



Joy and Trembling

R. Micha'el Rosenberg – rosenberg@hadar.org

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We tend to think of Shemini Atzeret and Simḥat Torah, which conclude the somber and at times terrifying High Holiday season, as a time of tremendous joy. This year, on the one-year anniversary of Hamas' brutal attack and the terrible war that followed, the exultation we associate with these days will be impossibly incongruous with how many of us will feel.

How are we supposed to live with these complicated feelings on this holiday? A closer look at the holiday's practices offers some direction, suggesting a much more complicated emotional landscape than pure, unadulterated joy. In some ways, Shemini Atzeret/Simḥat Torah is as much about existential fear as it is about celebration.

On the first day of Shemini Atzeret, we recite Geshem, liturgical poems that reintroduce to our Amidah the line, *mashiv haruah umorid hageshem* ("Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain"), the seasonal acknowledgment of God for sending rain. Traditionally sung in the musical modes of the High Holidays, by a *hazzan* wearing a *kittel*, this is a moment of seriousness, even terror. Will the coming year provide sufficient rain to support our community? Will the world be a safe and nurturing place for us, or one filled with fear? We



are transported back to some of the most dread-inducing moments of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.

The somber tone of Shemini Atzeret is manifest as well in our recitation of Yizkor, a memorial prayer for departed loved ones. Yizkor is a small moment of mourning in the midst of Yom Tov, when mourning is generally forbidden. In many traditions, Yizkor includes reciting sobering verses from Psalms: “What is the human being that you are mindful of them... a person is like a fleeting breath” (Psalm 144:3-4); “In the morning they flourish and grow; in the evening they wither and dry up” (Psalm 90:6). This is not a saccharine moment of levity.

We then move into the raucous dancing of Simḥat Torah.¹ If we’re paying attention, this is a jarring move in any year. It is especially so this year. How are we supposed to sing and dance on the one-year anniversary of such an awful day, when the liturgy and rituals will only remind us of what happened last year?

The seemingly radical disjuncture, however, is a mirage. The *hakafot* (the rounds of dancing we perform on Simḥat Torah) are at their core an extra set of *hoshanot*, the pleas for salvation that we recite on each day of Sukkot, circumambulating the Torah with our *lulavim* and crying out for God to save us: “*Hosha na!*”

Our dancing with the Torah scrolls on Simḥat Torah replicates this attempt to elicit God’s salvation, dancing around the Torah scrolls for seven rounds, each time asking God to save us and give us sustenance: “*Ana HaShem—hoshia na! Ana HaShem—hatzliḥah na! Ana HaShem—aneinu veyom koreinu!*” “Please, God—save us! Please, God—give us success! Please, God—answer us on the day of our crying out!”

¹ This is the order of things for communities that observe two days of Shemini Atzeret. For communities that observe only one day, the raucous dancing is surrounded on either side by Yizkor and Geshem.



These are not joyous songs, something we might sing to celebrate a birthday or anniversary. These are desperate pleas. We might sing them in a seemingly upbeat style, putting kids on our shoulders and enjoying the dance, but we are begging for salvation, for our very lives.

Shemini Atzeret/Simḥat Torah is a holiday of intense prayer, of fear and trembling. A holiday on which we supplicate before God asking for rain, on which we remember those we've lost, and on which we beg God to hear our cries, is fundamentally about recognizing the fragility of life.

Rashi tells us that the purpose of Shemini Atzeret/Simḥat Torah is to linger for another day with God:

רש"י ויקרא כג:ל

כְּמֶלֶךְ שֶׁזָּמַן אֶת בְּנָיו לְסַעֲדָה לֶכְךָ וְכָךְ יָמִים, כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ זְמַנּוֹ לִפְטֹר, אָמַר, בְּנֵי בְּרִקְשָׁה מִכֶּם עֲכָבוּ עִמִּי עוֹד יוֹם אֶחָד, קִשָּׁה עָלַי פְּרִדְתְּכֶם:

Rashi on Leviticus 23:36

Like a king who invited his children to a celebration for a certain number of days. When the time came to depart, he said, “My children, I beg of you, linger with Me another day; your parting is difficult for Me.”

For many of us, this year has complicated our relationship with God. What will it be like to spend so much time directly in God's house this year? Will it feel like being stuck in the house with a loved one who has hurt us?

The question is even more acute this year, when most of us outside of Israel will have a “3-day Yom Tov,” as the two days of Shemini Atzeret blend seamlessly into the first “normal” Shabbat of the new year. It is hard to imagine what the return to (relatively) ordinary time with a



regular Shabbat will feel like for us, and even harder to imagine how the long Yom Tov pause can lead us there this year.

But, just like the holiday is not really about joy, Rashi's description of us lingering in God's house is also not about joy. It is a time to spend close to God, not in order to pretend that everything is fine or to engage in a relationship of pollyannaish sweetness. It is a time to work on a relationship that includes fear and, though it is strange to say it, doubt. We are close to God not because our faith is unshakeable, utterly devoid of questions, but precisely because we are filled with doubt. We know that we have lost loved ones, and we fear that we might not receive the sustenance from God that we need in order to have a good life.

And yet, we perform one of these rituals of fear and trembling with joy, with singing and dancing. I am tempted to try to make sense of this incongruity, to explain why the words of the *hakafot* are not really fearful, or why our dancing is not really joyful. Reconciling them by force in this way, however, would be a mistake that misses the real point of Simḥat Torah. The point is that it doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to sing and dance happily while literally begging God to hear our cries; it doesn't make sense that God allows people to die; it doesn't make sense that our existence is so tenuous, dependent on whether this will be a year of famine or flooding. And it doesn't make sense that we want both to celebrate our closeness to God, joyously singing and dancing, and at the very same time we want to express our fears, doubts, and, most especially this year, our sense of loss—loss of life, loss of security, loss of, most dangerously, hope. Human emotions don't necessarily make logical sense, but that doesn't make them any less real.

This, apparently, is the necessary transition to get to the relative normalcy of Shabbat Bereishit. We move from the intensity of the High Holidays to the regular rhythms of the year by means of taking seriously the complexity of our inner lives, expressing both the joy and



love as well as the fear and trembling. We dance and we cry; we beg and we sing. The blending of seeming opposites allows us to move into the year.

This kind of being with God is neither simple nor easy. It is, I think, what Rashi means when he tells us what this day is about. “Linger with Me”—not in order to perform some *mitzvah* or fulfill some purpose, but just to be with Me, fully yourself. It will not be easy, but it is what we need to do in order to move back into normal life, to be ready for Shabbat Bereishit.

