

The Essence of Shemini Atzeres

Rav Shmuel Yaakov Weinberg zt"l

(Adapted transcript of a talk given at Aish HaTorah)

Shemini Atzeres is in one sense of the word, the culmination of *Succos*, but the fact remains that it is a *Yom Tov b'fnei atzmo* (a holiday, in and of itself). *Shemini Atzeres* is not the same *Yom Tov* as *Succos* but, nevertheless, it is also *zman simchaseinu*. It has the same purpose, the same justification as *Succos* - we are to use it in the same way that we use *Succos*.

This presents something of a problem. If we need the *Succah* for *Succos* and we need a *luluv* and an *esrog* for *Succos*, then why can we do without it on *Shemini Atzeres*? And if we can do without it on *Shemini Atzeres*, then why do we need for *Succos*? Seven days we need the *Succah* and the *luluv* and *esrog* at least in some aspects, and yet on *Shemini Atzeres*, we have the same *zman simchaseinu* without these *mitzvos* that make them a reality in our existence?

Even more, other than the specific *mitzvah* of *simcha*, which is more intense on *Shemini Atzeres* than it is on other *Yom Tovim*, there is no specific *mitzvah* that *Shemini Atzeres* possesses. Jewry have crowned it, in a sense, with a specific *mitzvah*, in a sense. *Klal Yisroel* has given it a special way of being celebrated, so to speak, a special approach that will enable us to do what we ought to do, even though the Torah does not specifically provide it for it - namely that of *Simchas Torah*.

So we have to deal with both aspects of *Shemini Atzeres*. The Biblical one, which tells us to make it a time of *zman simchaseinu* without providing us with the means, the *mitzvos*, through which to specifically acquire this characteristic. And at the same time, the *minhag* of *Yisroel*, that of giving us the *simchah* of *zman simchaseinu* via that celebration of *Simchas Torah* as an adornment to *Shemini Atzeres*.

But perhaps before we do, we ought to speak of another aspect of *Succos*. The holiday of *Succos*, which is the time of our joy, *zman simchaseinu*, is specifically the *Yom Tov* that follows *Yom Kippur*. After achieving atonement, is when we can achieve *simchah*, of course. But also after atonement, is when we can dwell most comfortably in the *Succos Hashem*, with the *Ribono Shel Olam*.

Succos, specifically, during this period of perfection and of achieving joy, is the time where the *Klal Yisroel* specifically brings into its direct *avodah*, into his direct worship, his concern with all the nations of the earth. The *korbanos* of *Succos* are for all the nations of the earth. It is the *Yom Tov* specifically designated for the expression of our realization - that our obligation as a Jewish people is not to the Jewish people alone but to all the peoples of mankind, to all the nations of the earth. That ultimately this "*Bais tefillah l'kol ha'amim yikaray*", this house of worship of G-d is not a house of worship for the Jew but a house of worship to all the nations of the earth, without exception.

And that they all need this closeness to G-d, which is provided through the sacrifices. That our concern and our purpose is to bring the awareness of the truth of G-d and Torah not simply to our children and grandchildren, but to all peoples all over the globe, without exception. Which surely is the fundamental meaning of a "*mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh*," a kingdom of priests. A kingdom of priests are those who bring the knowledge of G-d to others. That's the function of

the priest. And this is the function of the Jewish people, which we carry out willingly or not by the fact of our existence as Jews and survival as Jews.

That which takes place with us as Jews is a constant, making all peoples aware of the reality of a G-d who guides and directs this world. There is no other possible explanation for the survival of the Jew and the world's reaction to the Jew. The inter-reactions between Jew and non-Jew are the greatest expression of this reality and truth, that we are a light to the nations. Sometimes as a light by the funerals of our compatriots and sometimes by what we teach and how we act. But always, willingly or not, a light to the nations. A witness to all the peoples of G-d's reality.

This being the case, we have always recognized a fundamental part of our purpose is that of serving, as it were, all the nations of the earth. The service of our being the conduit for the knowledge of G-d and truth, justice, compassion, morality, ethics to all people's without exception. But this aspect of our obligations to G-d, this aspect of our existence as a people, a nation of G-d, is specifically brought to our direct awareness particularly on *Succos*.

For us to achieve a complete joy, then it requires, of course, the fulfillment of our existence, which includes the *goy*. If it deals with joy as seeking the good and seeing all the things in their fullness, in their most valuable connotation, that's really what joy does. That's what *simchah* does. To see all that lies in each and everything as we look at it and deal with it. The world as a whole, individuals, even lands, even objects. If that is it, then, this is the time to see all the positive aspects and take into consideration that of all of humanity, of all the nations of the earth. And it is no wonder, therefore, that it is specifically on the *Yom Tov* of *Succos* that we will bring into direct articulation our obligation to all peoples, to all mankind. It is when we appreciate and recognize and understand their importance, their essential role, more than at any other time.

Having said this, we now come to the fact that *Shemini Atzeres* is described by the *Chachamim* in a very unique way, one might almost say in a sense a peculiar manner. As though the *Yom Tov* has no purpose of its own, but serves some kind of periphery purpose. Namely, the *Yom Tov* is understood to be that G-d says to His people *kusheh uloy pridaschem* - The analogy of the father who's spending a delightful, wonderful week having his children in his home. He's brought them there, taken care of them, they've had a wonderful time together and they are getting ready to leave. And then he says, please, it's so difficult for me to see you go. Give me another day. Let me have another day together. And even though this last day is not quite in the house because of the preparations to leave, but it is a last day in which I can still keep the taste of being together with you, *Kusheh uloy pridaschem*. It is so hard for me to see you leave.

What are we saying there? That *Shemini Atzeres* isn't really a day on its own, it's just like I want to stretch out the good taste of *Succos*. We've had such a wonderful time together, let me stretch out that good taste. Let me hold on to you for another day.

Now, of course, there is truth that we dwelt in His *Succos*, we dwelt in His presence. And therefore, more than other *Yom Tov* there is a sense of let's stretch it out. But it still requires some explanation - why do you want to stretch *Succos* out and not *Pesach*? Why not stretch out *Pesach*? *Kushe uloy pridaschem*. You've come to see me in a *Mikdash*, you've made the *korbanos*, you've kept the *mitzvos*, I don't want to see you go. Just because it isn't really in the *Succos*? I mean there's truth in that but surely it's not the entire truth.

There's something about the *Yom Tov* of *Succos* which particularly makes it suitable for G-d wanting to kind of stretch it out more so than in other *Yom Tovim*.

Zman simchaseinu justifies it as such. You know this is a time of seeing completeness, a time of reacting differently, and therefore we hear immediately that this is particularly a time to stretch out. But a time to stretch out means it's not real in and of itself, it's just a kind of an extension. And in order to obviate and tell you this is not the meaning, the *Chachamim* used this expression that it's a *chag b'fnei atzmo*, it's a separate *Yom Tov*. It's not *Succos* extended. It is not *Succos* without a *Succah*. It is not *Succos* without a *lulav* and *esrog*. It's *Shemini Atzeres*. It's a *Yom Tov* in its own. It's not only the extension of *Succos*. It's a real, actual *Yom Tov* independent of *Succos*, separate from *Succos*.

And yet, it is an extension of *Succos*. It's still *zman simchaseinu*. It's *kushe uloy pridaschem*. How are we going to reconcile what appears to be two contradictory views, two antithetical views? Certainly, the way we describe it, we seem to specifically describe two points of view that oppose each other.

If we're going to find a solution to this problem it's going to have to be in terms that this itself is the perfection. The perfection of, you've left my house and you're still tied to me. That's a perfection of *simchah* on its own. It is an extension of *Succos*, but this very fact of a *Succos* without a *Succah* and a *Succos* without *lulav* and *esrog* is in of itself a whole new concept, which we have to develop and reinforce in our existence and relationship with G-d.

The *kusheh uloy pridaschem* is therefore not just hang around, but it's a statement - a longing for each other. This longing for, that even when I am not in His direct presence, even in those moments in which I am involved in the mundane, even in those periods in which I am dealing with the most material of things - I'm planting, I'm reaping, I'm sowing, I'm building, I'm banging - I still retain a relationship with you. It isn't only on your *Yom Tov* and it isn't only when I'm learning your Torah. It isn't only when I am aware of your closeness and dealing directly with you, but even when I go to sleep. Even when I eat, and when I procreate. In all of these areas, when I am not directly involved in that thing which is particularly meaningful to my material existence, even then, I'm with you. Even there, I find the perfection of our relationship. That's the *kusheh uloy pridaschem*.

Kushe uloy pridaschem is not just, oh, I regret your leaving. *Kusheh uloy pridaschem* is, remember, don't leave Me wherever you go. We're together and standing together when you leave that *Succah* and when you no longer have the *lulav* and *esrog*, and when your *mitzvos* are not surrounding you directly. You are still G-d's people, relating to Him - His children whom He wants. The father whom you love and whom you go to, the center of your being, the justifier of your life, the means of your existence - no matter where you are and no matter what you're doing. It is this that is the central thought and the concept announced by *kushe uloy pridaschem*.

It's a statement on its own and a very meaningful statement and perhaps the crucial statement. So in a sense, therefore, *Shemini Atzeres* is the culmination of *Succos*. On the other hand, we need that which will remind and enable us, even not on *Succos*, to relate to this concept of G-d as a constant no matter where and no matter what we're involved in. He is the constant of our being.

It doesn't seem to be the easiest thing in the world to remember and do. What is the contact with Him that enables us to maintain this awareness even in periods that seem to be so far

away? That seems to be so non-relating to G-d, like it would appear, that we're stuffing our mouths and stomachs.

Well, that's the whole point, don't stuff your mouths and stomachs. Eat - and in that eating, reach out to G-d as well. In *Chazal*, you make your table an altar. But the same is true in all physical aspects of life. But what are the means by which this takes place? Torah!

Torah! The realization of Torah. The learning of Torah. The transformation of everything we do through the hot light of mind and intellect that transforms the act from a mundane one to the highest and noblest in spirituality. It is through the awareness and understanding. But awareness and understanding are functions of the depth and illumination of Torah.

And it is the genius of *Klal Yisroel*, that this *Yom Tov*, which they express in terms of: we know You and care for You, and are in Your presence no matter where we are and what we're doing, that it is the time that they chose to reinforce themselves by a *Simchas Torah*. This is no coincidence.

This goes into the heart of the Jewish spiritual genius. Their awareness and the realization. We have to recognize and achieve this *simcha* in G-d's presence and also seemingly not in His presence. But for that we need help. And where are we going to get that help? Obviously, in that which enables us to do it all throughout the year. That which is the secret of the ability of *Klal Yisroel* to achieve that through their food and through their eating they can know G-d.

That they can sit on a *Shabbos* and physically enjoy, and in that physical enjoyment be a witness to the reality of G-d the Creator. Remember, this is the mark. *Oneg* on *Shabbos* is our worship. How do we achieve this? How do we make this unique contribution, this unique stand of the Jew, that in the deepest of physical activity he is achieving and reaching out to his spirituality?

As we've mentioned when we spoke about *Shabbos*, *Kedusha*, sanctity and holiness are found in the area of *isuray biah* - permitted and prohibited marriages and in *machalos asuros* - permitted and prohibited eatings. Specifically, in those physical activities - there - we find expressed above all else, the true meaning of sanctity, of holiness.

It is this that we seek but how do we get to that point? Clearly, it is Torah that is the vessel, the vehicle by which we Jews are able to achieve this. Because it is Torah that transforms a physical act into being imbued with intellectuality and spirituality as well. That binds and ties together our emotional self with our physical self, with our spiritual self - making it one splendid whole.

Therefore, on *Shemini Atzeres*, where we want to express this concept above all else, where we feel that this is the meaningfulness of what we're doing on that day, we're not leaving You G-d even though we're out of Your *Succah*. And even though we no longer have Your *lulav* and *esrog* to sustain us and to lift us, we're still there, we're still with You. We bring to bear the vehicle through which this is possible - we bring it to bear through the *Simchas Torah*.

Now, it isn't through the learning of Torah but through the awareness of Torah. The seeing what Torah does. What is *Simchas Torah*?

It isn't the time where we sit and learn. We sit and dance with the Torah. We express our awareness of what it stands for. We express our appreciation and understanding of what it means to us and what it does for us. We express our seeing its value with *simchah*, With this appreciation and understanding of the Torah itself, we can use this this awareness and for the purposes' that we have described above.

And I think this concept deserves a little bit more of an explanation. Torah affects us in terms of what we do, which we derive from how the Torah tells us how to act. Keep *Shabbos*, put on *tefillin*, don't eat prohibited foods, how to live between husband and wife, what are the specifics of celebrating different *Yom Tovim*, when to pray, how to pray. All the specifics of how the 613 commandments tell us how to act. How to live and use things. This is one aspect of Torah.

But there is the aspect of Torah which is the direct bond between us and G-d. The aspect of Torah that illuminates. It illuminates all our activities – even the non-*mitzvah* activities. The aspect of Torah which lifts us and transcends us above the mundane world, which alone makes it meaningful to have a separate *mitzvah* of learning all of Torah.

Not just that part of Torah that I need to know what to do and how to put on my *tefillin* or how to keep my *Shabbos*. But those aspects of Torah that seem to have no direct application, such as perhaps the laws of the sacrifices, which today, unfortunately, we're not going to keep. Such as the laws of the *Kohanim*, the non-*Kohen*, is never going to keep because it doesn't apply to him but to others. Such as the laws that hopefully will never apply, like the laws of divorce or the laws of levirate marriage. But I'm supposed to learn and know them, to understand them because they illuminate not just what I do, but illuminate all aspects of existence.

This that Torah gives, can only come when I recognize what Torah is. I need an appreciation for Torah. An appreciation that the Torah says, for instance, that the way to Torah is to properly honor those who learn it. To honor properly the great *talmidei chachamim*. Because without my appreciation of the centrality of Torah, I don't take any of this usage out of Torah. And if we want Torah to illuminate not only the acts that we have to do in *mitzvos*, but to ennoble and light up our physical existence, we must have this appreciation of Torah. This realization of its preciousness, of its specialness, of what it does.

And that's what *Shemini Atzeres* is. And that's the *Simcha* with the Torah. The appreciation of its uniqueness. Of what it means to me - in my life. Of the roles it plays in my existence, and in the existence of all of us as Jews, that is what is brought to the fore.

No wonder, then, that the extraordinary genius of the Jew in his relationship with his covenant partner G-d, his oneness with the Almighty has lead him to use *Simchas Torah* as the time with which to express this *simcha*, this joyousness. This appreciation and seeing the meaningfulness and the preciousness of the Torah. To use the potential of the *simcha* of *Shemini Atzeres* to give him the fullness of his appreciation of Torah. To deepen his commitment to that Torah, to deepen his awareness and love of it. Simultaneously, that awareness and love of the Torah allows for him to illuminate and deepen his usage of the *Shemini Atzeres*.

Do you follow this incredible masterstroke? Each to bolster, each to support, each to derive support from the other. This is the ultimate symbiosis. It is a symbiosis beyond all others. Simultaneously being sustained and sustaining (through the awareness and love of Torah together with the illumination of Torah).

However, this is not a commandment from G-d - this had to come from us. We had to respond to the opportunity that *Shemini Atzeres* is, by finding the way to use it in the way we just described and creating the custom of *simchas Torah*. Remember, *simchas Torah* is a custom. It is a custom for which we have evolved a whole *seder*, a whole order of worship. We have evolved all kinds of *minhagim* and customs with which to carry it out.

But above all, we have evolved a response of fullness of joy, which is the deepest of the whole time. The dancing and the singing and the response of *Simchas Torah*, is a kind of a culmination of joyousness, because, for sure, the two together (the awareness and love of Torah, together with the illumination of Torah of one's life) is the highest expression of *simchah* that we can have as Jews.