

## “On never Being done”

Shmini Atzeret/Simchat Torah 5781

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Even though we refer to the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot as “Simchat Torah,” the Talmud itself is not aware of this term. In the Gemara, the 9<sup>th</sup> day is simply the second day of Shmini Atzeres, or Yom Tov Sheni of the last day of Sukkot.

Simchat Torah came about only as result of the historical adoption of the Babylonian custom of finishing the Torah at the end of Sukkot (following the Babylonian annual cycle instead of the Eretz Yisraeli triennial cycle) combined with a second day of the last day of Yom Tov which was just begging for some content. But whatever its historical origin, Simchat Torah is now one of the most important days on our calendar as it marks the great completion and celebration of the Torah.

A question that is often asked is what exactly is the difference between Shavuot and Simchat Torah? Both holidays seem to be celebrating the Torah and its importance in our lives. The most common answer to this question is that while Shavuot celebrates Kabbalat Hatorah (receiving of the Torah), Simchat Torah celebrates the Siyum (or completion) of the Torah. While I believe that this answer is mostly accurate, I would like to amend it slightly. Simchat Torah celebrates both the Completion and the restarting of the Torah!

We don't just finish it and have a party. We finish it, begin it again and then have a party! This theme can be found in many customs and laws of Simchat Torah.

Chatan Torah / Chatan Bereishit - The custom is to honor two men with receiving the final aliyah of V'zot Habracha and the first aiyah of Bereishit (at Beth Sholom, we also honor two women as Kallat Torah and Kallat Bereishit!). But this really begs the question. If the real reading for Simchat Torah is V'zot Habracha (the final parsha) then why read the first section of Bereishit, especially since the gemara does not even mention the reading of Bereishit on simchat torah and we are anyways planning on reading it the next shabbat - Shabbat Bereishit?

The Mishna Berura (Orach Chaim 668) - quoting the Tur - says something very insightful.

ולהכי רגילין להתחיל מיד בראשית שלא יהא פתחון פה לשטן לקטרג לומר כבר סיימו אותה ואינם רוצים

לקרותה עוד

The reason we begin right away with Bereishit is so that Satan doesn't have an opening to say, “now that they finished it, they don't want to read it again.”

I think a similar lesson can be derived from the Haftorah of the day. The gemara says that the Haftorah for Simchat Torah would have been the Book of Kings (1) chapter 9. (**Homework** - go read that chapter and figure out why that was originally proposed). But already starting in the medieval era, a custom emerged to read the first chapter of the book of Joshua. It is as if to say that now that we have completed the Torah, we don't stop. We continue the story with the book of Joshua.

This lesson can also be derived with the celebratory Hadran paragraph that we read everytime we do a siyum. We have just finished a Masechet (tractate) or Seder (order) or even the entire Talmud. And what do we say - Hadran - we return to you oh tractate or Talmud.

In other words, in Judaism we don't really celebrate completing things because we have never really completed anything. Our study is a work in progress because we are a work in progress. We always change so we must look back at the same texts and learn them again.

Our tradition was worried that if we finished V'zot Habracha and even waited a few days to begin Bereishit, we might get the false sense that we are finished. We are done. And this is perhaps the most dangerous idea to Jewish life and learning.

On Shmini Atzeret we say Yizkor. This Yizkor is of course connected to Simchat Torah as in Israel they say Yizkor on Simchat Torah. I think in a certain sense, Yizkor is also a Hadran Alach (we return to you). We have hopefully had many years together with our loved ones who we are remembering but we would never say, "it was a wonderful relationship and now we move on to the next thing." Instead we say, "we return to you." We say that the relationship never ends and that just like our torah study every year is enriched and enhanced because we are new people, so too our relationships with deceased loved ones, also continues to change and grow as we change and grow. Yizkor is the time when we say Hadran Alach and go back to the same relationships and let them continue to grow.

This year has changed everyone in significant ways. Nobody is the same person that they were on Sukkot 5780. So it is impossible for us to approach a new cycle of the Torah with the feeling that how can we be excited to learn this material that we have studied and completed so many times. We are new, so the material will be new and have new ways of inspiring us and guiding as we face the challenges for the year ahead.

Wishing everyone a Chag Sameach!