

Menucha: The Gift of All Gifts

Change is exciting, bringing with it the opportunity to reimagine, reevaluate, and reshape our lives while also solidifying and reaffirming timeless values and commitments. It also has a way of heightening insecurities, uncertainty, and concerns about the unknown.

All at once, change has the potential to be invigorating, frightening, emboldening, and frustrating. Yet the only way to go from one stage to the next is to work within those two poles.

Finding the balance is a fine idea. The question is, how?

There are a number of important traits and skills that enable us to move through change in a positive, encouraging way. Yet there is one that is the gift of all gifts, both on the individual and collective level, and it is found in the haftara for Shemini Atzeret.

Defining an Era

The scene begins with a young King Solomon finishing up a lengthy prayer to Hashem in front of the newly inaugurated Bet HaMikdash on behalf of the Jewish people. When he faces the crowd to usher them into the new and long-dreamed of ideal era of Jewish history, he opens his address with the following statement:

ברוך ה' אֲשֶׁר נָתַן מְנוּחָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לֹא נִכְלַד דְּבַר אֶחָד מִכֹּל דְּבָרֵי הַטּוֹב
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ.

Blessed is Hashem who gave menucha to His nation Israel, just as He said He would. Not a single word has failed of all the gracious promises that He made



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through His servant Moses.

Melachim I 8:56

As they begin a new chapter, Solomon wants the Jewish nation to know that they are beginning it with something special, something G-d given, that Hashem promised for generations: *menucha*. Several commentators, including Radak, conclude that this refers to respite from the harassment of enemies. Finally, after thousands of years of being concerned with emancipation, escape, and their overall security, the Jews are entering the long-promised epoch of *menucha*.

God's Gift

Oftentimes, *menucha* is translated as “rest” or “tranquility,” and while those are two aspects of what *menucha* is and feels like, they are not the full picture. To get a deeper sense of what *menucha* is, let's take a look at a scene from the Book of Rut. After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi is bidding farewell to her Moabit daughters-in-law as she embarks back on the journey to her homeland, Canaan. They've all suffered the tremendous loss of their husbands, and each must build their lives anew:

וְהָאִמְרָן נְעָמִי לְשֵׁתִי כִלְתִּי לְכָנָה שִׁבְנָה אִשָּׁה
לְבֵית אִמָּה יְעֵשָׂה [יְעֵשָׂה] ה' עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד כְּאִשָּׁר
עָשִׂיתֶם עִם הַמֹּתִים וְעַמְדִּי יִתֵּן ה' לָכֶם וּמִצָּאֵן
מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁה וְתִשְׁקֶן לָהֶן וְתִשְׁאָנֶנָּה

קוֹלָן וְתִבְרָכֶינָה.

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Each of you, go back and return to your mother's house, May Hashem deal kindly with you as you have dealt kindly with the deceased and with me. May G-d grant that each of you find menucha in the house of a husband.” And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping.

Rut 1:8-9

The Malbim points out that Naomi is wishing more than kindness for them, but also “a gift.” Whatever they choose — whether it is to live in their mother's home or to build new homes with new husbands — they should “dwell only in tranquility and calm. This will be Hashem's gift.” Whatever they choose, they should be at peace with that choice, without any doubts, regrets, or nagging questions. Essentially, she wishes them a sense of inner security, a grounding that comes from within, and for good reason: the gift of *menucha* is the freedom to live fully focused in the moment.

Redefining Living in the Moment

Over the centuries “living in the moment” has become associated with living a hedonistic lifestyle. However, not living in the moment can be just as damaging. When psychologists

Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert conducted a study¹ on mind-wandering and its effects on happiness, they found that 46.9 percent of the time, their subjects' thoughts were not focused on what they were doing in the present. Oftentimes, individuals were focused on something that happened in the past, or something that they were anticipating in the future. While this is natural — our brains are wired to recognize and protect us from danger and threat — it is equally important to be in touch with life as it is *actually* taking place.

A Natural Resource

One of the encouraging things about *menucha* is that it's a built in, natural part of the world and thus part of human nature. Though our fast-paced world may make it seem like it's something beyond us, it's a natural resource available to each and every person who is willing to work for it. When Rashi comments on the words "And G-d finished on the seventh day" (Bereshit 2:3), he explains, "what did

the world lack until then? *Menucha* — the Shabbat came, *menucha* came, and with that the work was complete." Only once the world had an outlet of *menucha* was it a finished product. This goes to show that no matter how far we feel from it, or how out of reach it may seem, a strong sense of inner security is accessible to us at all times.

Shaya Ostrov, LCSW, a therapist specializing in premarital and marital counseling and author of *The Menuchah Principle*, suggests using methods of mindfulness to get in touch with this part of ourselves: "Set aside time every day to meditate on what is really important in life. Shut off your technology during these times, so you can be alone with G-d, and with yourself."² Writing down what we learn in these moments is also a good way to bring our thoughts and values to life, and to have them for us whenever we need a reminder.

Giving Ourselves That Gift

Cultivating *menucha* isn't easy, and as Shlomo's and Naomi's stories

demonstrate, it takes work and effort. However, it's also something that is essential to our existence. We are partners with Hashem in creating that *menucha*, and in maintaining it. In times of change and transition, we crave certainty more than ever, and by being deeply in tune with what matters to us most, no matter what circumstances arise, we tap into an inner strength and focus that isn't easily swayed or diverted. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz commented that this is why the Torah was given in the desert — a place of transition and challenge.³ *Menucha* isn't freedom from struggle, it is the freedom to have a focus in life no matter what comes our way, and to, *b'ezrat Hashem*, appreciate our lives from moment to moment.

Endnotes

1 <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/11/wandering-mind-not-a-happy-mind/>

2 <https://www.ou.org/life/relationships/answer-commitment-phobia-part-ii-shaya-ostrov/>

3 <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/14239>



Menucha Plays a Role in the Sukkah Experience

כל שבעת הימים קורא ולומד בתוך הסוכה ... אמנם אם לפי עומק עיונו בלימודו קשה לו העיון בסוכה יכול ללמוד בביתו כיון שלימוד זה א"א לו בסוכה וק"ו הדברים דאם בצער הגוף אמרו דמצטער פטור מן הסוכה וכ"ש בעינוי נפש דתורה דצריך שתהא דעתו מיושבת עליו ולעניין תפלה ... נכון להתפלל בסוכה אם יש לו מקום מנוחה בסוכתו שיכול להתפלל שם

All seven days, one should read and study [Torah] in the sukkah. ... However, if by learning in the sukkah, it becomes difficult to concentrate on analysis of the text, one may learn in one's home since this type of study is not possible in the sukkah. This is logical because if [the rabbis] said that one is exempt from the sukkah for physical discomfort, certainly spiritual discomfort from the inability to study Torah properly with serenity [should serve as an exemption]. ... Regarding prayer, it is proper to pray in the sukkah if there is a place in the sukkah where one can pray in a state of menucha.

Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 639:19