

Shemini Atzeret – Simchat Torah, 5775, 2014:

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Simchat Torah and Hakaret Hatov (Recognition of the Good)

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

By definition, the second day of Shemini Atzeret, i.e. Simchat Torah, has a Rabbinic rather than a Biblical basis, since the Torah does not mandate the observance of a second day of Yom Tov (in the Diaspora). In addition, for a significant period of Jewish history, the second day of Shemini Atzeret was simply the second day of the Festival – devoid of any unique celebratory activity or behavior. We know that the transformation of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into Simchat Torah originated in Babylon. Yet, exactly when this transformation took place remains lost in the sands of time. As Rabbi Ari Enkin, quoting Rabbi Avraham Yaari's widely respected work, *Toldot Chag Simchat Torah (The History of the Festival of Simchat Torah)*, notes:

The evolution of Simchat Torah as part of the Shemini Atzeret celebrations first originated in Babylon and was not even observed in Israel until the end of the Gaonic period [11th century]. For Babylonian Jewry, Simchat Torah was the celebration of the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle. The Torah had been divided up into 54 separate parshiot, with a different *parasha* (and sometimes two at a time) being read every Shabbat, thereby completing the entire Torah each year. (<http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2008/10/simchat-torah.html>, underlining and brackets my own)

Significantly, however, the name “Simchat Torah” does not appear in the Babylonian Talmud. This is particularly of note, since this work contains material up to and including the Sixth century CE. Therefore, we can readily surmise that Simchat Torah is, in all

likelihood, a product of the post-Talmudic period. Rav Amnon Bazak, a noted Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, suggests that the transformation of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into the holiday of Simchat Torah by Babylonian Jewry was part of the overall conceptual transference of the *Chagim* (Festivals) from agriculturally-focused to essentially Halakha-based days of celebration:

As opposed to the “Biblical Jew,” for whom agriculture stood at the center of existence, the “post-Temple Jew” concentrates his religious life in the proverbial “four cubits of Halakha.” Therefore, the agricultural calendar was replaced by the “Torah calendar.” In this system, the festival of the first harvest (Shavuot), which commemorated the first opportunity to benefit from one’s produce, was transformed into the holiday of *Matan Torah* [the Giving of the Torah], the first step in the nation’s acceptance of the Torah. Shemini Atzeret, which, for the agrarian society, was celebrated as the end of the year, evolved into the celebration of the completion of the Torah reading, Simchat Torah. (<http://vbm-torah.org/sukkot/shmin-bazak.htm>, brackets my own)

At this juncture, it is clear that the *Chachamim* (Sages) of Babylonia Jewry changed the nature of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into a day with its own unique identity and purpose – a day wherein the annual completion of the reading of the Torah was celebrated. The question, of course, is “why?” In other words, what were the motivating factors behind the creation of the day of Simchat Torah?

In my view, there is a portion of the *Siddur* that begins to answer our questions:

Therefore we are obligated to thank You, praise You, glorify You, bless, sanctify, and offer praise and thanks to Your Name. We are fortunate (*Ashreinu*) – how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our inheritance! (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, page 27, with my emendations for clarity, parentheses my own)

The first mention of this passage is found in the *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon* (Ninth Century). It is imperative to recognize that Rav Amram did not compose this section. Instead, the purpose of his work was to report, and thereby effectively formalize, the

liturgical practices prevalent in the Babylonia of his day. Hence, the origin of this section predated Rav Amram's classic work by an indeterminate number of years.

In my estimation, Simchat Torah's underlying rationale is found in the words, "We are fortunate (*Ashreinu*) – how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our inheritance" – one of the most popular phrases we sing and dance to during the course of the *Hakafot* (Seven Circuits). *Ashreinu* follows the introductory statement, "we are obligated to thank You, praise You, glorify You, bless, sanctify, and offer praise and thanks to Your Name." This phrase is, perhaps, one of the preeminent formulations of *hakaret hatov* (recognition of the good) in our liturgy. No wonder we are so fortunate! No wonder we give such effusive thanks! Our inheritance (*yerushatainu*) is the Torah itself, the words of the Creator of the Universe! "Moshe commanded us the Torah, it is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Yaakov" (*Sefer Devarim* 33:4).

I believe we are now in a better position to understand why Simchat Torah was created. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) wanted to designate a day to give voice to our innermost feelings of *hakaret hatov* to the Almighty for bestowing upon us His gift of the Torah. They wanted a day reserved for the thanks, praise and glorification of His ineffable Name – through absolute joy. Therefore, on Simchat Torah we strive to emulate *David Hamelech* (King David) who danced with passionate abandon when the *Aron Hakodesh* (Holy Ark) was brought to Jerusalem (*Sefer Shmuel* II:6:5). Moreover, we try with our entire being to fulfill King David's beautiful and inspirational words: "Serve the L-rd with joy (*simcha*) come before Him with praise." (*Sefer Tehillim* 100:2, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

May this Simchat Torah be the time when we reconnect to Hashem by demonstrating *hakaret hatov* through our joy, praise and love of Him as never before. In this way, may we truly serve Hashem in *simcha* and praise. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom

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