

מעֵינֵי תוֹרָה תְּשׁוּבָה תְּשׁוּבָה

Teshuvah: The Big Picture

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Throughout the month of *Elul*, in the weeks leading up to *Rosh HaShanah*, we focus on *teshuvah* in our rituals, in our personal lives and in our learning. We have the custom of blowing the *shofar* every day to awaken us to do *teshuvah*, as the Rambam says. We begin saying the paragraph of *Le-David Hashem*, a chapter in *Tehillim* focused on the desire to become closer to God. In our personal lives, many of us may be motivated during this time to take on new practices or to commit to an area in which we want to grow. Along these lines, two of the *parshiyot* we read during *Elul* relate to the theme of *teshuvah* as well.

Much of *Sefer Devarim* is a lengthy missive of Moshe *Rabbeinu* to the people of Israel, encouraging – and at times demanding – adherence to the commandments enumerated in the previous four books of the Torah. In the concluding sections of *Sefer Devarim*, which we read in the weeks preceding *Rosh HaShanah*, we read what is known as the *tochachah* or rebuke – the promises of God to exact severe punishment on and curse those who do not adhere to certain commandments. The first section of *tochachah* is found in *Parashat Ki Tavo*. The language and formulation of the *tochachah* in *Ki Tavo* is abrupt and direct. There is an extremely descriptive list of direct sins that one can potentially commit and a description of the things that are to befall a person who is in violation of these sinful acts.

The next *parashah*, *Parashat Nitzavim*, poses an interesting contrast to the *tochachah* of *Ki Tavo*. *Nitzavim* presents essentially yet another *tochachah* or rebuke cautioning the nation to remain faithful to God – to the point where, at first glance, this *parashah* may even seem

redundant and unnecessary. A closer look, however, reveals a subtle but significant difference between the two *parshiyot*. *Nitzavim* begins by saying “You all stand before God on this day... in order to enter into and complete your covenant with Him” (*Devarim* 29:9-11). The Torah continues by saying, “Maybe amongst you there’s someone whose heart is even now turning away from God... Maybe amongst you there’s a weed sprouting poison” (*Devarim* 29:17).

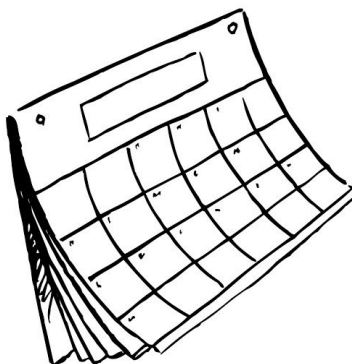
The Torah then warns this sinner that punishment awaits him. Nowhere in this section is any explicit, specific sin mentioned. Rather, this section focuses on the character and nature of one who may come to sin – a person whose heart is turning away from God – and warns that God recognizes the character traits and flaws of such a person and will respond accordingly.

A focused analysis of the rebukes presented in *Ki Tavo* and in *Nitzavim* reveals two different models of rebuke – the first being directed at the explicit and open sinner, and the second directed at one who does not even necessarily sin, but nevertheless harbors the seeds of sin and fosters those seeds and allows them to grow.

These two *parshiyot* represent two areas of our persona that need constant attention.

While the *Ki Tavo* model is more of a “do and don’t do” description of specific acts, the *Nitzavim* model is one which does not target our actions but our thoughts and minds – the essence of the human psyche.

Our religious life is about do’s and don’ts, no doubt, but those do’s and don’ts flow from a perspective of religious commitment and dedication. This time of year we have the opportunity to commit ourselves to better



observance of specific *mitzvot*, but it is also important during this time to not lose sight of the big picture and to spend time focusing more broadly on developing our Jewish identities and introspecting about who we are and where we want to go.

Simanim: Fruit or Fate?

Ariana Meyers ('22)

Every year leading up to *Rosh HaShanah*, Jewish households are filled with the sounds of little children singing about dipping apples in honey for a sweet new year – but where do they get this idea from? Also, on *Rosh HaShanah* night, after making *ha-motzi* there is a custom to have *simanim*, to eat apparently random foods and say short *tefillot* for good *mazal* for the coming year. However, there are a few questions that can be raised because of this widely accepted yet seemingly strange tradition.

What foods do we use, and can we modify the established list? Also, the Torah (*Vayikra* 19:26) says “*Lo tinachashu,*” do not practice divination. Included in the negative commandment of *nichush* is the prohibition of using signs or symbols to determine one’s fate or actions. Could practicing the *minhag* of *simanim* be a violation of this *issur de-Orayta*? Moreover, if this really is a violation of *nichush*, does that mean that *nichush* is effective (though forbidden), and that eating these foods and saying the *Yehi Ratzon tefillot* really impact our fate for the new year?

In the *Gemara* (*Keritot* 6a), Abaye says that, because signs are important, on *Rosh HaShanah* we should eat *kara* (squash), *karsi* (leek), *silka* (beet), *tamri* (dates) and *rubiya*. The *poskim* argue about what *rubiya* actually is. Rashi says it means clover, while others define it as fenugreek or a form of *kitniyot*, among other possibilities. In addition to Abaye’s list, the Rema (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 583) adds pomegranates,

and the *Tur* (*Orach Chayim* 583) adds the custom to dip apples in honey and to eat a sheep’s head. The *Magen Avraham* (583) adds that this list of foods is nonspecific, meaning you can always add or change what foods you use depending on the country and language spoken, as long as it matches up with a *berachah*. For example, he says that for *rubiya* one can use fish, because the food is meant to represent “*rabbim*,” being fruitful and multiplying. Even nowadays, people add new *simanim*. In Baltimore, it is said that Rav Heinemann has a *siman* that includes lettuce, half a raisin, and celery, in order that *HaShem* should “let us have a raise in salary.”



So how are the *simanim* not a violation of the prohibition of divination? The Meiri (*Horayot* 12a) says that the *simanim* are signs meant to arouse ourselves to do *teshuvah*. Therefore, there is no intrinsic value to eating the foods themselves, rather the significance is in what they represent. Through the *machloket* about what *rubiya* is, and the *Magen Avraham*’s opinion that one can use whatever they feel represents their *tefillah*, we see that the food itself is not the important part of the *simanim*, but rather it’s the *tefillot* and the *teshuvah* the *simanim* inspire us to do is the reason for eating *simanim* at all. In contrast, the Maharsha (*Horayot* 12a) states that there is significance to both the foods and the *tefillot*, but that *nichush* only applies when the outcome of the *siman* is negative; for example, believing that seeing a black cat is an unlucky omen. Here, the *simanim* for *Rosh HaShanah* have no negative impact upon our year, rather we can only hope for them to have a positive impact, if any at all, and are thus completely *muttar*.

It is not the foods that actually impact our year, but the actions that we do. During *U-Netaneh Tokef* on *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*, we say “*u-teshuvah u-tefillah u-tzedakah ma’avirin et ro’a ha-gezeirah.*” It is repentance, davening, and *tzedakah* that annul the evil decrees upon us.

It is not because of random foods that our future is affected, but instead because of the davening, *teshuvah*, and *tzedakah* that we are encouraged to do with inspiration from eating the foods.

The Impact of the *Shofar*

Aleeza Goldberg ('23)

Rosh HaShanah, the day that marks the beginning of the Jewish year, can teach us many valuable lessons about ourselves and our faith in *HaShem*. The *Torah* refers to *Rosh HaShanah* as *Yom Teru'ah*, since “*teru'ah*” is one of the *shofar*'s multiple sounds. *Rosh HaShanah* is a day when we reflect on our actions and *daven* to *HaShem* to be inscribed in the Book of Life. This *chag* takes place over the course of two powerful days during which we display a tremendous amount of *kavanah*. The whole Jewish nation prays for *HaShem* to forgive our transgressions throughout the year.

This scene in shul when we are anxiously awaiting the day of judgment is very similar to the setting at *Matan Torah* when the Jews were frightened while receiving the *Torah* and becoming a unified nation. Similar to blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah*, the *shofar* was blown at *Matan Torah*: “*Va-yehi va-yom ha-shelishi bi-hyot ha-boker, va-yehi kolot u-vrkaim ve-anan kaved al ha-har ve-kol shofar chazak me'od va-yecherad kol ha-am asher ba-machaneh*” – “on the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, lightening, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a loud sound of the *shofar*, and the entire nation that was in the camp trembled” (*Shemot* 19:16).

The fact that the *shofar* was blown at both of these pivotal moments in our history conveys valuable lessons. First, on *Rosh HaShanah* the *shofar* is blown to “wake us up” and to remind ourselves of the importance of *teshuvah* by acting as an alarm clock to reevaluate ourselves and the goals we have in place. Similarly, at

Matan Torah, the *shofar* startled the nation. This loud noise “woke up” the Jews in preparation for what they were about to witness. In both of these scenarios, the *shofar* is used to prepare the nation for what they are about to experience. On *Rosh HaShanah*, the *shofar* reminds each and every person who hears it to reflect on what they are going through in life, think about their goals, and to make positive changes to their everyday routines.

Additionally, there exists another similarity between these two important moments. At *Matan Torah*, our nation was given the *Torah*, which teaches that our ultimate goal is to bring *Mashiach* and to live in Israel serving *HaShem*. This is just like *Rosh HaShanah*, where we remind ourselves of what our goals are. While reflecting on our goals on *Rosh HaShanah*, one of our main focuses should be for *Mashiach* to come, as we say in the “*shofarot*” section of *Musaf*. *Matan Torah* marks the day we became a nation by joining together to aspire to the same goal. The *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah* reminds us of this very goal. When we hear the *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah*, it should remind us of the time at *Har Sinai* when the Jews had a clean slate and were just becoming a nation. Every year, we wish to have a clean slate to serve *HaShem* in order for us to improve ourselves and our actions. Both settings of *Matan Torah* and *Rosh HaShanah* teach us who we are as a nation and who we aspire to become. May everyone be granted a clean slate from *HaShem* and be inscribed in the Book of Life.



Why Extra *Shofar* Blasts on *Rosh HaShanah*?

Tali Fuchs ('23)

The *Gemara* in *Rosh HaShanah* 16b states, “After the first set of *shofar* blasts, a second set is sounded – in order to confuse the *satan*.”

Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier on ou.org brings up the famous question: If thirty *shofar* blasts on *Rosh*

HaShanah are sufficient to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *teki'at shofar*, why did *Chazal* establish another round of *shofar*-blowing, adding more sounds? The *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* answer that the *satan* keeps track of the blasts, and when the requirements are finished, he gets confused. He thinks to himself, "Why are the blasts continuing? It is probably the *shofar* for *Mashiach*!" The *satan* knows that when *Mashiach* comes, he will become unnecessary and will thus disappear, which scares him.

However, the *Mesillat Yesharim* explains that the *satan* is a warrior who knows trickery. He is clever and always watching people's actions to find the right time to strike. If this is the case, how could he assume every year that the *shofar* blows signal *Mashiach*'s coming? Why doesn't he learn from the previous year that he is only hearing additional *Rosh HaShanah shofar* blasts? Why does fear overwhelm him year after year?

An answer is that the *satan* is not physical, so he sees and understands things that we cannot. He knows how close *Mashiach* is and he wonders why *Mashiach* has not come.

Rabbi Shafier explains that the *satan* is like Einstein in the following anecdote. At age five, Einstein was sick and something happened that made him see the world differently: his father came into his room and gave him a compass to play with. After examining it, Einstein was amazed by the way the needle moved without touch or anything physical, as if there were a hidden force behind it. As a result, Einstein understood that there are extremely powerful unseen forces running the world, and he spent his life learning more about them.

Just like Einstein, the *satan* recognizes there is an unseen force running the world. Perhaps unlike Einstein, the *satan* understands that the unseen force is *HaShem*. He knows how powerful *HaShem*'s forces are and what can occur when a single *mitzvah* is performed. He is familiar with the concept of *teshuvah* and he knows that we, the Jewish people, do not understand it fully. If we just do *teshuvah*, the

exile would end and there would be pure happiness and joy in the world. Why, then, is it difficult for us to wait for *Mashiach*? We think, "*Mashiach* is so distant and foreign and he has not come all these years, so why should it be different this year? How should we think that we deserve it?" Yet, the *satan* thinks, "After all the dark times the Jewish people have been through, how has he not come?"

Therefore, after the *shofar* blast requirement is fulfilled, the *satan* waits in fear and dread – will this be it? This might be the time the Jewish people acknowledge *HaShem*'s true power. Ultimately, the *satan* waits in anticipation not because he is forgetful, but because he knows how close *Mashiach* really is.

Source: Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier, "The Footsteps of Moshiach."

<https://www.ou.org/holidays/the-footsteps-of-moshia-ch/>

Yom Kippur on Our Own

Shoshy Epstein ('21)

When my mom was in eighth grade, her principal asked her what the saddest day of the year was. Like many other kids that age would have said, she replied "*Yom Kippur*." Her principal responded that, in fact, *Yom Kippur* was the happiest day of the year, because that is the day on which *HaShem* gives us all the opportunity to be forgiven. Personally, I love *Yom Kippur*. I love the whole community coming together to sing and daven, and I love the feeling of being so close to *HaShem*, which I experience only on *Yom Kippur*.

But this year is different. Different shuls are doing different things, and it is clear that this *Yom Kippur* is not going to be the same. And the whole community coming together to do *teshuvah*? Not happening. What can we do this *Yom Kippur* to still feel the level of connection that can only be reached on the holiest day of the year, but this time, all on our own?

In the *Gemara (Avodah Zarah 17a)*, a story is told about Elazar ben Durdaya, who needed to

do *teshuvah* after straying from Judaism to pursue physical relationships. After traveling very far, he was told by a *zonah* that he was never going to be forgiven. That prompted him to realize that he wanted a relationship with *HaShem* and that he had been wasting his life until now. He first asked the mountains, “Mountains, will you ask forgiveness for me?” The mountains replied that they needed to ask forgiveness for themselves. He then asked the heavens and the earth. They also answered that they needed to ask forgiveness for themselves. Elazar ben Durdaya then went to the stars, the sun and the moon, but they all refused as well. He cried out: “*Ein ha-davar talui ela bi*” – “the matter falls entirely on me.” Just then, a voice came from the heavens and declared, “Elazer ben Durdaya is worthy of eternal life.” But was he? What did he do that was worthy of eternal life after being told that he would never be forgiven for his sins? The answer to that relates to our original question of how we can relate to *HaShem* and do *teshuvah* all on our own.

The story starts with Elazar ben Durdaya seeking the easy way out – he sought to blame his wrongdoings on others and then find forgiveness through them. Rashi on the *Gemara* explains that the mountains symbolized his parents, and he was asking them to declare that his lifestyle was not his fault, but rather because he was not supervised by them. He then turned to the heavens and earth, symbolizing the society and environment he lived in, as if to say that his surroundings were just as bad as he was. The sun and moon, Rashi goes on, represent the physicalities of the world; it was not Elazar ben Durdaya’s fault he came from a materialistic society. These pleas, however, were all rejected. So then Elazar ben Durdaya turned to the stars, blaming his wrongdoings on *mazal* (luck), but that was rejected as well. Finally, he realized that the responsibilities of his *teshuvah* fell upon him. He was responsible for his actions, and in realizing that, he became worthy of eternal life. This alone was enough. This shows us that in order to do *teshuvah* we do not need the congregation; we do not need the *chazzan* to

inspire us. Just taking responsibility for our own actions is enough. Once we accept that, we can fully do *teshuvah* all on our own.

There is an interesting explanation that takes this a step further. The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehudah Loew; 1520-1609) understood this story as an allegory, in which Elazar ben Durdaya is not just a name. Elazar is a juxtaposition of two words “*Kel ozer*,” “God helps,” and “*durdaya*” is the Aramaic word for the sediment which falls to the bottom of the wine barrel. Using this, the Maharal explains that the entire story is a metaphor used to convey that *HaShem* helps one who is like sediment at the bottom of a barrel, meaning He helps one who is at his lowest point, as long as he himself comes to the realization that it is up to him; a person must feel remorse, and must want change.

After hearing this story, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi famously announced, “*yesh koneh olamo be-sha’ah achat*,” “there are those who acquire their world in one instant.” There are people who work their whole lives for a place in *olam ha-ba*, but some, like Elazar ben Durdaya, can acquire it in just one moment of self-reflection and realization. Maybe this *Yom Kippur* can be our opportunity. It is different this year since we have to spend more time alone rather than with the community. But we see from this that sometimes we need to be alone. Sometimes we have to daven on our own in order to fully repent. Sometimes we have to be alone to realize that ultimately, our sins are our own sins, and now we have the chance and the privacy to own up to them. This is an opportunity, and my *berachah* to all of us is that we can take this unusual *Yom Kippur* and turn it into a meaningful day for each of us, whether we are together or apart.

Source:

Moshe Bogomilsky, “It All Depends on Me,” chabad.org

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2828613/jewish/It-All-Depends-On-Me.htm

The Surprising Connection between *Yom Kippur* and *Purim*

Sarah Solinga ('23)

For many of us, *Purim* felt “cancelled” this year. Not to worry, because we have a second shot at a totally opposite version of it! Seemingly, *Yom Kippur* and *Purim* could not be more different. Their names have totally different meanings, the former being the “Day of Atonement” and the latter translating to “lots.” Interestingly, however, they do have the same shoresh, “*p.u.r.*” R. Eliyahu Safran (ou.org) points out that another way to read *Yom Kippur* is *yom ke-pur*, a day like lots, a day like *Purim*. But how is *Yom Kippur* a day like *Purim*? Is the similarity in the names of the holidays just a coincidence, or is *HaShem* trying to tell us something?

One connection between the days is the concept of lots. On *Yom Kippur*, during the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*, a system of lots was used to determine which of two identical goats would be used as a *korban* and which would be thrown off into *Azazel*. A similar system was used by Haman *ha-rasha* to determine when he would destroy *Am Yisrael*.

Another relationship between *Purim* and *Yom Kippur* is the contrasting emphasis on the physical and the spiritual on each day. The Lubavitcher Rebbe *zt”l*, as paraphrased by chabad.org in “The *Pur* of *Purim*,” said that “*Yom Kippur* is the day that empowers the Jew to rise above the constraints of physicality and rationality. *Purim* is the day that empowers the Jew to live a physical life that is the vehicle for a supra-physical, supra-rational commitment to God.” This means that whereas *Yom Kippur* is not about being human, but being above the physical constraints that make us human, *Purim* emphasizes humans’ physical constraints through excessive eating and drinking, physical



acts which on *Purim* we dedicate to religious celebration and thanks to *HaShem*.

Similarly, Rabbi Safran (ou.org) says that most *chagim* are a balance of *gashmiyut* and *ruchniyut*, with time devoted to *HaShem* in *tefillah* and Torah learning, but also time for us to eat in festive meals. *Purim*, by contrast, is almost entirely *gashmiyut* – with fun, feasting and pure *simchah*, whereas *Yom Kippur* is a day almost exclusively devoted to *HaShem* where we spend all day in shul, fasting and pleading.

Although at first glance it seems as though *Yom Kippur* and *Purim* could not be more different, they are connected through their polarity. With one representing *ruchniyut*, and the other representing *gashmiyut*, together they create a perfect balance. From this we can learn that as *ovdei HaShem*, we must be devoted to our *Borei*, but that we are also allowed to live a little and take pleasure in the world that *HaShem* has blessed us with. We should not be too *ruchani* and forget to take care of ourselves and enjoy life, but we should also not forget about *HaShem* and what He does for us.

Sources:

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran, “*Purim* and *Yom Kippur*: An Odd Couple?” ou.org

https://www.ou.org/holidays/purim_and_yom_kippur

Rabbi Avi Shafran, “Dispatching the Goat.” chabad.org

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4590/jewish/Dispatching-the-Goat.htm

Chabad.org “The *Pur* of *Purim*.”

https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/2817/jewish/The-Pur-of-Purim.htm

Happiness On *Sukkot*

Adira Schreiber ('22)

On all of the *chagim* commanded to us in the *Torah*, we have a *mitzvah* to be happy and to celebrate, and *Sukkot* is no exception. “*Ve-samachta be-chagecha*,” says *Devarim* 16:14. The *Torah* commands us to rejoice on

both the holidays of *Sukkot* and *Shavu'ot*, and while the commandment to rejoice is not said about *Pesach*, we learn through rabbinic *derashot* that the *mitzvah* of *simchah* applies to *Pesach* as well. However, there seems to be an extra layer added to our happiness on *Sukkot*. Not only does it say “*ve-samachta be-chagecha*,” in relation to *Sukkot*, the *pasuk* also writes “*ve-hayita ach sameach*,” “And you should be very happy” (*Devarim* 16:15). Additionally, in the name of the holiday, “*zeman simchateinu*,” we see the importance of happiness on *Sukkot*.

If one were to think about it, it is a little strange that only on *Sukkot* do we have this extra emphasis on happiness. After all, on *Pesach* we celebrate *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim*, and on *Shavu'ot* we celebrate receiving the Torah. So why on *Sukkot* alone does the *pasuk* twice mention the importance of being happy? What is so special about *Sukkot* that when the *Beit HaMikdash* existed there was a *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah* – a special celebration – on every single day of the holiday?

There are a few answers to this question. One answer is that on *Sukkot*, by building the *sukkah*, and essentially “living” in it for seven days, it reinforces our trust in *HaShem* and reminds us how much we can and should rely on Him. As we say in the *berachah* of *Hashkivenu* during *Ma'ariv*, “*U-fros aleinu sukkat shelomecha*” – “spread over us Your shelter of peace.” The word “*sukkah*” is significant in this *tefillah*, and shows that the *sukkah* gives us a “shelter of peace.” When moving from our sturdy, roofed houses, to a temporary dwelling – a *sukkah* – we learn that a “shelter of peace” is not some strong, permanent building, but rather a place provided to us by *HaShem*. And this newfound *emunah* we have in *HaShem* enables us to acquire even more happiness. When we realize that everything is in *HaShem*'s hands, we learn to let go of some of the stress and anxiety that comes with everyday life, and just trust in Him that it will all work out because He knows what's best for each and every one of us.

A second answer is found in the *Sefat Emet*, by the Chasidic master R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905). The *Sefat Emet* explains that since *Yom Kippur* has just passed, and all our sins have been forgiven, it is a time of happiness and joy. However, not only are we happy that our sins have been forgiven, it is because our sins have been forgiven that we can solely focus on our relationship with *HaShem*, without an immense amount of fear. We have spent *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* davening and repenting, yet we may have been slightly motivated by the fear of what the year could bring. However, once our fate is sealed on *Yom Kippur*, on *Sukkot* we are truly able to celebrate with *HaShem*. With the trust that comes from dwelling in the *sukkah*, we can channel and build on our love for and our relationship with *HaShem*.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (*mitzvah* 324), says that the time of year that *Sukkot* takes place is a time of year where people are naturally happy. It is the culmination of the agricultural year, when the people were finally able to harvest their crops. They worked hard the whole year, and now they can finally see their work come to fruition. This is why people are naturally happy at this time – they have acquired food and are prepared for a whole new year. This is in line with the opinion of the Maharal who says that the epitome of true happiness is when we have reached a level of completion, in this case, when the crops have finally been harvested.

Especially during the time that we're living in, it's important to understand the *mitzvah* of happiness we have on *Sukkot*, and use the holiday of *Sukkot* to improve our relationship with and love for *HaShem*. Both when shaking the *arba'ah minim*, in the context of which the Torah (*Vayikra* 23:40) says “*u-smachtem lifnei HaShem*” – “rejoice in front of *HaShem*,” and when dwelling in the *sukkah* which teaches us to trust in *HaShem*, we will hopefully be able to harness the “natural” happiness that the time of year brings. Have a happy *Sukkot*!

Sheltering in Sickness and in Happiness

Leah Fischer ('23)

This year, we have been keeping our bodies safe by sheltering in place. Now, the time has come to celebrate *Sukkot*, which conveys a similar idea; we shelter in a specific place for eight days. How, then, is the act staying in a *Sukkah* different then staying in our houses for many months?

In fact, it is completely different. This *Sukkot*, we replenish our souls with happiness through the act of sheltering, as it says, "And you shall rejoice in your festivals, and you will be only happy" (*Devarim* 16:14). The point of the mandate set in place by the government, regarding the closing of many institutions, is to create a boundary between people to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Now, when we come together with this unrestrained joy, we are emotionally breaking those boundaries and allowing ourselves to once again become closer to friends and family through connections we make in relation to *HaShem*.

The Mystery of *Shemini Atzeret*

Risa Farber ('22)

Shemini Atzeret has always been one of the most mysterious holidays in the Jewish calendar. At first, it seems as though it is just a continuation of *Sukkot*, but really, it is one of the most unique days of the year.

Throughout *Sukkot*, seventy bulls would be sacrificed in the *Beit HaMikdash*, starting with thirteen on the first day and then decreasing by one each day after that. This was to represent the seventy nations and to ensure their well being. On *Shemini Atzeret*, however, only one bull was offered, which is learned from the words, "*par echad*" (*Bamidbar* 29:36). This single bull symbolizes the Jewish people, who stand apart from the seventy nations. Therefore, *Shemini Atzeret* celebrates the relationship between *HaShem* and His special people. It is a time for us to be with *HaShem* "one-on-one" after the week of "international" celebration that happens during *Sukkot*. *Bamidbar Rabbah* says that on *Shemini Atzeret*, *HaShem* is like a king who just finished hosting a celebration for everyone in the country. When the seven days of celebration were over, he asked his closest associate to a special party just for the two of them. This is what *HaShem* asks of us on *Shemini Atzeret*. *Sukkot* was the big celebration, but *Shemini Atzeret* is the special party just for us.

Similarly, the word "*atzeret*" comes from the *shoresh* "*atzar*," to stop. Rashi, on *Bamidbar* 29:36 says that this is *HaShem* asking us, His beloved people, to stop and stay with Him for one more day after *Sukkot*. Rashi compares this to children who are leaving their father. Their father says to them: "*kasheh alai peredatchem*," "Your departure is hard for me. Please linger for one more day."

In addition, the word "*shemini*" means eighth. According to the Maharal, the number seven represents the physical world. This is demonstrated in the number of days in a week, years in a *shemittah* cycle, and notes in a musical scale. The number eight represents going beyond the natural world, "*le-ma'alah min ha-teva*," transcending nature. *Shemini Atzeret* is a day in which the Jewish people celebrate their unique status, go beyond the natural world and become closer to *HaShem*. It is the perfect way to help close out the *Tishrei* season.

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