

When Tears and Glee Kiss: The Marriage of Shemini Atzeret and Simḥat Torah

Shemini Atzeret 5772 Sermon

by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

In Israel, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simḥat Torah* are celebrated together. It makes for an interesting juxtaposition of moods as *Hakafot* and the celebratory calling of *Hatan Torah* and *Hatan B'reshit* give way to the doleful tones of *Yizkor*. The calling of the bridegrooms to the Torah is actually the echo of an ancient celebration that took place on the Shabbat immediately following a young couple's wedding, while the memorial prayers recited for the dead call to mind the funeral services of our loved ones. It is very odd, indeed, on this one day to -- symbolically speaking -- attend a funeral and a wedding all wrapped into one service. The Israeli writer, Aryeh Avivi, describes this scene in one Israeli synagogue:

The merriment stops, overpowered by a change in the climate; nevertheless, here and there, are still seen signs of rebellion against the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of tears. The people obligated to recite *Yizkor* gather in the vicinity of the reader's lectern; and in the western part of the synagogue others are assembled and drink, toasting each other *öl'hayyim!* Life and death are face to face; there is rivalry between tears and mirth. At one moment mourning seems dominant, at another gladness. So it is, life and death meet, joy and sorrow are coupled, a tear and glee kiss. The order of life and the shadows of the dead are mingled. The recalling of the souls of the departed and the rejoicing of the Torah are as one. Is that possible? Indeed, it is . . .

Here in the diaspora we separate the distinct emotion of *Shemini Atzeret* from that of *Simḥat Torah*. Today is serious, tonight will be fun. Today our *Hazzan* will wear a *kittel* and chant to a pleading melody *Tefillat Geshem*, the Prayer for Rain in Israel; tonight we'll bang the lectern and sing *presto con vivace* (that's Latin for *öpsyched and pumpedö*!). Today we'll pray for the dead, tonight we'll sing and dance with the living. Today is for adults, tonight is for kids. Right?

Or perhaps not. . . In the recent past *Simḥat Torah* -- along with Purim -- has become very much a holiday for children. Look around at Purim and you will see virtually every child in costume, but relatively few adults. Look around at the sanctuary on *Simḥat Torah* and you will

see that a sizable number of adults choose to be spectators; they smile with pleasure as they watch children and teens sing and dance, but when we go outside to dance with the Torah, they all stay behind to shmooze in sanctuary, preferring not to join in.

When it comes to the melancholy of *Yizkor* we adults are maximally participatory -- come the Mourners' Kaddish virtually every person in the room will join in chanting. Indeed, because the Kaddish is defined by Jewish Law as a responsive prayer, I always take care NOT to recite the Kaddish during *Yizkor* to ensure that at least one person in the room answers at the proper time with the requisite responses. The *Kaddish* of *Yizkor* elicits 100% participation, but not the dancing of *Simhat Torah*. Why?

Some of it undoubtedly has to do with orthopedic ailments of one sort or another. Or perhaps we just don't have the same energy as our children and grandchildren; it is intimidating sometimes to see how fast they move and how long they can go without tiring. Yet conceivably we could dance at our own pace . . . if it's slower, so be it. Yet I suspect that the reason so many adults don't dance, even those able to, has nothing to do with physical fitness.

Over time we adults are conditioned not to express emotions in public. There are so many times that people with a legitimate reason to cry break down in my presence and then say, "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to," as if the expression of an appropriate sentiment constituted some *faux pas* of sorts. What is true at one end of the emotional spectrum is no less true at the other end. To show our joy too zealously as an adult, to caper about and engage in antics, to wear a silly costume in public, to shout and sing are seen as unseemly. That sort of enthusiasm is fine for kids who, after all, don't know any better. But for grown-ups, well, it seems so childish.

In our lives we have myriad relationships: with spouses, children, friends. In those relationships at times there is ambivalence, even in the best of them. We don't always hold hands or make goo-goo eyes with our beloved; there are moments when we may argue or disagree. Still, we understand the need to celebrate the relationships of which we are a part, and that, above and beyond our gratitude for the blessing of love in our lives, celebration is itself a

necessary act of affirmation vital to the ongoing health of the relationship.

If you don't believe me, feel free to conduct the following experiment: At your child's next birthday, feign ignorance of the date and see how he or she reacts. Alternatively, if you are married pretend to forget the date of your wedding anniversary, act surprised when your spouse questions your omission, and then pay close attention to what happens next!

The same is no less true of our relationship with Judaism. There are *mitzvot* that we love and practice with zest; we question the value of others, ignore some, or perhaps feel guilty at times for those we don't do. We may wish we knew more about what the Torah teaches. Yet to have a relationship with Torah requires that at times we simply celebrate its existence in our lives -- for precisely the same reason we observe anniversaries and birthdays. Dancing on *Simhat Torah* is not just about being grateful for having a relationship with Torah, rather it's intrinsic to the relationship itself.

Part of being a healthy adult includes knowing that at times it is important to be more "childlike." To abandon our cerebral, dispassionate and disconnected selves, and to find a joyous self connected to the music of community and the choreography of Torah through the pounding dances and boisterous singing.

There have been times when *Simhat Torah* captured even the most staid of Jewish adults with its magic. Read Elie Wiesel's 1966 description of a *Simhat Torah celebration* in Moscow in his famous work, *The Jews of Silence*, and you will encounter the power of Torah to enfold Jews in its embrace. "They sang and danced," wrote Wiesel, "borne along on a crest that seemed incapable of breaking. Their faces reflected a special radiance, their eyes the age-old flame that burned in the house of their ancestors. They filled the whole street, spilled over into courtyards, dancing and singing, dancing and singing. They seemed to hover in mid air, Chagall-like, floating above the mass of shadows and colors below, above time, climbing a Jacob's ladder that reached to the heavens, if not higher." These were not pre-schoolers, but Jewish men and women in their 20s, 40s, 60s, even 80s.

Shavuot celebrates revelation. It is about the formation of a covenantal relationship with God. It is a time of celebration, to be sure, but one that partakes of a cerebral nature. We study Torah, rather than dance with it. On *Simhat Torah*, on the other hand, the focus is not on the giving of Torah, but on Torah itself as Israel's beloved companion. It is no accident that the liturgy and imagery of this holiday returns time and again to the theme of bride and groom. As with a bride and a groom dancing with each other at their wedding, on *Simhat Torah* we hold our loved one in our arms and dance the night away.

In antiquity Yom Kippur was a day on which betrothals were announced. The festival of Sukkot may be compared to a Jewish wedding, the Sukkah itself reminiscent of the bridegroom's tent to which the couple would retire for *Yihud*, the time of privacy and intimacy mandated by Jewish Law after a marriage ceremony. *Simhat Torah*, then, is nothing other than the joyous reception that follows. For the Jewish people in its entirety, betrothed on Yom Kippur and married on Sukkot, it would be unthinkable not to attend our own wedding reception, and inconceivable not to dance with our loved one, Torah.

Yizkor in the morning, dancing this evening. It is all part of the Jewish tree of life. עץ חיים -- It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and all who uphold it are blessed.ö Tonight don't be a spectator. Grasp a tree of life. Uphold it in your arms. Don't mourn. Dance. Be happy. Be blessed. Be in love. Be Jewish.