

Yizkor Sermon | Shemini Atzeret
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Yichud and Yizkor

As we were escorted from the *huppah*, friends and family dancing and singing around us, we were brought to a room just across the hall from the sanctuary, a platter of food from the cocktail hour awaiting our arrival, favorite drinks chilled and poured on the counter. And outside the doorway stood two of Rebecca's closest family friends—perhaps two of our tallest and most intimidating looking friends, hands crossed and sunglasses on, making sure that only our parents would enter and then, after helping Rebecca bustle her dress, making sure that they exited the room to leave the two of us alone for just a few minutes. This is called *yichud*, the time immediately following a traditional Jewish wedding when the couple is alone together. In the most religious of Jewish circles, men and women who are not married and not related do not spend time alone together, and thus this moment marks a new reality for the couple—they are married, their relationship has transformed. Many generations ago, it was a time for the consummation of the marriage, but nowadays, even in the most traditional circles, it is a time for the couple to catch their breath, to speak with one another, to have a bite to eat and a sip to drink, before they emerge from *yichud*, pass by the guards, the *shomrim*, and dance the night away with family and friends. It is one small intimate moment for the couple to be together.

According to the Netivot Shalom, the 20th century Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, Shemini Atzeret is like *yichud*, one brief intimate moment together.¹ He explains

¹ Netivot Shalom, Volume Bet, Third Essay on Sukkot.

that Sukkot is *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our joy, because Sukkot is a reenactment of the marriage between God and the people of Israel. When we enter the *sukkah*, we enter the *huppah*, the marriage canopy for the sanctification of our relationship with God. This is one of the most joyous moments of that relationship. *Shir HaShirim*, Song of Songs, narrates a complicated love story, which the rabbis have read as an allegory for this relationship between God and Israel. The first chapter includes these words, הַבִּיאֲנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָדָיו, "The king has brought me to his chamber," נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָהּ בְּךָ, "Let us delight and rejoice in your love."² Entering the *huppah* and entering the *sukkah* are both moments of joy, celebration, and love. Which is why, when the days of Sukkot end and Shemini Atzeret begins, we see this day as *yichud*, the intimate moment to be with one another after the wedding ceremony is finally complete.

The *sukkah* reminds us of the *huppah* in that it is a fragile and vulnerable structure, with an impermanent roof, unfinished sides, typically erected for a brief period of time. If we relied on the *sukkah* as our permanent housing for the year, we would be exposed to the elements, suffering through bitter cold winters and sweating through scorching hot summers. If we relied on the *huppah* as the entirety of our marriage, we would likewise be ill-equipped to deal with the realities of marriage yet ahead. The *huppah* is only the beginning. It is barely the foundation. The couple must work to build something greater in time. In the ideal scenario, marriage becomes sturdier and better grounded because of the relationship that is built over time and into the future. That is *yichud* and that is Shemini Atzeret: the future of the relationship, the magnificent alongside the mundane, that which sustains the relationship.

² Song of Songs 1:4.

What makes the experience of *yichud* so intimate is that it is radically mundane. In *yichud* you take a few minutes to adjust your wedding gown, or retie your bowtie. You probably use the bathroom. You almost certainly eat and drink. You look at one another and you talk. Outside the room, guests experience the lavish and celebratory atmosphere of a wedding, and the couple inside the room is engaged in these most mundane things: eating, drinking, using the restroom. But it is the context that makes these things so special. Anyone who has had the great privilege of standing beneath the *huppah*, in whatever role you might be serving, knows that it is stressful, exciting, tense, and joyous all at the same time. You might be secluded beneath the wedding canopy with only the rabbi and parents nearby, but hundreds of people are watching this moment unfold, and it is hard to forget that this entire experience is on display. The same is true for Sukkot—we step into these humble huts for the week to celebrate with one another, but I cannot ignore the fact that the my neighbors peer at our backyard for the week, wondering why we have chosen to spend so much time outdoors this particular week of the year. And then there is *yichud*, the couple is swept away and given a moment of privacy. That is Shemini Atzeret, when we are no longer required to eat, sleep, and drink in the sukkah, so we return the privacy of our permanent homes and resume the mundane tasks of life indoors.

Shemini Atzeret is not a particularly glamorous festival. It has no unique rituals of its own. But it has all the other trappings of a festival: we recite Hallel in the service, we make kiddush as we gather for festival meals, we desist from the proscribed categories of work. The beauty of this moment is that this is it. After a season of holidays with complex preparations, liturgies, and rituals, Shemini Atzeret is radically mundane, and that is what makes it so

wonderful. After Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, this is the festival that we really desire, this is what we need, one simple, intimate moment together.

In a few moments, we will rise to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. Yizkor takes on different meanings throughout the year, depending upon when we recite these prayers. Today, on Shemini Atzeret, we recite Yizkor in this final intimate moment of the holiday season. We will not recite these prayers again until Pesach, when the world is reborn with the arrival of spring. This moment of Yizkor is our last chance of this season to commune with our departed loved ones, to feel their abiding presence, to just be together with them and to remember the typical and the mundane moments of being together, enjoying one another's company.

When we remember our loved ones at Yizkor on Shemini Atzeret, we do so knowing that just as *yichud* ends, so does this holiday. The experience ends, but the memories remain. The newly married couple emerges from *yichud* for their great celebration, but ultimately life becomes normal. The couple learns to live together, with the mundane and the awesome, the boring and the exciting, and every moment between. But they carry with them the memory of their wedding day and its joy, and they strive to infuse their relationship with those memories each and every day. So, too, with the memories of our departed loved ones. We remember them on this day and strive to infuse our lives with those memories. We remember the significant moments—weddings, b'nai mitzvah, birthdays, and holidays—and we remember the more mundane moments—a shared meal, a brief conversation, a hand held. May these precious, intimate, and radically mundane memories be the ones that we call to mind on this Shemini Atzeret, and may they bring us both comfort and joy in these final moments of the holiday season.