

Chag Sameach!

I would like to dedicate this Dvar Torah to my grandmother Sarah bat Avraham Halevi z'l who passed away on Shemini Chag Ha'atseret 1984, a year before my Bar Mitzvah. My grandmother was a remarkable person, buying a tallit and Tefillin for me in advance. She must have known. She took pride in her Jewish identity as she fought against the Nazi regime in the underground movement in Amsterdam, while losing 6 out of 7 of her siblings. Coming from a non-religious background after the war, my grandmother became more and more traditional later in life. She was always the center of communication and presided over the family as a matriarch. Her devotion has contributed tremendously to my own interest in Jiddishkeit. Yehi zichrona baruch. Her neshama be bundled in the bundle of life.

Shemini chag Ha'atseret: what exactly are we celebrating today?

On the one hand it is Shemini HeChag: the Eighth and Last Day of The Chag - The Festival, i.e. Sukkoth!

On the other hand it is Atseret, a "Regel Bifnei Atsmo": a festival/pilgrimage on its own right as stated in the gemara Tractate Sukkah 48a - the consequences are listed as well: there is a different set of korbanot compared to Sukkoth. b) Like the other independent holidays there is a lottery among priestly families to determine who will do duty in the Temple - whereas on the preceding days of Sukkoth all families were on duty due to large numbers of offerings - c. We say shehcheyanu and we are no longer sitting in the Sukkah

But as a Regel Bifnei Atsmo, an independent Holiday, nothing is really known about its significance. The holiday is devoid of any special mitzva, no sukka, no lulav, no matsah, no shofar etc. In this sense it is similar to Shavu'ot. A festival which Chazal called Atseret as well!

Although, you tell me: wait a sec. isn't it also Simchat Torah? There is lots of activity there... Rob Portnoe has recently taught us that Simchat Torah is a relatively modern invention. It became only known as such in the period of the Ge'onim (~900 CE). All the minhagim we do on Simchat Torah were added on later over the course of roughly a thousand years. How is this Simchat Torah then related to Shmini Chag Ha'atseret? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to celebrate Simchat Torah during the other Atseret, namely Shavu'oth, when we commemorate receiving of the Torah?

Shemini Chag ha'atseret seems a holiday with an unclear status: semi-independent, devoid of any formal positive commandments. Is it separate or is it part of a larger whole? In order to better understand this Chag, let's have a closer look at what 'Atseret' exactly means.

In most translations you will find that Atseret is translated as a 'solemn assembly' - and the chag is called the Eighth day of the Assembly.

But the word Atseret comes from the verb Atsor, with the shresh Y-Ts-R - stop!, or to detain. Shouldn't we then call it the Festival of Stopping or a festival of Detention?

If it means 'stopping' you'd think this would indicate a stopping of the ongoing Sukkoth celebrations. On Sukkoth so many offerings were brought in the temple that all kohanim were on deck. On Atseret the number of sacrifices were drastically cut to only one bull, one ram and 7 sheep. In fact, the sacrifices on Atseret are identical to those brought on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur! Let's hold on to this similarity for later.

The Ibn Ezra gives it a different spin: Atzeret does indeed mean 'stop' or 'detain': However he connects this with the next pasuk :Atzeret hie lachem- kol melechet avodah lo ta'asu! It's not that you've got to stop celebrating - rather, stop doing mundane work for one more day.

OK, we won't work, but why call it a day of detention?

A famous medrash brought in Sukka, 55 B gives some deeper insight, and I quote: I detained you with Me, God says, like a king who had invited his sons for a festivity of so many days. When the time came to say good-bye the king said: my sons, I have a request: please stay with me for one more day, for 'Kashe Alai Predatchem: Your partings (i.e. leaving me alone) are difficult for me. Some sharp commentators (Imrei Emet and others) assume God doesn't have any issue saying good-bye, but note that Hashem is upset about our imminent predah - separation, not only from Him, but also from people in our community. In other words, the chag is over and soon you all will go back home, back to

work. You will forget about Me and your good intentions you made on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Perhaps even worse - you will forget to improve your behaviors towards others as well. In no time all of you will be behaving just like you did before this whole period started; similar to last year and similar to the years before. And thus Hashem says 'Kashe Alai Predatchem!' - the WAY you part - with me and with the series of holidays - is difficult for me!

Now, we understand this concern. This certainly is a very real and realistic worry that we can identify with. It is very hard to change oneself, let alone to make those changes last, and even more if you try to do so all by yourself. But how is one more day going to make any difference? How is this day of detention going to help?

The Sforno gives some additional insight: not only should you stop working mundane work, but detain yourself for some time in a holy place - a bet kneset, a bet midrash, or the temple and devote time to Hashem: spend time to daven, learn or help in the avodah. -

This gets us more in the realm of some kind of positive commandment of what to do today. But we know we should be davening and learning on a daily basis, so what is so special about that.... today? Anything in particular we should learn or daven for?

Rav Karlenstein (quoted in the current To-Go, YU pamphlet) gives a the following answer: The time devoted on Shmini Chag HaAtseret is to internalize all the messages of the holidays from the entire year and tie them with a keshet shel Kayama - an ever lasting knot.

Again, Shmini Atseret is to internalize all the messages of the holidays from the entire year and tie them with an ever lasting knot.

I think, in order to understand Rav Karlenstein's words and the significance of Shemini Chag Ha'atseret we need to look at the period from Rosh Hashana and Y"K till Shemini Chag A'tseret as a whole. Atseret is linked to R"H and Y"K as we found before by their identical number of offerings (one, bull, one ram and seven sheep) bridging the period with a common theme: successfully transform ourselves to become better persons. Making changes that last.

Already before R"H begins, during the month of Ellul we said selichot, realizing we had fallen short in our behaviors and we needed to change ourselves. But since we had that same issue last year and the years before, we may conclude that we can't make those changes easily, even less to make them last, and let alone if we try to do that alone.

On Rosh Hashana itself we renewed our connection to Hashem: we acknowledged He is our King and we begged him to remember the covenants of old and to reciprocate our efforts in renewing His connection with us. We put Hashem back in our lives.

Then, During the Ymei Hatshuva we reflected on our bad habits- sins if you will, more in detail. We confessed those behaviors on Yom Kippur and we asked for forgiveness to those we harmed. And we prayed for obtaining divine atonement.

On Sukkoth we celebrate our clean slate, our renewed connection to Hashem and, having made amends to people we harmed, we celebrate a new sense of community.

Then Hashem says "STOP. Atsor- Freeze!! Before you go back to work tomorrow, before you resume your daily life: Reflect on what you promised during R'H and Y'K. Reflect on our renewed relationship, Hashem says, and realize I will give you the power you need to keep carrying out your resolutions if you ask for it. During Atseret, stop and reflect for some time and daven for this empowerment! But also realize you can't do this alone. We tried to do this year after year ourselves and were only little successful if at all. Atseret also means a 'solemn assembly'. A community, focused on helping each other becoming better people. Helping each other being accountable is what constitutes a true kehila kedosha.

Shavu'oth, was called Atseret by Chazal as well, but didn't merit this name openly in the Torah - Chazal explain, that after giving the Aseret Hadibrot, Bnei Jisrael ran away from Sinai - 'like kids who run out of class when the bell rings'. In doing so they missed the opportunity to stop and reflect - to internalize what they had just learned. As a consequence, at the first moment of adversity, at least in the way they perceived it, when Moshe didn't appear when expected, they turned to a golden idol. A bad habit, a habit they were engraved with over 400+ years in Egypt and clearly they hadn't been able to get rid of yet.

The cycle from Pesach, the Sfirath HaOmer and Shavuoth became a learning curve, an academic growth.

The cycle from Rosh Hashana to Atseret is a personal growth - internalizing the orach-chayim, the new way of life of the Torah we just learned and making sincere efforts to get rid of former habits.

But this type of personal growth requires commitment to a set of goals, accountability and willpower.

It is this willpower we daven for to Hashem and it is this empowerment what we celebrate today. It is hinted at in the very word Atseret. The shresh Y-Ts-R is also found in the term 'Yoresh Etser Hamelucha' - crown-prince, the heir to the power of the throne. The term appears in the misheberach for the malchut, said after laying in Holland and England and other monarchies.

When Hakadosh Baruch Hu introduced to Shmuel Hanavi the very first king to rule over Bne Yisrael, Melech Shaul, He told Shemuel as follows: (Shemuel A, 9 vs 17. See Rashi)

16. "At this time tomorrow, I shall send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be a ruler of my people Israel, and he will save My people from the hand of the Plishtim, for I have looked upon My people, as their cry has come to Me."

17. And Shemuel saw Shaul, and the Hashem said to him,

(הִנֵּה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ זֶה יַעֲזָר בְּעַמִּי)

"here is the guy I told you about, this one is going to rule over My people.' "

Rashi expounds on 'ya'atsor': will rule over My people: Thus is the function of the ruler: 1. to restrain the people during a war, that they do not scatter, and that they do not spread out from one another, i.e. 2. to assemble; and 3.. to restrain everyone from doing evil.

Basically, Rashi summerizes the meaning of 'Atsor' as: to Rule, Assemble and Restrain.

Chag Ha'atseret, a time to reflect on resolutions made and a time to celebrate empowerment to restrain from old habits with the support of the kehilla, forms the basis on which we are again ready to accept the Torah. Perhaps this may be why Simchat Torah, over the period of more than a thousand years has become part and parcel of Shmini Chag Ha'atseret.

Chag Sameach!