

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The last portion of the Torah includes one of its more esoteric phrases-"eish da'at, the fiery law." (Deuteronomy 33:2) The Midrash concludes that this phrase is a description of the Torah. In its words: "eish shahor al gabei eish lavan." The Torah is written "black fire on white fire." (Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis 1) What exactly does this mean?

On the simplest level, black fire refers to the letters of Torah, the actual words, which are written in the scroll. The white refers to the spaces between the letters. Together the black letters and white spaces between them constitute the "whole" of the Torah.

On another level, the black fire represents the p'shat, the literal meaning of the text. The rabbis point to the importance of p'shat when stating "the text cannot be taken out of its literal meaning." The white fire, however, represents ideas that goes beyond the p'shat. It refers to ideas that we bring into the text when we interact with it. This is called d'rash-interpretations, applications, and teachings that flow from the Torah. The d'rash are the messages we read between the lines.

On yet another level, the black letters represent thoughts which are intellectual in nature, whether p'shat or d'rash. The white spaces, on the other hand, represent that which goes beyond the world of the intellect. The black letters are limited, limiting and fixed. The white spaces catapult us into the realm of the limitless and the ever-changing, ever-growing. They are the story, the song, the silence. Sometimes I wonder which speaks more powerfully, the black, rationalistic letters or the white, mystical spaces between them.

Most of the Torah is made up of prose, the narrative of the text. The large majority of our portion is not prose-it is rather poetry. The rabbis speak of Divine poetry as black letters resting on the frame of the white empty spaces. "Half bricks on whole bricks," the Talmud notes. (Rashi, Megillah 16b. sv. I'veinah) It's the white fire that gives the black fire its foundation. In fact the spaces in the Torah take up twice the amount

of place as the actual letters, perhaps indicating that at times it is of greater importance.

Interestingly, water is the first element mentioned in the Torah; (Genesis 1:2) while fire-eish da'at-is the last. There is a marked difference between them. Of course, Torah is often compared to water, both are crucial to life and have endless depth.

Still, water flows toward the lowest level, while fire seeks a higher plateau. It reaches high, higher, and higher still, burning past our eyes and ears into our hearts and souls and memories. It soars heavenward, linking the finite human being with the infinite G-d.

Such is the power of eish da'at-the fiery law-the Torah. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Are we happy yet? By the time we reach Shemini Atzeres, we have already experienced the full week of Succos, "zeman simchaseinu," the time of our gladness. And when we are in a good mood, we are such pleasant company that G-d asks us to stay with Him another day, either in Yerushalayim (when the Temple will be rebuilt), or by taking another day off from the rest of the world (i.e. work) and spending it undertaking spiritual endeavors. This additional day, also "zeman simchaseinu," is Shemini Atzeres.

Outside of Israel, we are lucky enough to get two additional days (an ironic benefit of not making Aliyah, although we may have more of a need for the advantages an extra "holy" day brings), and even though they are both officially "Shemini Atzeres," the second day has become known as "Simchas Torah." (In Israel everything done on Simchas Torah is done on the one day of Shemini Atzeres.) On Simchas Torah we finish the yearly cycle of Torah readings, thereby finishing (and then starting again) the entire Torah. We rejoice with the Torah, singing and dancing for hours and hours, expressing our happiness for having reached this milestone and for being connected to the Torah and its values. Nevertheless, there is one part of Simchas Torah that can have the opposite effect, bringing about feelings of melancholy rather than joy.

"And there Moshe died" (Devarim 34:5). The Torah ends with the death of our greatest leader and

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prophet, the only human being to communicate with G-d "face-to-face," the one who G-d chose to take us out of Egypt and give us the Torah through. How can we maintain our level of joy while reading about the end of Moshe's life, a source of sadness and mourning?

On one hand, Moshe's death really only signifies the death of his physical body. His soul lives on eternally, and since that is the only thing of any real importance, perhaps it is misguided to have the reminder of his death take anything away from our simcha. However, that is true regarding *anybody's* death, and while the soul continuing on is certainly a source of consolation, it does not detract from the loss of our ability to gain more from what the person (in this case Moshe) would have been able to contribute or from what he still would have been able to accomplish in this world of "asiya" (action) regarding his own growth, had his death not occurred.

On the other hand, Moshe is different than most in that he is identified more for what he helped others accomplish than for what he accomplished for himself. To this day the Torah is referred to as "Toras Moshe," the Torah of Moshe (since it was given through him), and "The Five books of Moses." From that standpoint, Moshe's death is not as devastating, as the Torah he taught us lives on to this very day. "Even what a faithful student asks his teacher was taught to Moshe by G-d" (Tanchuma, Ki Sisa 17). The words Moshe spoke to the nation before his death still speak to us today. The reason his death can affect us so greatly thousands of years after its occurrence is precisely because it is as if he was still with us as we read the portions in the Torah about the exodus from Egypt, the receiving of the Torah and the trials and tribulations during the 40 years in the desert.

The tinge of sorrow felt as we read of Moshe's death stems from his (and our) connection to the Torah. We felt as if Moshe was still alive because of his role as the lawgiver. In the end, this is really a source of simcha, a true simchas haTorah, for by becoming connected to the Torah we become part of eternity, part of a chain going back through the generations that unites us as a people and unites us with our Creator. Just as Moshe transcended the mundane to become synonymous with Torah, we can transcend the mundane by learning Torah and living by its teachings.

Simchas Torah is about rejoicing with the Torah, by appreciating its importance in our lives and to our existence. There is no better example of this than Moshe Rabbeinu, who continues to live on in our lives through the Torah. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The truest essence of reality is not necessarily that which meets the eye; indeed, most things and most of us are not what we appear to be. Our most profound statement of faith, the biblical verse "Hear O Israel the Lord our G-d the Lord is One", is always recited while covering one's eyes with one's hand. It seems to me that this is in order to teach us not to be distracted by what we see. The world of G-d is the world of the inner dimension, the soul rather than the face of the human being, the inner reality rather than the mask for the outside world.

This entire Holy Day period, beginning with Rosh Hashana and culminating with Simchat Torah, is dedicated to the inner self and to the essential soul of things. The piercing sound of the shofar resonates with the inner cry of the human being; the liturgical poems remind us that the Almighty "searches the inner feelings of every human being" and we express on this day our deepest fears as well as our innermost desires. On Yom Kippur each of us stands before the Almighty bereft of his/her physical trappings and even minimal bodily comforts such as food and drink. It is our inner soul that stands before the Almighty ready to be purified.

In a similar vein, it may be said that the Jewish calendar establishes two celebrations for two aspects of the Torah—or, if you will, a separate celebration for each one of our two Torahs (Torot). The festival of Weeks, which we celebrate in the spring, marks the Revelation at Sinai when G-d first presented to us His Torah. But that was an external Torah, given amidst an "external extravaganza" of thunder and fire and sounds (kolot) which were to be seen by the eye. On Yom Kippur Moses received the second Torah, but this time in the midst of Divine silence and in the lonely splendor of intimacy with the Divine. Indeed, the Sages of the Midrash teach that the first Torah did not include the Oral Law, which is actually the innermost dimension of Torah which can only be heard and extracted by those who are privy to the inner voice of the Torah secrets. It is not by accident that the first tablets were broken whereas the second are eternal and indestructible. It is not by accident that forty days after the first Revelation the Israelites worshipped the golden calf whereas the second Torah remains our eternal symbol of Divine love and forgiveness.

These two Torot, the outer and the inner, are expressed in the K'tiv and Kri of the Torah as we experience it. The K'tiv literally means the "writing", the

black letters as they appear in the Torah Scroll; the Kri is the way Tradition mandates that we read those letters, sometimes in a different way than we would expect. One might say that the Ktiv is the external Torah and the Kri its internal counterpart. I would submit that on Simchat Torah we celebrate the inner Torah, the Oral Torah, the Kri.

Joy, or simcha, also has an external form as well as an internal essence "a beautiful wife, a beautiful house and beautiful objects enlarge the horizons of an individual", teach our Sages. Conventional wisdom would suggest that these three adornments bring joy and happiness. Nevertheless our Torah mandates that during the Festival of Joy, the holiday of Sukkot which leads directly into Simchat Torah, we take leave of our fancy homes and expensive furniture and move into what appears to be a most temporary and inadequate dwelling place. The message is indubitably clear: true joy is not a function of what we have but of who we are. It has nothing to do with the size of our chandeliers but rather with the presence of the Divine; it is not a function of expensive silverware, but is the result of hosting Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David in our Sukkah. In the words of the psalmist: "one thing do I ask G-d and only this do I request. Allow me to live in the house of G-d all the days of my life and to experience the sweetness of G-d". The essence of Sukkah joy is: "if a husband and wife are in love, they can sleep on the edge of a plow and be very comfortable; if they are not in love, their bed can be 60 cubits wide and it is too small". This message is further underscored by the citron (Etrog), which is one of the four species we must bless during the Sukkot festival. Interestingly enough, the citron is biblically described as being the fruit of a beautiful tree. Externally speaking, beauty is usually thought of being that which is fresh and expensive. Our sages identify the citron as beautiful because it remains on the tree from year to year—that is, it is faithful and constant and because the taste of the tree and the fruit are the same—that is, it's offspring retain the same qualities as the forbears. Obviously the citron is teaching the lesson of internal beauty.

Finally, on Simchat Torah we read of the death of Moses. Moses' life also has a K'tiv and Kri, an external form and an internal essence. From a rather simplistic external perspective, one might conclude that Moses was a tragic personality. He began his life amidst the wealth and fame of Pharaoh's palace, a veritable prince in Egypt. He concluded his life while wandering in the desert, without even a solid roof over his head. His goal had been to take the Israelites into the Promised Land. At their crucial moment of truth, they refused to rise to the Divine challenge. After a series of quarrelsome rebellions and forty two different temporary destinations, Moses departs from his people

and the physical world without even a cemetery monument to mark his memory.

The truth however resides in the Kri of Moses' life, the internal essence which follows us and which we follow to this day. It was Moses who spoke to G-d face—to—face as it were, and forged a slave people into a G-d infused nation. If Moses' words were not always heard by his generation, his message reverberates throughout all the Jewish generations. We celebrate the Torah even as we read of Moses' death because for us Moses never died; his grave is unmarked because through the words of the Torah that he communicated to us he lives and we live eternally. Moses in essence resides in his inner message, the Torah which remains his eternal legacy. It is this Torah over which we rejoice on Simchat Torah. © 2000 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Succot festival will end this coming week with the special holiday of Simchat Torah. Whereas on Shavuot we commemorate the anniversary of the granting of Torah to Israel at Mount Sinai, on Simchat Torah we simply rejoice in the fact that we possess the holy Torah. But the celebration on Simchat Torah, like all Jewish commemorative events that have survived the test of time and changing societal circumstances, follows a ritual, a halachic standard. What makes Simchat Torah different from all other holidays in the Jewish calendar year is that it has no basis in biblical, Talmudic or rabbinic literature. It is a holiday of custom and folklore that emanated from within the Jewish people - a popular invention of Israel to express its love and appreciation for Torah.

Most of the customs that form the basis of the Simchat Torah celebration arose between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in Central Europe and then spread throughout the remainder of the Jewish world. The centerpiece of Simchat Torah is the fact that the Torah readings of the year, read publicly every Sabbath throughout the year, comes to its conclusion on Simchat Torah. The ancient custom of Babylonian Jewry to complete the reading of the Torah every year - the custom of the Jews in the Land of Israel was to complete the Torah reading cycle every three years - was adopted by world Jewry in the fifth century. When the Jews went into exile from their homeland of the Land of Israel, they also adopted the custom of keeping a second day of the holidays as per the Talmud. Thus, Shmini Atzeret, the eighth day of Succot, so to speak, (in reality, Shmini Atzeret is technically a holiday all unto itself) also had a second day added to it in the Exile. Since Shmini Atzeret itself had no special mitzvot connected to it except that of rejoicing, the Jewish people took the second day of Shmini Atzeret and converted it into Simchat Torah and a day of great

rejoicing because of the Torah. In present-day Israel, where only one day of the holiday is observed, Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated simultaneously on the same day.

On Simchat Torah, everyone in the synagogue receives the honor of being called for an aliyah to the Torah. Thus the final portion of the Torah is read many times over on that day in order to accommodate this custom, this in spite of the fact that such repetitions are frowned upon on other occasions of the Torah reading throughout the year. The final person called to complete the Torah reading is called the "Chatan Torah" - the bridegroom of the Torah. A tallit is spread over the "Chatan" and the Torah and serves as a "chupah" - a wedding canopy, symbolizing the eternal love bond between the Torah and the people of Israel. The cycle of the reading of the Torah is now commenced immediately and another chatan - "Chatan Bereshith" is called to the Torah and the first section of the Torah, Bereshith, is now read aloud, again under the canopy of the tallit. The Torah reading itself is preceded by seven "hakafot" - circling processions of those in the synagogue carrying all of the the Torahs from the ark of the synagogue. The "hakafot" are accompanied by song and dance (and unofficially, liquid refreshment) and a great spirit of merriment and joy. A special aliyah to the Torah that includes all of the children present, even infants, takes place. It is deemed a particular honor for the adult who leads the children in the blessings over the Torah and this aliyah, called "Kal Hanarim," signifies the continuity of Torah study and observance among the Jewish people over all of its generations. It is the guarantee of our future, for as long as there is Torah amongst Israel and the love of that Torah is transmitted to our children, Israel will survive and prosper. Jews who tragically lose their connection to Torah inevitably disappear from the Jewish scene. Simchat Torah is the day of connection to Torah. It should therefore never be ignored or forgotten. © 2002 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

THE AISHDAS SOCIETY

Aspalaria

by Rabbi Micha Berger

R' JB Soloveitchik frames his Jewish thought and his perspective on mitzvos about tensions between various dialectics inherent in the human condition. Conflicting truths about man that are somehow both true.

For example, people construct a society in order to better serve their needs. And yet, man's highest calling is to serve the society, rather than themselves.

Perhaps the most classical such dialectic is the distinction Rabbi Soloveitchik draws between Adam as he is portrayed in the creation story in Genesis 1 and Adam as portrayed in Genesis 2. Adam I is at the culmination of creation. All builds up to him. He is charged "to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and master it." Man the engineer and technologist, forming the world to serve his needs. Majestic Man.

In Genesis 2, we're given a different view. From the time of his creation, Adam is in communication is G-d. "It is not good for man to be alone", so Hashem creates a woman "therefore man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife." This is a person as relying on his relationships and brings value to his life and the world through them. Adam II is Covenantal Man, who seeks redemption.

Succos is very much Adam II's holiday. The farmer, having just brought in his crop, has a propensity to credit himself for his success. Succos re-addresses that, by reminding him that it's not his mastery alone that brings food to the table. The succah teaches that it's not his fine house and the engineering it represents that bring security to his life.

There is a dispute between R' Eliezer and R' Akiva (Succah 11b) as to the nature of the succos in the desert that the mitzvah actually commemorates. According to R' Eliezer (and Unkelus Vayikra 23:42, as well as the Shulchan Aruch O"Ch 625¹, Gr"a ad loc), the original succos were clouds of glory. According to R' Akiva, they were actual huts.

Perhaps they're basing themselves on different ideas about the significance of the succah. In R' Eliezer's opinion, the succah is commemorating Hashem's gifts to us. It's to remind us that there is a Covenantal Partner in our efforts. R' Akiva has the original succah being the product of a partnership. Man builds, but it's Hashem who insures the success of that building. R' Eliezer focuses on our Partner, R' Akiva on our willingness to join the Convenantal relationship. (See Aruch haShulchan O"Ch 625.)

Each speaks to the farmer celebrating his harvest as he gathers it at the end of the year. One speaks of the role of bitachon, trust in G-d, which may otherwise be forgotten. The other speaks of the appropriate end-state, of the synthesis of bitachon and hishtadlus, personal effort.

"And a mist came up from the ground, and gave moisture to the whole face of the earth." - Genesis 2:6 "And a mist came up from the ground': For the topic of the creation of man. He raised the tehom [groundwater?] and gave moisture to clouds to wet the earth and to make man. Like one who kneads bread, who adds water and after that kneads the dough. So too here, 'He gave moisture' and then 'He formed'." - Rashi ad loc

"And Hashem E-lokim formed the man, dust from the ground, and He breathed in his nose a living soul; and the man was a living spirit." Genesis, *ibid* v. 7

"Dust from the ground": He collected dust from the whole earth, all four directions... Another opinion, He took his dust from the place about which it says 'an altar of earth you shall make for Me.' He said, 'If only the dirt would be an atonement for him, and he would be able to stand.'" - Rashi *ad loc*

In his work "Pachad Yitzchak", R' Yitzchak Hutner notes the steps of creation of man, according to this second opinion in Rashi. First, G-d adds water to the earth to make clay, then He forms man and breathes a soul into him.

R' Hutner writes that this is exactly what we recreate during the *nisuch hamayim* (water libation on the altar). The *kohein* pours water on the very spot Hashem did. This is accompanied by the *simchas beis hasho'eivah*, celebration and singing. Music is the most spiritual of the seven wisdoms. It speaks and moves the soul on a fundamental level. Through the *Simchas Beis haSho'evah* we imitate G-d's breathing a soul into Adam.

We just came from Yom Kippur and *teshuvah*. When Hashem fulfills His promise "And I will give you a new heart, and place a new spirit within you." (Yechezkel 36:26) *Simchas Beis haSho'eivah* is a celebration of man's ability to recreate himself, and therefore follows the steps of our original creation.

To continue R' Hutner's thought with a couple of my own, in light of the above: Repentance too can be seen in both R' Eliezer's and R' Akiva's perspectives. One can seek atonement from Hashem, and thereby realize the need to have a partnership with Him. Or, one can seek atonement from the partnership itself. As the same R' Akiva says, "Praised are you Israel. Before Whom do you atone, and Who atones you." Atonement is both done by man through the Divine Presence, and is a gift from Him. A dialectic.

I would like to suggest one additional point. This description is from the second chapter of Genesis, it's the telling of the creation of Adam II. It's not merely the celebration of our recent re-creation, it's the celebration of our creation as beings in a covenantal partnership with the A-Imighty. And therefore, it's not only on Succos as a postscript to Yom Kippur, it is a fundamental part of the message of the holiday. © 2003 *Micha Berger and The AishDas Society*

BRIJNET/UNITED SYNAGOGUE - LONDON (O)

Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, Radlett United Synagogue

When I was a little boy, twice a week my school took us to play football in the freezing cold and rain. It was an unbearable experience. I remember at the end of each afternoon the horror of struggling to do up my shirt buttons with half frozen

hands as the teacher threatened we would miss the coach home and be left stranded on the icy terraces of the school playing fields. It was a childhood nightmare, until one day I discovered the prayer for rain. Every Monday and Wednesday, I would fervently pray for enough rain in a small corner of Edgware to waterlog the pitch and save me from that humiliating experience.

Looking back, I realise that my prayers were not only a little naive they were also rather selfish. Jewish prayer is not meant to be egotistical. The Talmud rules that when we pray, we should never pray in the singular, but always use the plural; when speaking to G-d, it is inappropriate to think only of ourselves, we should think of others too.

Prayer should sensitise us to the people around us and to our G-d and this theme is found in the prayer for rain. Rashi explains that one reason that G-d chose the land of Israel for our people is that it is a place where water is scarce. Our people will constantly have to pray for this precious resource and so we will always be reminded of the G-d who sustains the world. This in turn should affect our behaviour turning us into more, caring, spiritual people.

The prayer for rain which we say on the eighth day of Sukkoth is perhaps the most democratic of our prayers. Even when we reach the end of Sukkoth, we do not request rain immediately, we merely mention it in our prayers. Only fifteen days later does the request kick in and later still in the Diaspora. The reason is that in Temple times, Sukkoth was a pilgrim festival when the entire Jewish people headed for Jerusalem to offer prayer and sacrifices to G-d. For some people, there was a long journey home. It would be insensitive for the community to pray for rain whilst these people were still trekking across the land of Israel and so the entire community waited until the last travellers had reached their destination beyond the river Euphrates before requesting rain.

On Shemini Atzeret, therefore, we do not pray for rain, we simply mention the rain in our prayers as an introduction to the ultimate request. But if Jewish days start at night, why do we only start reciting the prayer at Musaf? Wouldn't it make more sense to say it when the day starts on the preceding evening? The answer given by Rabbenu Asher is that in the evenings only a few people come to Shul. Were we to begin our prayer for rain at night, confusion and division would split the community with some people including the rain in their prayers whilst others ignored it. Even if we were to delay saying the prayer until Shacharit this would still not alleviate the problem since some people would imagine that they should have recited it the night before and this would create confusion. Therefore, for the sake of unity, we all delay reciting the prayer for the first time until Musaf. Even then, we do not mention the rain until the Chazan has announced it. The whole community must pray together in unison.

I find this an extraordinary and beautiful Halachah. It states that it is of paramount importance that the whole community pray together. We must sacrifice the recital of the prayer on the preceding evening to ensure that everyone can say the prayer simultaneously. Even when everyone has arrived in Shul for Musaf, we still do not mention the rain in our prayers until we have received our instructions from the person leading the service to ensure that it is truly a communal prayer.

It seems to me that the laws governing the prayer for rain teach us a powerful lesson. Many of our communities are undergoing a religious revival with more people learning about Judaism than ever before. It is easy for small cliques to dominate our shuls, ignoring the needs of the rest of the congregation. The prayer for rain reminds us that we have a constant responsibility to the whole community, those who live near and far, those who are religious and those who are not. Our shuls must be welcoming to them all and everyone must feel at home in our synagogues.

Detention!

by Rev Bernd Koschland—Editor—Daf Hashavua

Shemini Atzeret is a festival in its own right; hence we say shehecheyanu and also on its “second” day, Simchat Torah, unlike the last two days of Pesach when shehecheyanu is not said. As a festival, the Torah does not prescribe specific ritual other than the specific sacrifice for that day and abstention from work. Rashi has G-d saying to Israel that they should stay an extra day to make “a small banquet for Me, so that I may have some pleasure exclusively from you, Israel”. As the seventy sacrifices over the seven days of Sukkoth corresponded to the seventy nations of the world;

Sukkoth was regarded as a universal Festival (Zechariah 14:16ff, Haftarah for second day Sukkoth).

In contrast to this Midrash, Shemini Atzeret has become a Festival laden with observances: Yizkor, the prayer for rain (Tefillat Geshem), Kohelet (as this year, since there is no Shabbat Chol Hamo’ed). In Israel it is also Simchat Torah; there are Hakafot in Chassidic communities on Shemini Atzeret. Finally we eat in the Sukkah without the appropriate Berachah and during the day we take our leave of it. There are differences of custom mentioned with regard the full use of the Sukkah on Shemini Atzeret. An interesting point is mentioned in the Yosef Ometz, the Minhag Book (1) of Frankfurt-on-the-Main that the family Troyes (also known as Dreyfus) had customs regarding the Sukkah and Shemini Atzeret based on the usages of Rashi from whom they claimed decent.

The Haftarah (outside Eretz Israel) links with Shemini Atzeret in that Solomon dismissed the people on this day after the completion of the dedication of the Temple, though they waited till after Yom Tov before

going home. The next time we find Shemini Atzeret is when Ezra celebrated it “as prescribed,” i.e. with the appropriate sacrifices (Nehemiah 8). Whilst Solomon’s subjects returned home in joy, the Jews of Ezra’s celebration fasted next day to cleanse themselves of sin.

The word Atzeret means “Assembly” (Art Scroll) or “concluding festival” as well as “refraining from work.” The word also means “detaining,” as Rashi points out: G-d asked the people to “stay a day more, as it is hard for Him to part from them.” (Rashi Vayikra 23:26). Israel was “detained” on each of the three Pilgrim Festivals, the word Atzeret is used with each of them: on 7th day of Pesach they held back to sing the Shirah (Shemot 15:1ff), Shavuot is also Atzeret (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2), “detained” to receive the Torah, Shavuot being the concluding festival to Pesach; Shemini Atzeret they were “detained to party with G-d” at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple.

(1) 1637; many communities compiled a book to contain the customs peculiar to that town. © 1999 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

RABBI LEVI COOPER

For Pity’s Sake

The Bible proudly tells us that G-d does not show favor (Deuteronomy 10:17); the rich and famous are not given preferential treatment in judgment before the Almighty. In fact, scripture intimates that this attribute is what makes G-d “great, mighty and awesome.” Yet in open contradiction, the priestly blessing exhorts G-d to give special consideration to those being blessed, and even uses the same Hebrew phrase (Numbers 6:26).

The glaring paradox bothered many sages and perplexed others as well. In one place Bloriya the convert asked Rabban Gamliel about the incongruity (B. Rosh Hashana 17b-18a). Our sages offer a variety of explanations; we will focus here on one approach.

In our tractate (B. Berachot 20b) it is the ministering angels who accuse G-d of not keeping the Divine avowal against favoring: “You are partial to the Children of Israel as is evident from the priestly blessing!” G-d responds: “What do you expect, should I not favor Israel?! In my Torah I told them that after they are satiated they should bless me and they are so bighearted and careful that they recite the grace after eating a minor amount, such as an olive bulk or the volume of an egg!”

Biblical law mandates reciting a blessing after having eaten and been satiated: “When you eat and are satisfied, then you must bless G-d your Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:10). Our sages discuss whether grace should be recited after eating the equivalent of the mass of an olive or of an egg (M. Berachot 7:2). What

ever the minimum volume that requires grace, this barest amount is more like a snack rather than a feast and we would hardly expect to be sated after such a nibble.

Another source that follows a similar line has the Divine attribute of judgment accusing the Almighty of being too lenient and favoring his subjects (Tanna Dvei Eliyahu Zuta 23). Here G-d replies: "How can I not be compassionate, for when the Jewish People left Egypt they were willing to accept all the commandments. Moreover, they are willing to teach the Tradition, gather in groups to study and even pay from their own pockets to hire teachers!"

Such G-dly responses barely hold water; the perplexing contradiction remains as the Almighty appears to flout the divine rule against being partial.

Perhaps G-d is saying: "How can I not show them favor? They may not always deserve it and perhaps I should not grant it - but I cannot help myself." Parents are generally partial to their own children. Which parent doesn't think that their children are the brightest and cutest of all children? G-d - as our parent - only sees the good in us. It is as if the Almighty says: "They are my children, they are loyal to me, doing my bidding even beyond the letter of the law. Could I not favor them?"

Elsewhere in the Talmud, a tale is told of a drought (B. Ta'anit 23a). The spring was near, most of the last winter month - Adar - had passed, the rains had not arrived and the situation was grim. A message was sent to the Second Temple sage, Honi: "Pray that rain should fall." Honi acquiesced, but despite his prayers the rains did not come. He drew a circle and standing inside it, he adamantly addressed the Almighty: "Master of the universe, Your children have turned to me for I am like a family member of Yours. I swear that I will not move from here until You show mercy to your children!"

Miraculously it began to drizzle, whereupon Honi's disciples turned to him: "It appears that the rains are only falling to release you from your oath!" Once again Honi turned heavenward: "This is not what I asked for! I requested rains that will fill wells, cisterns and caverns." Torrential rains began and the students hurriedly came to Honi: "It looks like the rains are intent on destroying the world." Honi turned to the Almighty a third time: "This is not what I asked for! I expected rains that bring blessing and express goodwill."

The rains began to fall steadily, continuing until all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were forced to high ground on the Temple Mount: "Master," implored the students, "Just as you prayed for the rains to come, pray that they should cease." Honi, however, balked: "I have a tradition that we do not pray for the cessation of an abundance of good." Nevertheless, in light of the dire circumstances, Honi ordered: "Bring me a thanksgiving sacrifice." A bull was brought, and Honi placed his two hands on the animal: "Master of the

universe, Your people cannot withstand an excess of good nor an excess of punishment. If You are angry with them they cannot survive, if You are too good to them they cannot survive. May it be your will that the rains cease and there be relief in the world."

A gust of wind blew, the clouds dissipated and the sun shone. The people went out into the fields and collected truffles and mushrooms.

The leading rabbinic figure of the day, Shimon ben Shetah, sent a stern message to Honi: "If you were not Honi, I would have you excommunicated for you have taken the Heavenly keys to rain into your own hands and thus have desecrated the name of G-d with your capricious requests. But what can I do to you, for you misbehave and the Almighty fulfills your behest! You are just like a child who is naughty, yet the parents do the child's bidding."

In the liturgy of the High Holy Days we often recall the duality of our relationship with the Almighty. G-d is at once a master over us and a parent to us. We play the dual role of servants and of children. Yet we would undoubtedly prefer the parent-child bond over the master-serf relationship, so that when sitting in judgment, G-d feels compelled to be partial towards us, just as parents favor their children. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper teaches at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post and Up Front Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehudah Shaviv

The Torah ends with praise of Moshe: "And no other prophet arose in Yisraellike Moshe" [Devarim 34:10], continuing with a description of some of the deeds that he accomplished, "for all the signs and miracles that G-d sent him to perform in Egypt" [34:11]. The high point of the praise is the last passage: "and for the mighty hand and the great awe that he achieved in the eyes of all of Yisrael" [34:12]. What fearsome act did Moshe perform in front of the nation? According to Ibn Ezra, this refers to the gathering at Mount Sinai, a momentous occasion worthy of being remembered at the end of the Torah. On the other hand, Rashi quotes the Sifri, saying: "Moshe was inspired to break the Tablets in front of them, as is written, 'And I shattered them in front of your eyes,' and G-d agreed with his action, as is written, 'that which you shattered,' meaning that it was right to break them." But this is problematic: even if G-d accepted his initiative, is this the act that should be remembered as the highest point of Moshe's distinguished career? Should we be left at the end of the Torah with a memory of broken pieces of the Tablets?

It may be that what is unique about the shattering of the Tablets is the fact that Moshe initiated the action on his own, and not in order to fulfill a commandment of the Almighty. All other actions by Moshe were in response to a command of G-d, but this is different in that it can be attributed to Moshe himself. Moshe's action was fateful indeed, since it might have led to the destruction of the great vision of establishing a holy nation of priests. On the other hand, it also carried with it a great opportunity for rejuvenation and repentance. In any case, it was an unprecedented example of taking the initiative and shouldering responsibility. Moshe's decision to shatter the Tablets and rebuild the nation is the highlight of his varied and active life, which was emphasized by the Torah as his end approached.

Remembering this event at the end of the Torah carries with it another important message. What should one do after he has studied the Torah to the end? The fact that Moshe broke the Tablets might present a hint of the path to take. Once the Tablets were shattered, it was necessary to return to the beginning and start over again. When someone finishes the entire Torah, perhaps he is meant to consider himself as if he were standing in front of shattered Tablets, so that he must go back and start his studies again from the beginning.

DR. NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

Let us work with the SE's very first ma'amar in the section entitled 'le'sukkos'. In fact, this first ma'amar has much to tell us both about sukkos and about shemini atzeres.

The SE begins by telling us that the 8 days of Sukkos give the world its life for the entire year. That is, Sukkos is the time when the chiyus (vibrancy, life force) that HaShem ordained for the world on Rosh Hashana actually flows out to give life to all creation. The Torah provides a unique mitzva to serve as a metaphor for this feature of reality. That mitzva is Nisuch HaMayim, the ceremonial offering of water, which is poured over the Mizbei'ach (altar) on Sukkos (and only on Sukkos).

The life force that flows to the world on Sukkos is for the life of Olam HaZeh (literally: to 'this world'). But I don't think that the SE wants us to take this term literally. I conjecture that he is using the term 'Olam HaZeh' to refer to physical/material existence in general.)

Since the chiyus of sukkos is for 'olam hazeh', non-Jews, too, have access to it. The metaphor that expresses their access to HaShem on Sukkos is the Korban (offering) of 70 bulls that we bring on the mizbei'ach over the course of sukkos. How does this symbol convey that message? The format of this korban reflects the notion that 70 nations comprise all of humankind.

By contrast, the Chiyus that flows out to the world on Shemini Atzeres is for the life of Olam HaBa (literally, the 'world to come'. Again, I have the impression that the SE is using 'Olam HaBa' not in its usual sense, but rather more generally, to refer to the life of ruchniyus—spirituality). That life is uniquely for Bnai Yisroel. Why so? Because Torah is the central feature of our lives; and Torah is the form in which the world's chiyus ha'enimiyus (inner vibrancy) is expressed in this world. Life in this world is a life in which we can perceive only the world's external appearances. Thus, we see Nature, but not HaShem, who is behind Nature.

Because our perception of the world is misleading, we need protection. The SE continues, telling us that the mitzva of Sukka can provide the protection that we need if we are to live our lives in accordance with an accurate picture of reality. But how can a Sukka give us the protection necessary to function effectively in a world in which we can see only external appearances rather than true reality?

In fact, the Sukka can protect us. For the Sukka is the testimony that HaShem brings on our behalf to testify that even in this physical/material world, the central feature of our life is Torah (more generally, ruchniyus). How so? To address that critical question, the SE cites the Zohar, which refers to the Sukka as 'Tzila DiMeheimenusa'. This term is crucial for understanding the mitzva of sukka (and hence, the yom tov of Sukkos), so we should make an effort to see what it means. 'Tzila' is 'shade'—shielding us from the blazing heat of the sun. 'Di'meheimenusa' means 'of emuna'. I translate 'emuna' as 'affirmation'; i.e., our affirming the Presence of HaShem. By our willingness to dwell in the sukka, we show our awareness of HaShem's Omnipresence. Shielding us from harm.

Summing up, the SE 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!

And, concludes the SE, perhaps this is what Chazal had in mind when they said that on shemini atzeres, we dwell in the Sukka—even though, in fact, we do not! © 2001 Dr. N.C. Leff & torah.org



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