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Rabbi Packouz's



Shabbat
Shalom
Weekly

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Simchat Torah

GOOD MORNING! This Friday evening, October 9th, begins Shemini Atzeret, followed by Simchat Torah on the following night. In Israel, Simchat Torah is observed concurrently with Shemini Atzeret since they celebrate only one day of *Yom Tov* (holiday). However, outside of Israel we celebrate two days of *Yom Tov* -- and they are celebrated on separate days.

Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah is actually a separate festival which happens to be adjacent to Sukkot, a fact which is lost on many – including myself at one point. Many decades ago, I took a walk on the golf course near my home. Midway through my walk I was called over by one of the elderly groundskeepers who hopped off his riding mower to come over and talk to me.

I was pretty sure he was going to scold me for walking on the golf course (pedestrians on the paved pathways of the course were not welcome), but

as it turn out he was just a little bored and wanted to chat. Seeing that I was an Orthodox Jew, he mentioned to me that he had worked in a synagogue for thirty-five years. At this point I was beginning to get a little bored myself, but what he said next intrigued me:

"I bet that I know more of the Jewish holidays than you do!" I smiled smugly as I thought to myself, "What a fool. There is **NO WAY** he could possibly know more Jewish holidays than me."

Seeing my self-assured smile he challenged me: "Go ahead – name the holidays you know."

Barely able to keep my eyes from rolling (I was seventeen after all) I began, "Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot..." "Go on" he said to me. I continued "Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur..." He urged me further, "Keep going." I then went on to mention the rabbinic holidays of Chanukah and Purim. "Still missing one!" I looked at him blankly, "Tu B'shvat?"

"No!" he said triumphantly. "YOU FORGOT SIMCHAT TORAH!" I looked at him in complete shock – he was absolutely right! Simchat Torah is not part of the Sukkot holiday, a fact that had completely slipped my mind.

I learned two very valuable lessons that day: 1) Never be overconfident in what you think you know, and even more importantly 2) **Never** underestimate what someone else can teach you – even if your teacher appears to you in the disheveled torn clothes of a groundskeeper.

Simchat Torah is a day when we celebrate our relationship with the Torah. In non-pandemic times, everyone attends the synagogue and there is much merriment: All are encouraged to be called up to the Torah – even young children! Attendees to the celebration in the synagogue literally dance circles around the synagogue – this is known as *HaKafot*.

Everyone has an opportunity to dance with the Torah and many synagogues break out the booze during the festivities. Which reminds me of the following story:

In a certain small shtetl in Poland, Simchas Torah was celebrated in a legendary manner that included liberal amounts of drinks all around. One year the rabbi's wife finally had enough; she prohibited the rabbi from imbibing on the holiday and she made sure that all of the rabbi's adherents were aware of her disallowance.

What were the rabbi's followers to do? They earnestly wanted their rabbi to inspire them with some meaningful message on Simchat Torah and a little "schnapps" always seemed to help him open up and deliver an inspiring sermon. But the rabbi's wife was watching them with eagle-eyed alertness.

Zalmy, the rabbi's *shamash* (sexton) had an idea; he went outside and poured 6 oz of very strong schnapps into 8 oz of milk. He went back in to the synagogue and handed the rabbi what appeared to be a large glass of milk. The rabbi's wife nodded approvingly.

The rabbi drank it down and his eyes opened very widely. He called over his *shamash* and asked him to lean down so that he could tell him something. The *shamash* bent over, eagerly awaiting to hear the rabbi's pearls of wisdom. The rabbi whispered earnestly in his ear;

"Zalmy – whatever you do, don't sell that cow!"

All kidding aside, Simchat Torah is an extremely important holiday; it is the day that we celebrate the Torah and our connection to it.

On Simchat Torah every synagogue in the world completes the yearly cycle of the weekly Torah reading and promptly begins the next cycle. We read the last Torah portion in Deuteronomy, *Vezot Habracha*, and then begin immediately with *Bereishit*, starting the book of Genesis. Thus, Simchat Torah is a celebration of both completing the Torah and starting it again!

The evening and again the next morning are filled with dancing and songs rejoicing in the Torah and thanking God for the Torah and the opportunity of being Jewish! If you take your kids to synagogue twice a year – one time should be Simchat Torah!

One may wonder, why did our sages see fit to designate a separate day for Simchat Torah? Would not Shavuot, the day we received the Torah, be a more appropriate time for this celebration?

The Talmud instructs a father that as soon as his child is able to speak, he should teach him, “*The Torah that Moses commanded us is a heritage to the Congregation of Jacob.*” Why is this the verse selected when there are earlier verses in the Torah that convey a similar message (e.g. “*This is the Torah that Moses placed before Children of Israel...*”)?

To address these two questions I will (very) briefly explain the difference between Shavuot and Simchat Torah. Shavuot is the day that we became betrothed to the Almighty, as it were, and we received the Ten Commandments as a sign of that commitment. This is why the sin of the Golden Calf was so bitterly painful; we had strayed and betrayed our “marital” commitment to the Almighty. This is also why Moses shattered the original tablets when he discovered our infidelity.

As previously mentioned, on Simchat Torah we read the final portion in the Torah known as *Vezot Habracha*. It begins with the blessings that Moses gives to the Jewish people and each tribe right before he dies. Then Moses ascends Mt. Nebo where the Almighty shows him all of the land the Jewish people are about to inherit. He dies, is buried in the valley in an unknown spot, and the Jewish people mourn for 30 days.

The Torah then concludes with the words, “Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Almighty had known face to face...”

As long as Moses was alive we had a living connection to the Almighty; someone who could speak directly to Him. If there was ever a question of law Moses simply asked God for clarification. Once Moses died there was no longer a direct link to the Almighty and we, the Jewish people became the final arbiters of the Torah and what it requires of us.

In other words, on Simchat Torah we celebrate the betrothal of the Torah to the Jewish people (as opposed to Shavuot, when we were betrothed to the Almighty). This is why many of the customs like *Chatan Torah* and *Chatan Bereishit* are referred to in that manner (*chatan* referring to a groom). It really is a marriage celebration!

According to our sages this is hinted to in the verse; “*The Torah that Moses commanded us is a heritage to the Congregation of Jacob.*” The Hebrew word for heritage is *morasha*; the sages teach us that word can be read as *m’orasa* – which means betrothed. Once Moses dies the Jewish people have an eternal bond of betrothal to the Torah by being the final arbiters of what it means and requires of us. This truly is something special to celebrate!

Yizkor, the memorial service for parents and relatives – and Jews who have been killed because they were Jewish or in defending the Jewish people and Israel – is said on Shabbat morning, October 10th. A 24-hour memorial candle (or *yahrzeit* candle) should be lit on Friday night before sundown.



TORAH PORTION OF THE WEEK

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

This Shabbat is Shemini Atzeret, the concluding Yom Tov of the Sukkot holiday. We read *Deuteronomy* 14:22-16:17, which includes the topics of:

tithing crops, remission of loans during the *Shemithah* year, to be warm-hearted and open handed to the destitute, Jewish bondsman, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, and going to Jerusalem for the *Shelosh Regalim* (the three pilgrimage festivals: Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) with offering to celebrate the festivals.

Sunday, October 11th, is Simchat Torah. We read *V'Zot HaBracha* to complete the Book of Deuteronomy and thus the whole Torah. This Torah portion begins with the blessing of Moses, right before he dies, for the Jewish people and each tribe. Moses ascends Mt. Nebo and, as mentioned above, he dies and is buried in the valley in an unknown spot. The Jewish people mourn for 30 days. The Torah concludes with the words, "Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Almighty had known face to face..." and then we start again the yearly cycle of reading the Torah with the reading of *Bereishit*, Genesis!

“ Quote of the Week ”

Judaism is absolutely incompatible with the abandonment of the Torah.

– Solomon Schechter

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

