

Parshat Shemini Atzeret 5777

The krias Hatorah for Shemini Atzeres comes from the latter half of parshas Re'eh, (Chapter 14). On yom tov, this parsha is the “extra leining” that we read each of the shalosh regalim for the additional day that we celebrate outside of Israel.

On Pesach and Shavous we have the shorter version of the leining starting from Kol Hachoch, which allows for just five aliyos, unless the last day of the chag falls on Shabbat, when we add the extra two aliyot commencing with Aser Te'aser. The Shulchan Aruch states that we should follow the same procedure on Shemini Atzeres ie the shorter version if it falls on a weekday and only the longer version if we need 7 aliyos. However the Mishna Berura brings the minhag which we are used to that on Shmini Atzeres, whether the Chag falls on a weekday or a Shabbat we always add the Aser Te'aser portion.

The source for this minhag is the Tur, brought down by the Magen Avraham who states that because this is Chag Ha'asif, the time of year when the produce is gathered in from the fields and Maasrot and gifts to the poor were traditionally made by the farmers, it is appropriate to extend the reading to Aser Te'aser which has the mitzvot of the tithes and tzedaka contained within.

The Gemara in Gittin notes that the double expression Aser Te'aser teaches us that one who tithes and in particular gives tzedaka will merit great wealth – Aser bishvil she'titaser; tithe in order that you should become wealthy. This is brought by chazal in other places where we are taught that if we want to “test” Hashem the only legitimate approach is to give tzedaka and to see if it is at least repaid once, and hopefully repaid many times over. Indeed stories are told of people giving away their possessions to those less fortunate than themselves and then being rewarded in another way just a short time later.

However, the phrase of giving in order that one will become rich needs some explanation on a peshat level. How should we understand gaining wealth from giving it away; although if we have to, we sometimes leave teachings of chazal to things which happen but we don't understand why, it is always better to find a logical way to understand the teaching, if we can. Two such approaches may be as follows:

R Shimon Shkop suggests that we are Hashem's treasurer of all material possessions that we have in this world. Some people are given more to look after

and some less, each coming with respective challenges. However someone who understands that a regular portion of the wealth which they are holding needs to be reapportioned to others who are less fortunate shows that he is a good treasurer. Therefore Hashem grants that person a larger pot to manage for the coming season, with the knowledge that the money will be again distributed accordingly.

Rav Shwab takes an alternative approach. He says that the brocho of wealth promised by the gemoro does not mean having a large bank balance but having the middo of someach bechelko, being satisfied with ones portion. The possuk therefore tells us that if one gives away a portion of his funds to tzedaka he will merit being someone who is satisfied with what he has. We can understand this as either that although being satisfied is not a natural human emotion, this is the brocho promised by Hashem. Alternatively, we can understand the brocho by saying that in giving away some of what is mine, and I still have enough to feed myself and my family, I recognise that I can manage with less than I previously thought.

This focus on tzedaka also explains why we say the Yizkor memorial prayer on Shemini Atzeres, the penultimate day of the chag, and not like all other yomim tovim when we say it on the last day of the chag. As the leining contains the mitzvah of tzedaka and it is customary to pledge charity when one says yizkor, it is appropriate that yizkor is said together with the Aser Te'aser leining.

Perhaps we can give an alternative explanation for the reading Aser Te'aser on Shmeni Atzeret in Chutz La'aretz. When we leined this parsha earlier in the year, it was, in parshat Re'eh, which always falls on or just before Rosh Chodesh Elul, when we started to say Ledovid Hashem. On Shmeni Atzeret we finish saying Ledovid in Chutz La'aretz. We therefore come back to the same leining and ask ourselves, have we achieved any of the commitments that we aspired at the beginning of Elul. Has this period uplifted us so that both our bein odom lamokom and bein odom lachaveiro are on a new, improved level. If they are, then we can confidently go into Simchat torah and say one of the key phrases of the day, being “Ata Haretia Ladat Ki Hashem Hu HaElokim, Ein Od Milvado”; that we have created a unique bond with the Almighty that we are dedicated to him and in turn we know that He will look after our needs.