That Lingering Feeling
Shmini Azteres 2010
Rabbi Yosie Levine
The Jewish Center

Mike and Eddie are avid golfers. Every week they meet up to play 18 holes at their local country club. One day they’re out on the course and Mike is about to chip onto the green. In the distance, he sees a funeral procession on the road behind the golf course. He stops mid-swing, puts his golf club down, takes off his cap, closes his eyes, and bows his head in silent tribute.

Eddie is blown away: “That is the just kindest and most sensitive gesture. That was so thoughtful of you. I’m touched.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Mike says. “We were married for 35 years.”

Lost in the hubbub of this very full and very long holiday is the section of the Torah we read just a few moments ago. It was an excerpt from Parshat Rosh. The Passuk mentions the so we understand the basic justification for reading this selection on Yom Tov. But it’s not just our today. It’s actually the Passuk on the last day of every holiday. We read it at the end of Pesach. We read it at the end of Shavuot. And we read it today – effectively the last day of Sukkot. To borrow a pitching metaphor in anticipation of the upcoming playoff season, this section is the closer of the laining community.

Contained within it, though, is the mention of a special mitzvah that’s never mentioned anywhere else in the Torah. After you bring the korban pesach, the pasuk says:

In the morning you shall start back on your journey home.

Rashi, quoting the Sifri, writes that this verse is the scriptural source for a mitzvah called – staying overnight in the Temple.

The pasuk says you’ll go home in the morning. Speaking to every pilgrim – every Jew who had journeyed to Jerusalem for the holiday – it requires him or her to remain in the precincts of the Temple for one more night. When three stars emerge and Yom Tov has finally come to an end, you’re not permitted to leave until morning.

The obvious question is why. The holiday is over. You’ve offered up your sacrifices; you’ve performed the necessary mitzvos; you’ve discharged your obligations with grace. You’re a model Jew. Now you just want to catch the late flight and get home: back to all the parts of your life that you’ve left behind. So what’s stopping you? Why does the Torah demand that you delay your return home until morning?
It’s a particularly relevant question today because it captures the very essence of שמחת הスーパー גלעד. God tells us, It’s true. Sukkos is over. The mitzvos are complete. But stay behind for just a short time more. Linger a while longer.

Why? What’s the value in lingering?

As we stand at the crossroads between the culmination of our holiday season and the special day we call שמחת הראיה, allow me to suggest four answers to this question – four ways that we can think about what we might gain by lingering at the close of the holiday rather than returning to the everyday routines of our lives.

First, and perhaps most obviously, lingering is our way of allowing for a moment of absorption. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argues, the mitzvah to remain in Jerusalem rather than rushing back home is an opportunity to soak up all the feelings and thoughts that you’ve gathered up over the Yom Tov: “At every offering in the sanctuary the bringer must tarry in its surroundings, [so] that we first collect our thoughts in its vicinity, allow the impression we have gathered to mature in the still night, so that then, with our clear morning thoughts spiritually enriched, we can carry that treasure, as the true blessing of the sanctuary, back to our homely hearths.”

Think of all your favorite moments from this past month of חגים? What were the sparks of inspiration? What are the ideas, connections, themes, texts, tunes or people that moved you over these past three weeks? Take a moment – take a day – the Torah says – to stop and reflect on just what it is you want to take with you going forward.

Second, this extra time gives us a chance to look back and notice what we may have missed in the course of all our busy-ness. We were so taken with the Sukkah and the Arba Minim and our davening. Did we stop to pay attention to who was absent? Before everyone scatters about once again, the Torah calls for a time for everyone to be together in one location: either within the walls of the Old City or within the walls of your local shul. Undistracted by the day’s mitzvah or social obligations, look around and see the people. Who’s missing? Where are they?

Interlaced with the mitzvos of the chagim are the mitzvos of caring for the disaffected and the underprivileged. Over and again the Torah says:

ושמהת עלפ האלואקר את האלק פעל יבש ומים ואמיים ולאיר רכיבר מיהו והיהו והיהו והיהו והיהו והיהו

 Kurdistan.

Celebrate with your family, but be sure to include the stranger, the widow and the orphan among you.

Even retrospectively, I would argue, your simcha is only valuable if it sharpens your capacity to care about the disenfranchised. If you haven’t done it already, do it now. Look around the room. Notice the people who are missing or hurting in some way. Who’s looking for a job? Who’s battling an illness? Who’s alone? As this new year begins in earnest, what’s your role going to be as their friend?
Third, creating times and spaces for people to just be opens up untold possibilities for connection. Time is stopped. It’s the moment you’ve discovered that your Blackberry has an off switch. There’s no place to go.

Visitors from communities outside of New York are invariably blown away by the crush of people at The Jewish Center Kiddush. Then they’re even more blown away by the crush of people not actually interested in Kiddush, but who are just here. And they ask me, “Does anything come of all this talking and socializing? Are young people actually meeting?”

The answer is yes. In fact, when The Jewish Center was founded 93 years ago, one of its express purposes was to create a facility for social gathering – a center for members of The Jewish community to come together and meet one another.

About a week and a half ago, I heard the wonderful news that two Jewish Center members became engaged: To each other no less. They met downstairs in our auditorium as they celebrated together at the Young Leadership for Rabbi Ariel and Jessica Rackovsky.

It’s a message that extends well beyond the call of the day. We have a beautiful community and beautiful shul. Relish the time you spend here. It’s a bracha. Don’t be so anxious to leave. One of the treasures for which you’ve been searching may be right here in this room. And if they’re not, they’re almost surely downstairs at Kiddush.

Finally, we have a moment to reflect back and think about the people with whom we used to spend Yom Tov who were not with us this year. It wouldn’t be quite appropriate to call for this kind of difficult emotional energy prospectively. To spend time bemoaning the absence of people we love at the beginning of the chag would surely embitter the sweetness of the festival. But how fitting it is to look back on the Yom Tov that’s just concluded and feel the whole left by those who have passed on.

Perhaps it used to be easier. We’re not in Jerusalem. We don’t have a Temple, the very walls of which were so suffused with holiness that our mere proximity to them would elevate us.

But never has the need to linger been more relevant and more valuable than to our generation. We’re so busy, so caught up in the routines of our lives. Not just with golf – and not just with work. We could be caught up with chesed projects or taking care of someone who’s sick or advocating for Israel or davening too much. OK – that one’s probably not the issue. We’re doing important things with our time and I don’t want to minimize that for a second.

But the ethic of pausing until the morning to just be – should never be undervalued. It’s about breaking to absorb and take in what’s just passed; it’s about noticing the needs of the people around you; it’s about making time to connect with others; and it’s about reflecting on who is absent.
This is the very meaning of שָׁצוֹר. A stoppage. A pause. A window in time.

Sukkos is the holiday of לְאֹדוֹר גְלִילָה. So I guess it’s appropriate that when we think about lingering, we do it in the most elaborate way possible. In a matter of hours, in Israel – Shmini Atzeres will be all over. We, however, will linger and linger: today, tomorrow, Shabbos. We’ll just keep right on going.

Perhaps it’s in our nature to miss work when we stop and miss stopping when we go back to work. But the clock, for a change, isn’t ticking. Savor these moments. With an extra month added to our Jewish calendar this year, they won’t soon come again. These hours have the potential to be transformative, if only we allow them to be so.