

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of shmini-atzeret | Volume 44 | 22 Tishrey



First Shabbat Meal

What Shmini Atzeret is All About

The rituals of each holiday generally have a clear connection to the objective of that holiday. For example, on Pesach we consume Matzot because that is the food the Jewish people consumed upon leaving Egypt. On Sukkot we dwell in the Sukkah to recall the protective clouds that surrounded the Jews while in the desert. On Shavuot we celebrate and relive the giving of the Torah. Simchat Torah (Shemini Atzeret), however, seems to be lacking a clear reason behind its cause for celebration. There is no explicit reason cited in the Torah behind Shemini Atzeret and no particular ritual either associated with the holiday. What then are we to do on Shemini Atzeret to best celebrate this holiday?

To give insight into the meaning of Shemini Atzeret, the Sages compare it to a father and son who have spent time together and the time for the son to head back home has arrived. As he lives a great distance away from his father, his father kindly requests one more day to share together; the farewell is painful and the father wishes to extend that precious time just that bit more.

Similarly, we've celebrated the High Holidays and Sukkot within a very condensed time span and Hashem wishes to spend that bit more of intimate time together with His Children; this is the holiday of Shemini Atzeret. This is a unique request from Hashem to be together with Him. While we have some understanding of the meaning of Shemini Atzeret, it remains unclear what particular actions are expected of us, what Mitzvot are incumbent upon us to respect the spirit and meaning of the day? The Sages explain the meaning of Shemini Atzeret further in that this day of intimacy with Hashem is exactly that, a moment of intimacy between loving friends staring into each other's eyes. No words are uttered, no external exchange takes place between them, only a telepathic communication between hearts.

Hashem, in His love for us, asked of us to have one more day together with Him. On this day, there is nothing that is demanded of us, but to be present before Hashem in a moment of utter intimacy. We are to open our hearts and 'gaze' at Hashem, understand Him and bring ourselves closer to Him. To genuinely attain such a state can be intimidating and perhaps even unattainable, for how can we 'face' Hashem when we are so full of sins and faults? How can we ever feel comfortable in facing Hashem as we would an intimate friend? This very paradox David addresses in Tehillim 104:34 where he says: "I shall sing to Hashem while I'm alive and praise him as long as I exist." David longed to praise and sing to Hashem, but felt abashed and unworthy of doing so; he viewed himself void of any good deeds or any merit whatsoever.

The only point that gave David the confidence to come forward and praise Hashem was his dedication to bettering himself and repenting. This is David's intention when he says that he will praise Hashem "as long as he exists;" as long as there is life within him, he will do everything to repent and bring himself closer to Hashem.

Each and every one of us must live by this sentiment. Even if we haven't yet accomplished our life's purpose, even if we haven't attained the levels that we are capable of achieving, we must still praise Hashem because we will one day repent and reach the objective we are meant to achieve.

This very perspective can serve as the basis to explain why the Hosha'anot are called Hakafot (circling) and why we circle the Bima (prayer platform) in the process. The ritual and the name alludes to our cashing in on deeds that we will do in the future; we are using credit for good we promise to accomplish in the future.

This lesson we've repeated several times over the years because of its immense significance. We oftentimes don't have the merit or strength to accomplish or ask for certain things. In such instances we must plead to Hashem to lend us the strength, the merit- whatever it takes to accomplish and receive what we are requesting. In the future, when we will have the proper understanding, proper spiritual level, sufficiently accumulated good deeds to continue without relying upon Hashem's lent strength and merit, that Hashem can allow us to continue under our own strength and merit.

This is the secret and meaning of Shemini Atzeret. We are in intimate connection with Hashem and then and there we ask Hashem to lend us strength and merit until we have how to repay and stand on our own, so to speak. We are asking that Hashem grant to us on credit for the good we will ultimately accomplish. This is what King Saul, the first king of Israel would do, hence his name (Saul means borrowed in Hebrew).

This is a very important lesson, which must be reiterated, emphasized and inculcated within Shuva Israel.



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Soul Of the Rif

A person needs to know that within their soul, every Jew has tremendous capabilities, which are immeasurable and incomprehensible. The Evil Inclination wages wars and gives advice in order to make a person small in their own eyes to lead them to sin. Externally, people definitely want to appear big and strong, but internally the Evil Inclination makes a person despair and inculcates them with a sense that in the world they are small and unsuccessful. However, a person must know that even if they have sinned and made mistakes, their soul is still elevated and strong; they still have the ability to improve, repair and change everything. This accounts for the statement of King David, who said "Guard my soul for I am devout (Tehillim 86:2)." Although King David viewed himself as dust and ashes, as he himself said "A worm and not a man, a disgrace of a human being (Tehillim 22:7)," a very sharp phrase indeed, he knew that he had a strong and elevated soul. Therefore, he said the truth, that "I am devout" for his soul was great and strong, with immense capabilities. He asked "Guard my soul" in reference to the power and exalted nature which he believed that his soul carried. In effect, he said: Even if I have made mistakes and stumbled in sin, my soul remains great and I will not despair, "Guard my soul, for I am devout."



2nd Shabbat Meal

Be happy and rejoice on Simchat Torah

We say "The Heavens will rejoice and the earth will exult" (Tehillim 96:11) and on the day of Simchat Torah, we also sing a song in which we say "be happy and rejoice on Simchat Torah." What does this phrase mean, it seems that it should have said, "Rejoice with the Torah," what does Simchat Torah - the 'joy of the Torah' mean?

It is written that when Hashem wanted to give the Torah to the world, He went to each of the gentile nations and suggested that they accept it. He went to the children of Yishmael, He asked if they would like to receive it and they asked about its contents. He said to them that the Torah says, "You shall not commit adultery." They responded that they did not want it. He then went to the children of Edom, they too asked what is written in the Torah. He said to them "You shall not murder," they said that they did not want it. No nation wanted the Torah, the only people who did were the Jews.

Let us imagine, G-d forbid, that the children of Yishmael had said that they did want the Torah, then the Torah itself would be in pain as it would need to belong to them. Therefore we say, 'be glad and rejoice with the joy of Torah,' as the Torah rejoices over the fact that we merited to have it.

The holy Torah rejoices and says: What is better, that a Christian or an Arab should have the Torah and dance? If they had said that they wanted it, Hashem would have given it to them. In the end, they said 'no,' and the Torah came to us. The Torah rejoices over the fact that we are the ones who received it.



Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, I am a mother of four children, may they be well. A year ago, I was struck with a terrible sickness and have undergone great physical and emotional suffering. With thanks to G-d's great mercy, I am now healthy and whole, but on a daily basis, I experience feelings of fear and terror, as I worry that the sickness may return to me. I wanted to ask about these feelings, do they come from the Creator of the World or from the Evil Inclination?

Answer:

Fear in general comes from thoughts which a person should not have. You are whole and healthy and should, please G-d, live a long life. Meanwhile, what is happening? You live with fear, in which case the sickness has not entirely passed over you, since it still exists in the form of fear. The sickness will pass in its entirety when the feelings of being afraid cease. Erase the fears and the last traces of the sickness will vanish.





3rd Shabbat meal

Shemini Atzeret - another gift of a day to draw strength and joy In Kohelet (11:2), King Shlomo says: "Distribute portions to seven, or even to eight for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth." It is known that King Shlomo was a very holy man, and every word he said carries huge importance. He was the wisest of all men, and one of his virtues was that he could foresee things generations in advance. This included foreseeing the power of the Beit HaMikdash and the future placement of Kohelet within Tanach. Given that every word of Kohelet has such great meaning, we have to understand the meaning of the aforementioned verse. What does it mean?

Perhaps we can answer that on account of our many sins, we do not know what "misfortune may occur on earth." We remember that last Sukkot, we were entirely "in joy and of good heart" (Devarim 28:47). No one thought or believed that we would reach Sukkot of this year in the current situation, in which we are all afraid and feeling great fear. Whether these be concerns and fears about life, finance, whether general or more specific causes for fear, the fear which is felt at present is great.

During Sukkot a year ago, all appeared good, and each person simply had their specific life circumstances which they had to deal with. No one imagined what was hiding on the side, waiting to come shortly after, nobody sensed the troubles which the world was to face.

It is necessary to know that at the moment when troubles start, they do not stop, but progress and become stronger. Indeed, until they reach a big explosion, they do not stop. Our great teachers call this generation the 'Generation of the Great Depth.' What does the 'Generation of the Great Depth' mean? When a person falls into a small hole or pit, they rise and get out. However, when they slip into a great abyss, they are unable to stop, but rather keep plummeting until the end of the depth; this allegory mirrors the state of the current generation in many regards.

When a person starts a small argument, be sure to stop them quickly. Why is this needed? Because a small argument can reach to the bottom of great depths. When a person makes a small problem, it must be solved quickly before it expands. This is a generation of depths, because everything which is not resolved quickly ends up expanding. The essence of the generation is that it is before the coming of the Messiah, it is a generation of the depths.

G-d gave us decades of peace and tranquility, good times, albeit with some battles and struggles, but this was always the case. The Jewish people always had methods and ways to more or less remove themselves from their difficulties, there were not material existential threats as they are now.

During these days the entire world faces a great and harsh difficulty which is not understood. The lack of understanding is enormous and very difficult. Everyone knows that in the end, all will be understood and it is not something which we can currently fathom. G-d covers everyone's eyes, and they therefore cannot find the answer, as He rolls the world to a place of the most dangerous depths.

This is the harshest and most difficult of things, the descent of the world. This ongoing descent is found in many matters. This downward path is dangerous, for if some extraordinary form of Teshuva does not happen and with it a resulting increase in closeness to Hashem, then the aforementioned path will continue. There will be a proliferation of more things which will reduce Torah and Mitzvot.

The Romans once made a decree banning the study of Torah. Today, no one has decreed that Torah may not be learnt, but the reality is that it is difficult to pray, we cannot go to synagogues, no one is guilty for causing this reality, it is just the reality of the situation, just like the Romans and other forms of suffering imposed on us in the past. G-d forbid, it is not like someone has decreed in a harsh and evil manner against the Torah and the Jewish people. The reality is that G-d has brought something to the world, similar to all of the harsh decrees over the generations through a small move of closing the entire world, which entails descending into the depths; it can be the beginning of going from one level and then plummeting to another which is incredibly dangerous.

It is important to be aware of a key concept, the holy Torah tells us that Hashem gave us several types of festivals: Rosh Hashanah is to atone for our sins, Yom Kippur is to gain forgiveness, on this day He forgives us for all the bad things we have done. Hoshana Rabbah is the seal of all that we have done over the course of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the Ten Days of Teshuva and over the days of joy of Sukkot. Pesach is designed to take the power and potential of the miracles and wonders for the rest of the year. Shavuot is to learn Torah in order to draw strength for one's Torah study throughout the whole year. The essence of Sukkot is to bring joy into the entire year. Just as there are gas stations on the highway interspersed kilometers apart, in order to enable cars to keep traveling forward, Sukkot functions in the same way to light up the soul with joy.

King Shlomo said to distribute portions to seven in reference to the seven days of the festival of Sukkot, and an eight is added as a special addition which the Almighty added to the festival, which is Shemini Atzeret. Why is this day added? We do not know what troubles there will be and what problems will occur throughout the rest of the year. "Man sees what is visible to the eyes, while G-d sees into the heart (Shmuel I, 16:7)." With the power of sight, mankind sees problems and troubles, a person does not know what ambushes await them. Therefore, we say to Hashem: Seven days of the festival of Sukkot are good, but You add one more day, Shemini Atzeret. We must be quick and snatch this day, because we do not know what awaits us, nor what problems will strike in the future of the world. Therefore, this day or days that Hashem adds, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, are uniquely special. To continue to keep the power of the soul alight with further Simcha is like when a person travels by car and can set money aside for fuel in advance. G-d gives us extra 'money' by giving us the extra day of Shemini Atzeret, another day, to fill further and give us extra strength for longer. It is a gift from Hashem; like a father giving a son one hundred shekel for gas and then giving him one hundred and fifty. We have another day to load up the fuel for the soul, to fill ourselves with strength, loading our souls with joy for the difficult days which lie ahead of us and the unknown future which is coming our way.



Treasure charms from the Rif



The prayer when leaving the Sukkah: 'May it be Your will, Lord, our God and God of our fathers - in the same way that I have fulfilled the commandment and dwelt in this Sukkah, so may I merit next year to dwell in the sukkah made from the skin of the Leviathan.'

The Book Yesod Yosef records that it is also virtuous to recite the following prayer when leaving the Sukkah: 'Master of the Universe, let it be your will, that those angels who are associated with the Mitzvot of the Sukkah, the Mitzvah of the Four Species: The Lulav, Etrog, Willow and Myrtle, which are all performed on the festival of Sukkot, should accompany us when we leave the Sukkah and enter with us into our homes, with life and peace. Those angels should serve as an eternal protection for us from Your holy abode. They should save us from any sin, iniquity, deficiency in life, or indeed any trying time which may befall us. You, G-d, should pour Your holy spirit upon us from the highest heights, and rejuvenate our longing to serve You with truth, love and fear. And we will diligently devote ourselves to both study and teach Your Torah.'



And the merit of the Four Species, and the Sukkah should serve to prolong Your anger, until we have returned to You with a wholesome Teshuva. We will remedy all that we have tarnished and will merit the two tables without pain and anguish, both I, the members of my household and all my offspring. And all of us should be enveloped in peace and tranquility, bountiful and joyous. We should be true servants of Hashem according to Your good will among all the Jewish people. Let the words of my mouth, and thoughts of my heart be favorable before You, Hashem, my rock, and redeemer.'

When doing something good, do not do it on condition to receive something good in return.

The 'Viina Gaon' was one of the loftiest souls amongst the Jewish people, and anyone who approached him requesting his assistance could be assured of his help. The Vilna Gaon would help them and once he finished helping would open a drawer and give each person a small stone.

They asked the Gaon why he would give small stones each time. He answered that man's nature is such that it is very difficult to accept favors from others. This is to say, that if one receives an item, they feel compelled to remunerate by giving something in return. From the moment that one has received an item, they cannot help thinking about repaying it in some form. The Gaon continued and explained that he only gave small stones, so that people would not feel compelled to repay him with large ones after the favor.

Man needs to know a fundamental principle, not to expect anything in the world from any person. This is because human nature is such that if one receives compensation from someone, they will always feel indebted to that person, and will look for a way to relieve themselves of the debt. The compulsion to free oneself of the debt, may lead one to bring evil into the world.

One who begins to nurture expectations in their soul and starts to contemplate and solidify those expectations, will only engender negative consequences. If they begin feeling entitled to certain things, and only commit to do certain things having rationalized to themselves that certain positive consequences will result, this will only lead to great pain and sorrow. Rather, one should do things from the sake of Heaven. If someone asks you for help, then if you can, help them! Do not first think, 'will he one day be able to return the favor?' Rather help him immediately. In this way, your conduct will be purely for Hashem's sake and untainted by ulterior motives. However, the moment you start making your help contingent on your own interests, then the verse "all men are false" (Tehillim 116:11) will apply, and great disappointment will result.

And this is one of the central principles which one ought to internalize. Especially during this era, when life runs so fast, this is a pivotal foundation which one should strive to live by.

In the past, it could take ten years to develop a genuine and meaningful friendship, for the two parties to feel truly connected to one another. However, today, friendships are built over a cup of coffee. One will buy a coffee for the other and suddenly they will be friends, yet upon receiving a cup from the other person, friction will develop in the relationship, and the friendship will be in turmoil. This unhealthy type of relationship is a result of people harboring expectations of one another, and not simply giving to the other because it is the right thing to do.

Therefore, one ought to draw on deep thought and contemplation to inform his conduct, such that all of his actions should be for the sake of Heaven. All his behavior should be clean, with good intent, without him approaching each situation thinking 'what is in this for me?'

You should believe only in Hashem - as the verse states: "And they believed in Hashem and Moshe His servant" (Shemot 14:31). Believe in Hashem, his Tzadikim, and Talmidei Chachamim (scholars), walking in the pure path of Hashem. One's guiding light should be the knowledge that everything is from Hashem, whether it be something pleasant or challenging, everything is from Hashem, and He knows exactly what is right. It is in this manner, one ought to cultivate his Emuna and conduct in life. The plague which was stopped in the merit of Rabbi Eliezer Papo (author of the 'Pele Yo'etz').

From the age of thirteen, we begin to give classes in the holy works entitled the 'Pele Yo'etz' and 'Ya'alozu Chassidim.' Indeed, every year we are particular to visit the grave of the author of these auspicious works, Rav Eliezer Papo, and these visits have often coincided with sudden miraculous ends to difficult situations.

The Pele Yo'etz, Rav Eliezer Papo, was an exceptionally lofty person. In the introduction to one of his books, he wrote that 'if I merit to see the pleasantness of Hashem and enter His holy temple, then I will endeavor to repay anyone who does good to me in the best possible way.' In a sense, the Pele Yo'etz was saying that if one day he merited to reside in the lofty heights, in Hashem's holy abode, then he would seek to repay that person with goodness.

Who amongst us today, would not benefit from a powerful advocate such as the Pele Yo'etz, Rav Eliezer Papo? He was an exalted person, to whom countless miraculous wonders, beyond the realm of nature, can be attributed.

It is known that in the days of the Pele Yo'etz there was a devastating plague in which thousands of people died; try as they might, no one was able to contain the plague. At the time, the Pele Yo'etz was still a relatively young man, approximately forty years old, yet he had already developed a strong following of students. On the eve of Hoshana Rabbah, he stood before his students and informed them that in the evening he would go to sleep as usual, however he would not wake up the following day. Rather, his soul would ascend to Heaven for evermore and serve as an atonement for the Jewish people and the plague would stop. Alas, everything transpired as he had said, and sure enough the deadly plague ended the next day.

Until today, in the city of Silistra in Bulgaria, where he lived, there is commemoration to Rav Eliezer Papo. Indeed, even the gentiles of the town honor him and attribute great importance to his legacy. His clothes, and chair remain in the city, in the town hall - with all eternally grateful to him for having stopped the plague.

From those days onwards, in any trying time during which people needed salvation, all endeavored to learn the book 'Pele Yo'etz,' to tap into the great power of the book and its illustrious author, Rav Eliezer Papo. They did this in the hope that the merit of Rav Eliezer Papo's great light would serve to bring salvation and ward off any adverse forces.

We too strive to learn the Pele Yo'etz, and this is especially apropos seeing as Rav Papo, in his humility, wrote that he wrote the book for simple people like himself. This gives insight into his deep humility, which underpinned all his Avodat Hashem (service of G-d); he was a man of keen humility and intense closeness to Hashem.

For this reason, we should all incentivise ourselves to humble our hearts, and designate time to learn the Pele Yo'etz and take it with us wherever we go. In this vein, it is known that if one takes a holy Sefer with him wherever he goes, then the power of the Sefer's Kedusha (sanctity) will protect him.

To conclude, strengthening the learning of the Pele Yo'etz is exceptionally virtuous. We ought to seize our free moments to learn it, be it in the office, or at home, and through this, Hashem will accompany us, and in the merit of the Holy Pele Yo'etz we will merit a redemption and magnificent success with Hashem's help.