

SHEMINI ATZERET / SIMCHAT TORAH - 5761

Please, Don't Leave Me: Of all the holidays of the month of Tishrei, it is perhaps the very last, Shemini Atzeret, which best expresses G-d's love for the Jewish people. The name itself, "Atzeret," comes from the Hebrew word "to stop" or "delay." G-d detains us, as it were, for one more day before we return to our regular lives. The Midrash likens this to a king who holds a seven-day celebration for his sons. On the eighth day, when it comes time for them to leave, he is reluctant to see them go and asks them to remain for one more day of festivities.

A question is asked: How can one more day of celebration make the inevitable departure less painful? What is gained by pushing it off? We must therefore conclude that there is something about this special holiday, Shemini Atzeret, that actually prevents the departure from taking place at all. This concept is reflected in the precise language of the Midrash. "Your departure is difficult," the king tells his sons, not "our departure." This alludes to the fact that G-d never abandons the Jewish people; His love for us is constant and eternal. "Your departure is difficult," G-d tells us. G-d doesn't want us to abandon Him; He therefore requests that we celebrate one more holiday together which will serve to strengthen our bond.

The key to maintaining a close connection with G-d is achdut--unity. When Jews are united with one another our relationship with G-d is strong. When, however, there is strife and division, it forms a wedge between the Jewish people and our Father in heaven. The entire theme of Sukkot is Jewish unity; indeed, the mitzva of the Four Kinds represents the four types of Jews coming together to be bound into one entity. Nonetheless, after Sukkot is over and its positive effect has dissipated, the possibility still exists that the individual elements will revert to their previous separateness and dissociation. In order to prevent this from happening, G-d asks us to remain with Him a while longer, to celebrate a holiday which will secure our unity in an everlasting manner.

On Shemini Atzeret, a single sacrifice is brought in the Holy Temple, expressing the idea of the indivisible nature of the Jewish people. Furthermore, this concept is also reflected in the way the holiday is celebrated: great scholars and simple people alike dancing with the Torah scroll, without distinction between them. The absolute unity with which we conclude the holidays of Tishrei thus guarantees that these feelings will carry over into the rest of the year, effectively preventing that we will ever "depart" from holiness, G-d forbid. (www.chabad.org). Adapted from Likutei Sichot of the Rebbe Vol. 2)

A Single Heart: On Simchat Torah we finish reading the Torah and begin reading it once again. The last letter of the Torah is "lamed" (found in the word Yisrael -- Israel). The first letter of the Torah is the "beit" in B'reishis ("In the beginning").

These two letters together spell the word lev, heart. The Torah is the heart of the Jewish people and demands that we view each other as one singular heart, pulsating, beating and bringing life to our world and every one of its inhabitants. (www.chabad.org)

The Powerful Dance: *Reb Yisrael lived for his Rebbe. That is to say, his Rebbe's words inspired everything he did in life. Not only did he live according to his Rebbe's teachings, but he spread his holy words wherever he went. Although it wasn't easy, Reb Yisrael traveled to his Rebbe twice a year. A trip to the Rebbe, however, wasn't like a trip to the market. Certainly not. Reb Yisrael began his preparations months in advance, with daily immersions, constant study of Chasidut, fervent prayer and a course of general self-improvement. Even his children were caught up in the excitement of the impending trip, emulating their father by increasing their own good deeds and Torah study.*

Suddenly, with no warning, in the midst of all this flurry of preparation, Reb Yisrael's youngest son, Yaakov, fell desperately ill. A stream of doctors attended his bedside, but nothing could cure the illness that was sapping the child's life away. In desperation, Reb Yisrael hurriedly packed his bags. He would go to the Rebbe and ask for his holy blessing. After all, now it was the month of Elul, the month when the King of Kings was most accessible, the month of mercy and forgiveness. The long journey passed in a fog. Hours merged into one another, as the distraught father recited the Book of Psalms. As the houses of the town emerged in the distance, Reb Yisrael began to feel a flutter of hope in his heart. As he entered the study hall, he barely returned the enthusiastic greetings of his fellow chasidim. All his thoughts centered on his beloved Rebbe and the audience he would soon have.

Meanwhile, Reb Yisrael prepared himself for the holy day of Rosh Hashana. When the day arrived, Reb Yisrael barely lifted his eyes from his prayer book, for he never stopped beseeching the Almighty to spare his son. By Yom Kippur, Reb Yisrael was even more desperate, his prayers even more intense. Now, added to his pleas for the life of his son was another prayer: that when he entered the Rebbe's room, his note would be accepted. It was a known custom that a chasid would place a note containing his requests on a table, and if the Rebbe took the note, it was assured that the

requests would be fulfilled. If the Rebbe did not take the note...

As the day of his audience approached, Reb Yisrael became more and more anxious. He stopped sleeping and couldn't eat. Finally his turn came and there he was, standing in the Rebbe's room. He placed the tear-stained note on the table and waited for the Rebbe to take it. What seemed like hours passed, and it became apparent there would be no salvation -- the Rebbe did not take the note. Somehow, the dazed Reb Yisrael made his way out of the room. His worst fears had come to pass; perhaps his dear son had already left this world.

He wandered until he came to the edge of town, and there, under a tree, Reb Yisrael fell fast asleep. When he awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and he realized that it would soon be Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Tears poured from his eyes as he thought, "What is my life?" Back in town, everyone was rushing to and fro in a tornado of preparation for the festival. But he, like an automaton, proceeded to the synagogue where he sank into a corner, oblivious to the joy which surrounded him. What caused him to lift his eyes is not clear, but Reb Yisrael looked up for a moment and his eyes locked onto the dancing figure of Reb Mula. Reb Mula, who during the entire week could barely put one foot in front of the other, was dancing and leaping like a young stag. The town beggar was whirling with a strength that he never before possessed, his face gleaming with holy joy.

As he watched in fascination, Reb Yisrael felt a great yearning well up inside himself. And he thought, "Today, all of creation is joyful. And what of me? When all the angels and all the worlds are rejoicing, should I remain alone in my own private sorrow?" Reb Yisrael rose from his corner and joined the circle of dancers. Forgetting everything in this world, he whirled and spun and leapt and jumped. He stamped and turned and never stopped until his joy merged with the joy of the universe and he no longer remembered his son, his pain, or even his own name. His entire being was only rejoicing.

Reb Yisrael entered the Rebbe's room for a blessing on his departure. He had decided not to ask about his son. The Rebbe blessed him and then spoke, "When you came and asked my blessing for your son's recovery, I saw that Heaven had decreed his death, and so I left your note on the table. But on Simchat Torah, when you annulled your own pain and rejoiced in the Torah in pure joy, the Heavenly decree was also annulled. Your son will live." (www.chabad.org)

ONE MAKES KIDDUSH AND EATS AND DRINKS IN THE SUKAH, BOTH BY NIGHT AND DURING THE (FOLLOWING) DAY. HAKAFOT ON SH'MINI ATZERET NIGHT. HAFTORA: VAY'HI K'CHALOT UNTIL UL'YISRAEL AMO. WE DO NOT SAY THE (SPECIALLY DESIGNATED PRAYER) YEHI RATZON UPON LEAVING THE SUKAH. SH'MINI ATZERET AND ROSH HASHANA ARE PARALLEL IN MANY OF THE KAVANOT AND HIGHER YICHUDIM. ON ROSH HASHANA, THOUGH, THESE ARE IN A MODE OF ELEVATION AND ON SH'MINI ATZERET IN A MODE OF ELICITATION FROM ON HIGH DOWNWARD. ON ROSH HASHANA MAN'S AVODA IS WITH SUPPLICATION, SUBMISSION AND INTENSE BITTERNESS; ON SH'MINI ATZERET IT IS WITH JOY. (REBBE'S HAYOM YOM TISHREI 22)

The spiritual side of your life is not a hobby nor a luxury - it is your purpose of existence. When you are learning Torah, or meditating, or in prayer, nothing else exists.

Your spiritual career should have at least equal priority as your worldly career.

-Bringing heaven down to earth