheet. To be asked to be a Chatan Torah or Chatan Bresheet is a great honour bestowed by the community upon people regarded as Torah scholars since they are understood to represent the community before God in the covenant marriage service. In fact the Hebrew word 'chatan' means bridegroom further underlining the concept of Simchat Torah as a marriage service. As Rav Ben-Zion Elgazi has written, "The idea of marriage is communicating and joining with the heart and soul. Chatanei Torah are messengers of the congregation to demonstrate to the people continuous dedication to the Torah, an aspect of "I betrothed you forever." (Hoshea 2:21) The dancing and merry making which surround the service are thus consciously reminiscent of that which is to be found at any Jewish wedding. Simchat Torah is to be a truly joyous occasion marking the eternal union between God and the Jewish people.

And that is why we are here today. We rejoice too as with our brothers and sisters everywhere we celebrate the completion of Devarim, the end of the cycle we began last year, and the beginning of Bresheet, the beginning of the new one. This is a time when we not only celebrate the cycle of Torah readings, but reflect on our relationship with God and the Torah. However you understand Torah, as perhaps a one off revelation or alternatively as a progressive development of inspired Jewish thought, now is the time to recommit to it in the service of God and of our fellow human beings. Torah is deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness, even, surprisingly for many secular or atheistic Jews. It is what has made us

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and shaped us so that we are the people who we are today - a people with a deep sense of social conscience and commitment to improving the lives of all human beings whether they are Jewish or not. And all of this in the service of God. As Rav Hillel said, the message of the Torah may be easily summed up in this way, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." Likewise Yeshua said, "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that sums up the teaching of the Torah and the Prophets." Imagine what both you and I, not to mention the whole world, could be if we all lived according to these Golden Rules! Imagine the power to build up and to heal that could be unleashed if we allowed this conception of Torah to govern our consciousness and actions? Would we not see the visions of the Biblical prophets fulfilled? Wouldn't nations turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks? Wouldn't the lion lie down with the lamb? Far from Torah being done away with what we need is to establish Torah, for without it what kind of hope for a life of fullness and blessing can we or our children or our children's children have? And that is why we are here today. For the life and the blessing!