



A Beit Midrash Zichron Dov Publication

Finding Our Way Back

Torah Reflections on
Thought, Speech, and Action
for the Yamim Noraim

Tishrei Companion | 5787



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Introduction

The month of Tishrei invites us on a profound journey of reflection, renewal, and spiritual growth. As we move through the High Holidays, we are called to engage in the observance of our mitzvot, while also in a deeper process of personal transformation. Jewish tradition teaches that complete *Avodat Hashem* is built upon three interconnected dimensions: מחשבה (thought), דיבור (speech), and מעשה (action).

In this Tishrei Companion, we have chosen to explore the High Holidays through the lens of these three pillars with our community leaders and shlichim across Canada. Each article offers an opportunity to deepen our awareness, elevate our words, and strengthen our actions as we journey from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur, Sukkot into Simchat Torah.

Positive thought gives our mitzvot meaning, intention, and direction. It is often the starting point of the entire spiritual process: when we cultivate a mindset of gratitude, optimism, and purpose, our words and actions naturally follow. A healthy and positive thought life is more likely to lead to uplifting speech and constructive behavior, creating a cycle of growth that begins within and radiates outward. Speech allows us to express our relationship with Hashem and with our peers through prayer, blessing, learning, and heartfelt communication. Action brings our values into reality, translating inspiration into tangible deeds that shape our lives and the world around us. Together, these three elements embody the Torah's vision of spiritual wholeness: "בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו": with your mouth, your heart, and your actions.

While this journey is deeply personal, it is never undertaken alone. Every individual act of growth contributes to the elevation of the collective *klal*, strengthening Am Yisrael as a whole and helping to create a more compassionate, moral, and uplifting communal environment. Together, our thoughts, words, and deeds have the power to transform not only ourselves, but the world around us.

We bless you and all of Am Yisrael with a year filled with positive thoughts, uplifting words, and meaningful actions. May this season of renewal inspire us to grow closer to Hashem, strengthen our bonds with one another, and deepen our commitment to Torah, mitzvot and the Land of Israel. May we merit to see the continued flourishing of *Medinat Yisrael* and those protecting it, and may our collective efforts help usher in a brighter future filled with unity and holiness towards a *geula shlema*.

Ktiva ve'Chatima Tova,

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov and Mizrahi Canada Teams

Why One Extra Mitzvah Isn't Enough: The Rambam's Unexpected Requirement for the Beinoni



Rabbi Dr. Seth N. Grauer
Rosh Yeshiva, Head of School, BAS
Chairman, Mizrahi Canada

We are all familiar with the famous Gemara in Massechet Rosh Hashana (16b). Rav Kruspedai teaches that on ראש השנה, three books are opened before הקב"ה: one for the completely righteous, one for the completely wicked, and one for the בינונים.

The Rambam, in the third chapter of הלכות תשובה, quotes this Gemara. Yet he makes a subtle but remarkable change. After describing the fate of the צדיק and the רשע, the Rambam writes: "בינוני, אם עשה תשובה נחתם לחיים, ואם לאו נחתם למיתה."

This is surprising. Why does the Rambam require תשובה? Why not simply say that the בינוני should perform another מצוה? If he is exactly balanced between merits and sins, one additional מצוה should tip the scales in his favor. Why insist upon the far more demanding process of תשובה?

The משנה raises a related question. Why can the בינוני not simply remain as he is and rely upon Divine mercy to tip the scales toward life?

His answer addresses both questions. Failing to do תשובה is not a neutral act. When הקב"ה grants us the opportunity to repair our mistakes, refusing to seize that opportunity is itself a failure. We do not have the option of saying, "No thank you," to תשובה.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, in שיחות מוסר, develops this idea further. He explains that we often misunderstand the phrase תלוין ועומדין. The בינוני is not waiting for judgment. He has already been judged. His judgment, however, has not yet been finalized. The רשע

receives no such opportunity. The **ב'ינו'**, despite standing under judgment, is granted a precious window during which the decree can still be transformed.

What does genuine **תשובה** look like?

The Rambam famously outlines four stages:

1. **עזיבת החטא**: abandoning the sin
2. **קבלה על העתיד**: resolving never to repeat it
3. **חרטה**: regretting the past
4. **וידוי**: verbal confession

At first glance, the order seems puzzling. Intuitively, one would expect **חרטה** to precede **קבלה על העתיד**. Indeed, **רבנו בחי** and **רב סעדיה גאון** present the process in that more natural sequence.

Perhaps, however, the Rambam is teaching us something profound about human nature.

The greatest obstacle to **תשובה** is not changing our behavior. It is confronting our past. Most people find it extraordinarily difficult to admit that they were wrong. We rationalize. We justify. We explain away our mistakes. We tell ourselves that everything happened for a reason and that our actions were not really so problematic after all.

Yet as long as we continue to defend our past, true **חרטה** remains impossible.

The Rambam therefore offers a different path. First, distance yourself from the sin. Next, commit yourself to a different future. At that stage, you have not yet been forced to relive every mistake or confront every failure. But once you have already changed direction and resolved to move forward differently, it becomes much easier to look backward honestly. Only then can genuine **חרטה** emerge. Only then can one arrive at authentic **וידוי**.

Perhaps this is one of the messages of the שופר.

The Rambam teaches that every one of us should view ourselves as a בִּינוּנִי. If so, every one of us stands in need of תשובה. While ראש השנה is not primarily a day of וידוי, it is the beginning of the תשובה process that culminates during עשרת ימי תשובה and reaches its peak on יום הכיפורים.

As we listen to the קול שופר, we should think about the first steps of that journey: leaving behind the habits and behaviors that distance us from הקב"ה, committing ourselves to a better future, and opening our hearts to the possibility of genuine חרטה.

May we merit to use this precious opportunity wisely. May הקב"ה forgive our sins, inscribe and seal us in the ספר החיים and bless us, our families, and our entire community with a year of חיים ברכה, peace, and goodness.

שנה טובה.

Child or Servant: How Do You Connect to Hashem?



Rabbi Ori Idels
Shaliach, Rosh Beit Midrash BAYT

If you had to describe your relationship with God, how would you define it? Do you feel like His child, or do you feel like His servant?

This is a question that challenges me every single time the community stands together on Rosh Hashanah, singing the ancient words of *Hayom Harat Olam*. As I contemplate my own spiritual life, I cannot help but wonder: When I do the will of Hashem, am I acting out of the robotic duty of a servant, or the loving devotion of a child?

Hayom Harat Olam

The words of the piyyut carry a haunting beauty:

היום הרת עולם
היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים
אם כבנים, אם כעבדים
אם כבנים – רחמינו כרחם אב על בנים
אם כעבדים – אם כעבדים עינינו לך תלויות עד שתחוננו ותוציא כאור
משפטנו
איום קדוש

*On this day, the world came into being;
On this day, He places in judgment— all the creatures of the worlds—
whether as children, or as servants;
if as children, have compassion on us as a father has compassion on his
children!
If as servants, our eyes are fixed on You until You favor us, and bring
forth our judgment Revered and Holy One!*

The poem opens with a profound truth: on this day, the universe was brought into being. Every year, the Almighty revisits that foundational moment, asking us, in essence, whether we are fulfilling our ultimate purpose. Rosh Hashana calls us to a deep *cheshbon hanefesh* - a moral audit of our souls. It forces us to examine the very nature of our commitment.

Two Models of Spiritual Service

Many commentators suggest that the servant represents fear, while the child represents love. But let us suggest a different distinction - one based not just on emotion, but on identity and responsibility.

1. The Servant Model: Compliance Without Connection

The relationship of a servant is defined by external pressure. A servant obeys because there is no choice. There is no intrinsic connection to the master's vision; there is only the desire to escape the burden.

We find a fascinating psychological insight in the Talmud (Berachot 35b), which describes a generation that looked for technical ways to exempt their produce from tithes. This is the servant mindset. It is a state of mind that views the Torah as a checklist of demands, constantly looking for a way to minimize the burden. It is compliance without connection.

2. The Child Model: The Unbreakable Bond

The child, by contrast, shares an essential, organic bond with the parent. A healthy child does not look for ways to escape the family; he looks for ways to belong. Even when a child stumbles, or acts out of fear, the foundational relationship remains entirely intact. Why? Because a child is a part of the parent's own story.

Ultimately, our own attitude creates the reality. When we realize that Hashem's commandments are not restrictions, but gifts given

for our own growth, our worldview shifts. We elevate ourselves from forced obedience to a profound, living connection.

The Mirror of Judgment

- The path we choose directly shapes how Hashem responds to us in the Heavenly court: **If we live as children**, Hashem relates to us with the ultimate mercy of a parent. As David HaMelech wrote in Tehillim: *"As a father has compassion on his children, so Hashem has compassion on those who revere Him."* A father's mercy is not weakness. It is the recognition that the bond of love is far stronger than any temporary failure. It allows room for forgiveness and growth.
- **If we live as servants**, we invoke a dynamic of distance. We are judged by the strict letter of the law, under the rigid gaze of a master. And since no human being is perfect, a servant standing before strict justice cannot rely on intimacy. They can only look up with pleading eyes, hoping for unearned grace: *"our eyes are fixed on You until You favor us."*

The Choice is Ours

As we stand before Hashem this Rosh Hashana and hear the moving notes of *Hayom Harat Olam*, we must not remain passive listeners. This prayer is not just a description of two theological options; it is a momentous personal choice.

We cannot choose how the year will unfold, but we can choose how we approach it.

This year, let us actively choose the path of the child. When we perform a mitzvah, let us look for the meaning, the beauty, and the love embedded within it. Let us transform duty into destiny, strengthen our bond with our Father, and step into the new year not as servants in retreat, but as children coming home.

The Shofar: A Prayer Beyond Words



Rabbi Yehuda Mann
Rosh Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

There is a fascinating custom in some communities to sound the shofar during the silent *Amidah* of Rosh Hashana.

At first glance, this seems astonishing. How can we perform another mitzvah in the middle of *Shemoneh Esrei*? Imagine if someone opened a Gemara to learn Daf Yomi, put on tefillin, or shook a lulav during the *Amidah*! We would immediately object. The *Amidah* is our private audience with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. It demands our full attention.

So why is the shofar different?

The answer is that the shofar is not merely another mitzvah. Many explain that the shofar is itself a form of tefillah - a prayer without words. The blasts of the shofar are not a distraction from prayer; they are part of the prayer itself.

But what is the meaning of a prayer without words?

I would like to suggest two beautiful ideas, both associated with the teachings of Rav Soloveitchik.

The Gemara tells of a man who stood before Rabbi Chanina and enthusiastically praised Hashem with a long list of descriptions. When he finished, Rabbi Chanina asked, “*Have you completed all the praises of your Master?*”

Sometimes, less is more.

The truth is that no human being possesses the words to adequately describe Hashem's greatness or thank Him for all the kindness He bestows upon us. If we truly began counting our blessings - our health, our families, our Torah, and the countless *chasadim* we enjoy every day - we would never finish.

How much do we owe the *Ribbono Shel Olam* simply for allowing us to stand in shul on Rosh Hashana? To hear *Shehecheyanu*? To be surrounded by loved ones? So many people who stood beside us last year are no longer here today.

At that moment, words fail us.

The cry of the shofar becomes a tefillah of gratitude that cannot be expressed in language. It is our neshama crying out, "*Thank You, Ribbono Shel Olam, for everything.*"

There is also a second message.

In *Avinu Malkein* we ask Hashem to "*accept our prayers with mercy and favor.*" Rav Soloveitchik wondered: if Hashem accepts our prayers willingly, why do we also need mercy?

He answered with a personal story. As a young scholar in Berlin, one of Europe's great cultural centers, he desperately wanted to remain there. When he received an offer to move to what many then considered a spiritual outpost - Boston - he prayed fervently that he be allowed to stay in Germany.

Yet Hashem did not grant that request.

Years later, Rav Soloveitchik reflected that this was one of the greatest kindnesses Hashem ever did for him. Had his prayers been answered, he would have remained in Germany during the 1930s. Instead, he moved to Boston in 1932 and went on to transform Torah life in North America.

How often do we pour our hearts out to Hashem and feel disappointed when the answer seems to be “no”? We sometimes think our tefillos were rejected. Yet perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps Hashem heard every word and, in His infinite mercy, knew that what we were asking for was not truly good for us.

This is the second message of the shofar.

After all our requests and hopes for the coming year, we add a prayer without words. It is as if we are saying:

“Ribbono Shel Olam, I have told You what I think I need. But ultimately, You know far better than I do what is truly best for me. Fill in the blank. Complete the prayer in the way that only You can.”

The shofar is the ultimate expression of *emunah* and *bitachon*. It reminds us that true tefillah is not only asking Hashem for what we want, but trusting Him to give us what we need.

May we merit this Rosh Hashana to hear not only the sound of the shofar, but its message. May our spoken prayers and our wordless cries rise before the *Kisei HaKavod*, and may the *Ribbono Shel Olam* accept them all *b'rachamim u'v'ratzon*, granting us and all of *Klal Yisrael* a year of life, health, growth and nachas.

Vetechezena Eineinu BeShuvcha LeTzion



Rabbi Nisan and Renana Asulin
Shlichim, Ottawa

Aseret Yemei Teshuva are unique days in the Jewish calendar. They are days when we pause the rush of daily life and reflect on the year that has passed. We examine our actions, our relationship with Hashem, our families, and our communities, and we ask ourselves: Who am I? What is my purpose in this world? And where do I hope to grow in the coming year?

For many of us, these days carry a special significance. Throughout the year, we are occupied with work, studies, raising children, and building vibrant Jewish communities. Yet during Aseret Yemei Teshuva, we are invited to step back and return to the deeper questions of Jewish identity. Not only how I live as a Jew, but also how I connect to the larger story of Am Yisrael.

Chazal teach that during these days, "*HaMelech BaSadeh*" - the King is in the field. As the prophet Yeshayahu teaches, "*Seek Hashem while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.*" Hashem opens a unique gateway of closeness, inviting us to draw near to Him. Yet this closeness is not merely a private matter. It is not limited to correcting a particular mistake or improving a specific behavior. *Teshuva* speaks to our sense of belonging, our identity, and the direction toward which we orient our lives.

Rav Kook writes: "*The most fundamental act of teshuva, which instantly brings light into the darkness, is for a person to return to his true self, to the very root of his soul.*" According to Rav Kook, *teshuva* is not merely regret over the past, it is a return to our authentic identity. A person returns to who he is truly meant to be.

Yet Rav Kook expands this idea beyond the individual. He teaches that the same principle applies to Am Yisrael as a whole. Thus he writes: *"If a person seeks to develop lofty ideas about teshuva in our time, yet fails to look toward the revealed signs of redemption and the dawning light of salvation, he will be unable to fully understand the truth of Torah."* In other words, in an era in which the Jewish people are returning to their land and witnessing the unfolding of national redemption, discussions of *teshuva* cannot be detached from the broader story of *Geulah*. Genuine *teshuva* is not only personal; it is also connected to the return of the nation to its land and its destiny.

When we reflect on the *Avodah* of Yom Kippur, we discover just how deeply it is connected to Yerushalayim and Eretz Yisrael. The holiest day of the year does not take place in an abstract setting. Every aspect of the Kohen Gadol's service was performed in the Beit HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. The climax of the day was his entry into the Kodesh HaKodashim, the holiest place in the world. Even the *Se'ir LaAzazel*, which played a central role in the atonement process of Am Yisrael, was sent into the Judean wilderness in Eretz Yisrael.

When we recite the *Seder HaAvodah* on Yom Kippur and pray for the restoration of the service in the Beit HaMikdash, we are not merely recalling a distant past. We are expressing a longing for a reality in which the *teshuva* of Am Yisrael can once again be fully realized in its natural place - Yerushalayim, the Holy City.

For thousands of years, Jews throughout the world lifted their eyes toward Yerushalayim. Even when they built flourishing communities, *batei kneset*, and *batei midrash*, they never ceased to pray: *"Vetechezena Eineinu BeShuvcha LeTzion BeRachamim."* Yerushalayim was never merely the direction of prayer, it was the direction of the Jewish heart.

Today as well, as we are privileged to live in strong and thriving Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora, we continue to look toward that same horizon. We invest in Jewish education, Torah learning, *chesed*, and communal life, striving to strengthen Jewish identity and pass it on to the next generation. Yet as we stand before Hashem during the Yamim Nora'im, seeking forgiveness, growth, and renewal, we can also hear another voice within our tefillot - the voice of the entire nation yearning to return to its source.

Aseret Yemei Teshuva remind us that *teshuva* is not only a personal journey, rather also a national one. We turn toward Yerushalayim in prayer, asking that not only our eyes be directed toward Tzion, but that our lives be directed there as well. For the complete *teshuva* of the individual is bound together with the *teshuva* of the nation, and the process that began in exile reaches its fullest expression in Eretz Yisrael, the place where the *Shechinah* dwells among Am Yisrael, and the place toward which our prayers and hopes have been directed throughout the generations.

The Hidden Kavanah of Yom Kippur



Rabbi Ezer Diena
Maggid Shiur

Throughout the Yamim Noraim season, we tend to be focused on ourselves. On Rosh Hashana, the underlying messaging seems to be somewhat self-centered, where we perform the *Simanim* ritual(s) and spend all day davening in shul to be written in the Book of Life, the Book of Tzaddikim.

One glaring example of this can be found in the general presentation of the very first Rashi of the Torah reading on Rosh Hashana (Bereishit 21:1). Rashi is bothered by the connection between the healing of Avimelech's house, and the conception and birth of Yitzchak. Although Rashi doesn't quite say it this way, Rashi is often presented as offering a "life hack" for getting what one wants: If you have a particular need, daven for another person who has the same need, and Hashem will make sure to answer you first. Although of course Avraham Avinu was not davening for Avimelech just in order that Hashem allow Sarah to conceive, Rashi is often presented in this manner.

Fast forward to the Aseret Yemei Teshuva, and we have other troublesome messaging. The Aseret Yemei Teshuva often incorporate a lot of personal chumrot and Tefillot. Along with that, once again presented in a somewhat inauthentic way, is the Mishnah's teaching (Yoma 8:9) that Hashem doesn't forgive you on Yom Kippur unless you ask forgiveness of your friends first, so if you want to be forgiven by Hashem, you'd better make up with them. The appeasement of others seems to be just another step in pursuing personal salvation.

Yet, on Yom Kippur, we are supposed to rise above this transactional approach to *Bein Adam Lachaveiro*. When the Kohen Gadol exits the Kodesh Hakodashim after performing the *Avodah* on Yom Hakippurim, he adds a strange sentence to the end of his prayer (Yerushalmi Yoma 5:2, as adapted for our Machzorim):

וְעַל אַנְשֵׁי הַשָּׂרֹן הָיָה אֹמֵר: יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְפָּנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאַלְקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
שֶׁלֹּא יַעֲשׂוּ בְּתֵיהֶם קְבָרֵיהֶם.

And on the people of Sharon he would say: May it be Your Will, Hashem our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, that their houses not become their graves.

The Kohen Gadol, right before he appeared to the nation (and our singing of “*Mar’eh Kohen*”) would pray for a small, seemingly random segment of the Jewish People, whose houses were built on particularly dangerous terrain that might have led to their collapse. He wasn’t from Sharon. He didn’t have a best friend living there. He might not have known anyone there, and he certainly didn’t have the same need as they did. But he still davened for them at this special moment.

There are stories told of the most recent Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who spent his break on Yom Kippur arranging for help for others who he didn’t know. There is the famous story of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who skipped *Kol Nidrei* to help a young child. That’s because one of the goals of Yom Kippur is to stop just thinking about ourselves and to really start thinking about others. Not as a tool to advance our own agenda, but because we should rise above that.

This is the true meaning of those earlier commentaries. Avraham was genuinely davening for Avimelech’s family, so Hashem rewarded him for that. Similarly, Hashem helps remind us to make peace with those we may have harmed, by not having Yom Kippur

atone for those sins.

This focus is not just a separate element of Yom Kippur, but inherent in the main task of the day, the *Viduy*. All of the sections we recite are written in the plural, because it's not just us we are asking forgiveness for, but for ourselves, our inner circles, and eventually, for all of *Klal Yisrael*. Even if we didn't perform a specific sin, we can still ask for atonement for those who did. We can still pray and think of others that we know, those that we don't know, and hopefully thereby merit to soon restore the scene of the Kohen Gadol praying for the people of Sharon as he leaves the Kodesh Hakodashim in peace!

The Duality of Speech



Rabbi Ari Faust
Rosh KTM & Mizrachi Montreal

In one of his most beloved novels, SY Agnon uses Tehilla, the main character after whom the story is named, to introduce the notion that we have a predetermined number of words to speak in our lifetime:

When I was a child, I was quite the chatterbox. From the moment I got up until the moment I went to bed, the stream of words from my mouth never ceased. There was an old man who lived nearby. To those who delighted in my chatter, he would say: "What a pity for this child. If she squanders all her words in childhood, what will remain for her old age?" Fear fell upon me, and I worried lest by tomorrow I would be mute.

Tehilla decided from that moment to consider every spoken word. At the age of 104, Tehilla accredits her old age to her scarcity of speech – she still hasn't completed her designated word bank.

Now, whether Agnon intends for us to believe this idea literally, meaning that he or Tehilla actually believes it, or whether it is meant as a metaphor, is left deliberately open. But frankly, that's not the point. Tehilla lives with an unusual awareness that words are precious. Just as one should not squander money, time, or strength, one should not squander speech. But this is not just the "economy of words". Tehilla speaks little because she treats speech as something sacred. Or to frame it differently: Tehilla understands that speech is one of the deepest expressions of our humanity.

From the onset of existence, we were the sole creature who could speak. Animals can communicate, but it is only homo sapiens who

can formulate ideas, give words to emotions, and give expression to ideals. This is taught by Onkelos immediately upon the creation of man, who translates נפש חיה (living being) as רוח ממללא – a *speaking soul* (Bereishit 2:7). Just as Hashem created the world in speech (Bereishit 1:1), human beings are meant to preserve and develop the world with our speech.

Perhaps this is the reason that speech takes such a prominent place in the traditions of Yom Kippur and its liturgy. The hallmark of the *tefilot* of Yom Kippur is the section of *viduy* – which Rav Hirsch translates as “*admission to oneself*”. For the Rambam, “verbal admission” is the central mitzvah of the *teshuva* process (Hil. Teshuva 1:1). Not only that, according to Rambam it is not enough to feel shame or regret over past misgivings, but a person must literally enunciate in speech and say out loud these feelings of *teshuva* (2:2):

He must verbally express and state these matters which he resolved in his heart.

So on one hand, we express our humanity through speech. The power of speech makes us human and what we do with the power of speech defines what *kind* of humans we are. We are powerful and therefore need to take responsibility.

But there is another dimension to speech that is expressed on Yom Kippur, and that is the limitations of speech. The great philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: “*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*”

In one of the most powerful moments in the Musaf repetition, we solemnly read the אלה אזכרה poem – describing the horrible death of the Ten Martyrs. The poem, hinting at the words of Moshe Rabbeinu (Talmud Menachot 29b), reflects on the death of such pious and righteous sages and asks the poignant question:

“This is the reward for Torah study?!” The response: *“Be silent! Such it arose in the divine thought.”*

There are limitations to human comprehension and thus there are limitations to speech. Rabbi Nachman Mi'Breslov comments:

“Such was the Divine thought” – a matter that exists beyond the realm of words. Therefore, this is a question before which one must be silent, for it belongs to the category of 'it arose in thought', where no language exists by which it can be satisfactorily explained.

Speech on one hand expresses our ultimate strength – our advantage in the animal kingdom – but also our greatest vulnerability – we are temporal, limited. It is as such that we stand humbly before Hashem and seek atonement for our shortcomings. On Yom Kippur we acknowledge the existential duality of what it means to be human – we are great enough to be partners with God in creation, yet humble enough to recognize that we are limited. We are a speaking soul. We are – human.

Kapparah: Does G-d Grant Atonement or Do People?



Rabbi Shmuel Leshner
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On the eve of Yom Kippur, Jews around the world ask each other for forgiveness. This practice is in accordance with the Mishnah in Yoma (85b) that teaches that while Yom Kippur atones for sins between man and G-d, it does not atone for interpersonal sins. Therefore, before entering a day dedicated to repentance and asking G-d to forgive us, we must first do right by the people we have wronged.

However, why wait until the eve of Yom Kippur? If you wronged someone, would it not make more sense to seek forgiveness right away? The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 606) seems to codify this delay, titling the relevant chapter *“To Appease Your Fellow on Erev Yom Kippur.”* This question raises a deeper issue: who ultimately grants atonement for mitzvot *bein adam lichaveiro*, sins committed against another person?

Judaism emphasizes both commandments between man and G-d and those between man and his fellow. Based on the Mishnah cited above, R. Daniel Z. Feldman (*The Right and the Good*) notes the power this places in human hands — G-d, so to speak, delegates atonement to the wronged party, who is within his rights to withhold it.

The Rosh (Peah 1:1) likewise stresses the primacy of interpersonal mitzvot. The first Mishnah in Peah, recited each morning, lists mitzvot whose fruits we enjoy in this world while the principal awaits us in the World-To-Come — honoring parents, acts of kindness, hospitality, visiting the sick, making peace between people. The Rosh explains that these are mitzvot between man and his fellow, “[because] G-d... has greater desire for those mitzvot,

by which one also pleases other people, than for the mitzvot between man and his Maker.”

Yet we have not always lived up to this. The Talmud (Bava Batra 165a) already recognized laxity in ethical and business matters, and Torah leaders across the generations bemoaned neglect of interpersonal mitzvot relative to strict ritual observance. One reason may be the sheer difficulty of repair.

In his thorough analysis of *lashon hara* (evil speech) in contemporary society, R. Feldman relates an old Jewish folk-tale of a man who came to his rabbi to seek advice on how to repent for the offense of speaking *lashon hara*:

“The rabbi advised him that it is indeed possible, albeit complicated. He instructed him to take a pillow – the old-fashioned kind, with feathers inside – and to cut a hole in it and then walk around his town, allowing the feathers to escape from the pillow. Having done that, he returned to the rabbi and asked him for the next instruction. The second step was significantly harder than the first: “now pick up all the feathers.”

However, although it may be complex, G-d in His kindness only expects of us what is humanly possible. And although the best policy for healing and repairing relationships that have suffered is prevention, that is not always an option. We must forge a path towards forgiveness no matter how difficult. In the words of our Sages, *“One who comes to be purified is given assistance [by divine sources]”* (Menachot 29b).

Seeking Forgiveness: The Debate Between Rav Yisrael Salanter and the Chafetz Chayim

Sometimes seeking forgiveness can be halachically problematic. R. Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, reviewed an early manuscript of the Chafetz Chayim, written by R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, on the topic of *lashon hara*. He objected to one ruling:

that someone who slandered another without the victim's knowledge must seek forgiveness and specify the offense. In R. Salanter's view, one cannot achieve atonement at another's expense — revealing the slander would only inflict more pain. The Chafetz Chayim based his ruling on Rabbeinu Yonah's Shaarei Teshuva (3:207), but R. Salanter appeared to have remained unmoved.

Interestingly, it is possible that even the Chafetz Chayim may have had a change of heart about this ruling in his other work, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, the Mishnah Berurah, published after Sefer Chafetz Chayim. There (O.C. 606:3) he cites the Magen Avraham who rules that if a request for forgiveness would embarrass the victim, the offender should not specify the wrongdoing — aligning with R. Salanter's position.

According to R. Salanter, in this situation, what should the repentant person wishing to achieve atonement do? According to one reading of R. Salanter, this person has no recourse and no atonement can be achieved. However, R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (Az Nidberu 7:66; Teshuvot VeHanhagot 5:397) reports in the name of R. Salanter that there is another option. One can ask forgiveness on Erev Yom Kippur, when everyone is doing so, avoiding suspicion and sparing the victim the painful details. R. Moshe Sternbuch (Moadim U'Zmanim 1:54) suggests that according to R. Dessler, this answers our original question. The communal custom of asking forgiveness on Erev Yom Kippur is done precisely so people can ask for a general forgiveness without divulging what they did.

R. Mordechai Willig points to the Tefillas Zakah of the Chayei Adam recited before Kol Nidrei, in which we forgive anyone who sinned against us and ask to be forgiven in turn. Even without knowing the details, we can both forgive and seek forgiveness.

Not in the Place of G-d

In a shiur in Bet Shemesh, R. Asher Weiss raised more difficulties with seeking forgiveness from others. What if the wronged party has died? The Gemara (Yoma 87a) states that in such a case, one is supposed to bring ten people to the grave. However, what if the offender dies first? The Minchat Chinnuch (mitzvah 364) holds he is stuck, since *“one cannot achieve atonement after death.”* It is said in the name of the Chazon Ish that if a victim forgives only outwardly while withholding it in his heart, no atonement can be achieved, because forgiveness must come from the heart. Similarly, R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv is quoted as ruling that one cannot gain atonement for harming a minor or someone mentally impaired, since they cannot halakhically grant forgiveness (Bava Metziah 21a).

In his Minchat Asher (Vayikra, Kedoshim, 41:5), R. Weiss disagrees with all of the above rulings. In his view, the Mishnah's requirement to appease one's fellow, he argues, does not mean a human holds the power of atonement:

“For is he in the place of G-d?!” After all, once one asks forgiveness three times unsuccessfully, he is excused and gains atonement anyway. Asking for forgiveness is part of the repentance process, not its essence. Therefore, when reconciliation is impossible or would only cause pain, atonement can still come from G-d.”

R. Weiss notes the Mishnah's precise wording: Yom Kippur does not atone *“until he appeases his fellow”* — not *“until his fellow is appeased.”* What matters is doing all within one's power; once that effort is made, atonement follows.

R. Mordechai Willig concurs with R. Weiss' approach. Whenever someone seeks his forgiveness, R. Willig “beats them to it,” forgiving them before they can explain what they did to him. He marshals the rulings of Shulchan Aruch that one need only ask for

forgiveness three times and the instruction to visit the grave of the wrong party is no longer living (O.C. 606:1 and 2). Both of these show that forgiveness itself is not always fundamental. What is required is a sincere, complete effort at reconciliation, with atonement ultimately coming from G-d.

As our Sages say, “*The Torah was not given to angels*” (Yoma 30a). According to R. Willig and R. Weiss, G-d alone grants atonement. Therefore, if reconciliation is impossible, *teshuva* for mitzvot *bein adam lichaveiro* can still be achieved.

Between Yom Kippur and Sukkot

The Bridge Between: Creating a Space for Kedusha



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After arguably one of the most intense and spiritually uplifting days of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, we are encouraged to do something seemingly surprising. Rather than remaining in the bubble of holiness created by a day spent fasting, praying, and seeking forgiveness, the *Shulchan Aruch* teaches:

והמדקדקים מתחילים מיד במוצאי יום כפור בעשיית הסוכה כדי
לצאת ממצוה אל מצוה

"Those who are scrupulous begin immediately at the conclusion of Yom Kippur to construct the sukkah, in order to go from one mitzvah to another mitzvah." (Orach Chaim 624:5)

Why do we leave the spiritual heights of Yom Kippur to engage in something so physical and laborious?

The answer lies in the profound connection between Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

In Parshat Emor, the Torah commands:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן... וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים

"On the first day you shall take the fruit of a beautiful tree... and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God for seven days." (Vayikra 23:40)

The obvious question is: the first day of what? Sukkot begins on the fifteenth of Tishrei, not the first.

One beautiful explanation is that this is the first day of a new relationship with Hashem.

Throughout Elul and the Yamim Noraim, we become acutely aware of our actions and their consequences. We recite *Selichot*, hear the shofar, add *L'David Hashem Ori*, and spend weeks engaged in introspection. This is *teshuva me'yirah*, repentance motivated by awe and fear of judgment.

While this is an essential stage of growth, it is not meant to be permanent. A relationship based solely on fear can inspire change, but it cannot sustain closeness.

The five days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot therefore become a bridge. Having repaired our relationship with Hashem through awe, we begin rebuilding it through love.

Our mindset shifts from:

"I must serve Hashem because I fear the consequences if I don't,"

to:

"I cannot imagine living any other way because I love Hashem and recognize His constant kindness."

Viewed this way, "the first day" is not merely the first day of Sukkot, it is the first day of serving Hashem primarily through ahavah.

There is another transition taking place.

Yom Kippur is the one day of the year when we resemble angels. We abstain from physical pleasures and spend almost every moment immersed in tefillah. Yet Judaism never intended us to remain angels. The real challenge is returning to everyday life without losing the inspiration we have gained.

Perhaps this is why the very first mitzvah after Yom Kippur is to build a sukkah.

Building is physical. It is tangible. It requires effort. Rather than allowing the inspiration of Yom Kippur to remain an emotional experience, Judaism demands that we transform it into action.

There is something beautifully symbolic about picking up a hammer immediately after *Neilah*. With every nail we drive into the sukkah, we are telling Hashem, *"I do not merely aspire to become a better person, I am building that person."*

The days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot are therefore filled with purposeful activity: constructing the sukkah, preparing the *arba minim*, and getting ready for Yom Tov. Chazal teach that during these days people are so occupied with mitzvot that they scarcely have time to sin. The best way to preserve inspiration is not to admire it, but to act upon it.

Perhaps this is the lasting lesson of these five remarkable days. Yom Kippur changes our hearts, but the days that follow change our lives. Spiritual growth is measured not only by the prayers we offer or the tears we shed, but by what we build afterwards.

As we leave the shul after *Neilah*, we are reminded that Judaism's greatest moments are not meant to remain moments. They are meant to become foundations. We take the inspiration of Yom Kippur, pick up our tools, and begin building a holier future.

Bringing Kedusha Home



Rabbi Ami Yunger
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At first glance, Sukkot almost feels like a step backwards.

After the holiness and intensity of Yom Kippur, we return to food, comfort, and physical life. We leave behind the white clothing, the fasting, the hours in shul, and instead spend the week eating meals, hosting guests, and sitting in a fragile outdoor home.

Just days after separating ourselves so completely from the physical world, the Torah leads us back into ordinary life.

But perhaps Sukkot is not a departure from the process of the Yamim Noraim at all. Perhaps it is where that process was always meant to lead.

Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are not simply three separate Yamim Tovim spread across the calendar year. Together, they trace a progression in how *kedusha* moves through the world.

The journey begins on Pesach. *Chametz* is almost entirely excluded from the *Mizbeach*. With very few exceptions, it has no place within the *avodah* of the Beit Hamikdash. *Chametz* represents expansion and physicality, flour and water that rise, swell, and become fuller in appearance. In the language of Chazal and many *mefarshim*, it often symbolizes the *yetzer hara*, pride, appetite, and the pull of the physical world itself.

Pesach therefore begins with separation. Before the physical world can be elevated, it must first be restrained. The Jewish people leave Mitzrayim eating matzah, the simplest form of bread, stripped of expansion and excess.

Then comes Shavuot.

On Shavuot, something remarkable happens. The Torah commands that the *Shte HaLechem* be brought specifically from *chametz*. The very substance usually excluded from the Mikdash is now brought directly into the Beit Hamikdash itself as part of the *avodah*.

The Maharal explains in Tiferet Yisrael that this is deeply connected to Matan Torah. Torah does not ask a person to escape the material world. It teaches a person how to elevate it. Human ambition, creativity, desire, and physical life itself can all become part of *avodat Hashem*.

But on Shavuot, that elevation still takes place in the Mikdash. The physical world is brought before Hashem, but only within the holiest and most carefully controlled setting.

Sukkot completes the process.

On the first night of Sukkot, there is a Torah obligation to eat in the Sukkah. Chazal derive this through the *gezeirah shavah* of “*tet vav, tet vav*,” connecting the fifteenth of Tishrei to the fifteenth of Nissan. Just as there is a mitzvah to eat matzah on the first night of Pesach, there is a mitzvah to eat bread in the Sukkah on the first night of Sukkot, and unlike Pesach, that bread is specifically *chametz*.

That contrast is the key.

On Pesach, *chametz* is removed from Jewish life. On Shavuot, *chametz* enters the Mikdash. But on Sukkot, *chametz* itself is brought into the home.

The Sukkah transforms ordinary living into *avodah*. We eat

regular meals there, sit with family there, host guests there, speak, sing, and dwell there throughout the week. The activities of ordinary life do not disappear. They become sanctified. The same *chametz* that could not appear on Pesach now becomes part of the mitzvah experience of Sukkot.

The same pattern appears in the Yamim Noraim themselves. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are days of awe, judgment, *teshuva*, and restraint. On Yom Kippur, a Jew steps away from physical comfort entirely, from eating and drinking to washing and wearing leather shoes, in order to stand before Hashem with greater purity and focus.

Then Sukkot arrives, and physical life returns, but transformed. Eating becomes a mitzvah. Drinking becomes part of *simchat Yom Tov*. Living itself becomes *avodat Hashem*.

Sukkot therefore completes both journeys. It completes the movement from Pesach to Shavuot to Sukkot, and it completes the movement from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur to Sukkot.

First, there is separation from the physical world. Then the physical world is brought into the Mikdash. Finally, the *kedusha* of the Mikdash itself is carried back into the home.

The final goal is not to escape ordinary life, but to create a life in which even ordinary things are lived before Hashem.

The Magic of Ushpizin



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One of my absolute favorite moments as a child was the moment of inviting the Ushpizin into the Sukkah. We were so excited to "host" Avraham, Yitzchak, Yosef, and the rest of the famous אושפיזין in our סוכה.

It took us some time until we were able to understand and crack the magic of the Ushpizin- what makes them special and what caught our attention specifically there. It seems to us that our years of Shlichut here in Toronto have managed to sharpen an important perspective for us.

During our years of Shlichut, we discovered that a huge part of our work - and perhaps that of many Shlichim - revolves around one central axis: hosting and being hosted, a modern form of אושפיזין.

For us personally as well, the special people we met (and still meet) during our Shlichut, whether while hosting or being hosted, are a very significant part of what makes our Shlichut what it is.

The ability to step outside the boundaries of the classroom and meet the parents, children, grandfathers, and grandmothers opens another genuine and honest window into the hearts and souls of many community members.

Often, this became even more significant when we had the privilege of hosting alumni we had previously taught, in our home back in Israel.

But it seems to us that חג הסוכות and the custom of the Ushpizin direct us to look a little deeper inward at that beloved מנהג.

Who are your Guests? Our guests will not always necessarily be אֲבוֹנוּ or יֵעֲקֹב or דּוֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ, but the question that should always occupy us is whether this encounter elevates and advances us as people, as a family, and as a community, or whether it remains only at the level of politeness and mundane chatter.

Our Ushpizin guests arrive after the recitation of the famous נִסּוּחַ. This תְּפִילָה helps us focus our intentions and pay attention to the nature of our discourse with the guests: what words we choose, what the character of the conversation is, and how much of it will engage with positive content and illuminating words.

The fact that we host and are hosted specifically in temporary dwellings "obligates" us to focus on the core, paying attention primarily to the human encounter taking place among the participants, and less focus on gossip or insignificant topics.

Stepping outside the walls of the house often allows for creative vocal combinations as well. Families join together in song, giving tangible meaning to the words of Chazal:

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּיִין לֵישֵׁב בְּסוּכָה אַחַת.

"All of Israel are worthy to sit in a single Sukkah" (Sukkah 27b).

Chazal taught us in Masechet Shabbat (127a):

גְּדוּלַּת הַכִּנְסַת אֹרְחִים יוֹתֵר מִקְבֻלַּת פְּנֵי שְׂכִינָה.

Hospitality to guests is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence, and it seems to us that based on the points discussed above, we can also try to understand why.

Receiving the שְׂכִינָה occurs, for the most part, under defined, clear, and "stable" conditions. Hosting (or being hosted), on the other hand, frequently requires us to step significantly out of our comfort zone - a step that, when it does occur, transforms us into better and more worthy servants of Hashem.

So, what do you say, would you like to come over for a אָחַד meal?

Why Is Sukkot One of the Three Regalim?



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The Three Regalim, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, stand at the centre of the Jewish calendar. In the time of the Beit HaMikdash, Jews travelled to Jerusalem, brought offerings, and celebrated together as a nation.

Yet when we compare the Three Regalim, one of them seems different.

Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, the moment when Bnei Yisrael left slavery and became an independent nation. Before the Exodus, we were an extended family descended from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Through the Exodus, we became a people.

Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Jewish people received their laws, values, identity, and national purpose.

It is therefore easy to understand why Pesach and Shavuot are central festivals. They commemorate the two most formative events in the creation of the Jewish people: becoming a nation and receiving the Torah.

But what about Sukkot?

The Torah explains:

“לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דִרְתֵּיכֶם כִּי בִסְכוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל”

“So that your generations will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in sukkot” (Vayikra 23:43).

However, Chazal disagree about what these sukkot were:

“עֲנֵנֵי כְבוֹד הָיוּ, דִּבְרֵי רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר: סִכּוֹת מִמָּשׁ עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.”

Rabbi Eliezer says that they were the miraculous Clouds of Glory that protected the Jewish people in the desert. Rabbi Akiva says that they were actual huts built for shelter (Sukkah 11b).

Whether Sukkot commemorates a miracle or simple shelters, it does not seem comparable to the Exodus or the giving of the Torah. Why, then, is it one of the Three Regalim?

To approach this question, we should examine the main type of religious experience associated with each of the Three Regalim.

Shavuot emphasizes Torah study. It is connected to thought, understanding, and intellectual engagement.

Pesach emphasizes speech and communication. The Torah commands:

“וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ”

“You shall tell your child” (Shemot 13:8).

We ask questions, tell the story of the Exodus, explain its meaning, and sing the Haggadah.

Sukkot, by contrast, emphasizes physical action. We build a sukkah, carry boards, measure walls, arrange the *sechach*, examine the *hadassim*, and take the four species.

Before Sukkot, hardware stores are suddenly filled with observant Jews buying wood, screws, cable ties, and tools. For some, the last time they entered such a store may have been before the previous Sukkot. Rabbis discuss the sukkah’s height, the position of the *sechach*, and how many leaves remain on a *hadass*.

Sukkot is deeply concerned with the physical details of this world. This becomes even clearer when we compare Sukkot to Yom Kippur, which comes only a few days earlier.

On Yom Kippur, we separate ourselves from ordinary physical life. We do not eat or drink. We spend the day in prayer and repentance. It is a holy experience, but clearly not a sustainable way of life. We can barely live this way for one day. The thought of a “two-day Yom Kippur” seems almost impossible.

Sukkot presents the opposite movement. Instead of leaving ordinary life behind, we bring holiness into ordinary life.

Chazal state:

”תִּשְׁבוּ כְּעֵין תְּדוּרוֹ”

“You shall dwell in the sukkah in the same manner that you live in your home.”

We eat there, drink there, invite guests and Ushpizin, talk there, and even sleep there. What other mitzvah can a person fulfil while sleeping? In the sukkah, a person can perform a mitzvah simply by being present.

But when Judaism enters real life, it must also deal with complexity and compromise.

The ideal sukkah has four walls. Yet a sukkah can also be valid with three walls, or even with two walls and part of a third. The message is not that the minimum should become the ideal. Four walls remain the complete form. But when that is not possible, the Torah teaches us how to preserve the essence within imperfect circumstances.

That is also the nature of life. We have ideals, but reality is not always perfect. The Torah does not abandon the ideal, but it also

does not abandon the person who cannot achieve it completely.

During Sukkot, the Beit HaMikdash also featured נִסְיוֹן הַמַּיִם, the water libation. Instead of focusing only on wine, something special and celebratory, the festival celebrates water, the most basic substance of life. Sukkot celebrates nature, rain, shelter, the body, and the physical world.

This may be the answer.

Pesach and Shavuot commemorate the great events that created the Jewish people. But we cannot live only through great historical moments. Most of life is not the Exodus or Mount Sinai. Most of life consists of eating, sleeping, building, welcoming guests, working, and coping with an imperfect reality.

Sukkot is one of the Three Regalim because it teaches that life itself is sacred. Not only the great events of history matter. Every ordinary moment of human life can become a mitzvah and a place for holiness.

When Hashem Asks Us to Stay



Rabbi Sam Taylor
Senior Rabbi, Shaarei Shomayim

Every celebration has its final moment. The music quiets, the tables are cleared, and guests begin gathering their coats. Goodbyes are exchanged with smiles, hugs, and promises to meet again. Yet in the Jewish calendar, something extraordinary happens just as the festival season seems to be drawing to a close. After the final notes of Succot have faded, before everyone disperses and returns to everyday life, G-d says something deeply unexpected: *"Please stay a little longer."* That simple invitation captures the heart of Shmini Atzeret. Rashi, drawing on a beautiful Midrash, explains the holiday with a touching parable. A king hosts his beloved children for a magnificent feast lasting many days. When the celebration is over and they prepare to leave, he turns to them with one heartfelt request: *"My children, I beg of you, stay with me one more day. Your departure is difficult for me."* The king is G-d. The children are us.

For weeks we have journeyed through the most spiritually intense season of the Jewish year. We stood in awe on Rosh Hashana, searched our hearts on Yom Kippur, and celebrated with joy beneath the succah, holding the lulav and etrog. Every festival has its own distinctive mitzvah and purpose. Then, just as it is all about to end, Hashem asks for nothing more than our company. That is what makes Shmini Atzeret unlike any other festival. There is no special object to hold, no temporary dwelling to enter, no elaborate ritual to perform. The Vilna Gaon is traditionally quoted as teaching that the defining mitzvah of the day is simply simcha, joy itself. It is the joy of belonging, the joy of being G-d's people, and the joy of a relationship that needs no special occasion to be cherished.

There is something profoundly liberating in that idea. So much of modern life revolves around achievement. We measure ourselves by what we accomplish, produce, fix, or improve. Even our spiritual lives can become lists of obligations and expectations. Shmini Atzeret gently turns that thinking upside down. For one precious day, the Almighty is not asking us to prove ourselves or perform another commandment. He simply delights in our presence. Perhaps that is the deepest expression of love, being wanted not because of what we do, but because of who we are. It reminds us that the strongest relationships are often built not on grand gestures, but on simply choosing to remain together a little longer.

The Jewish year itself can be understood as a remarkable journey. It begins with liberation at Passover, continues through the giving of the Torah at Shavuot, moves into the reflection of the High Holy Days, and blossoms into the gratitude and joy of Succot. Shmini Atzeret becomes the quiet closing chapter, gathering together everything we have experienced before we step back into ordinary life. Yet this ending contains something beautiful. On Simchat Torah, celebrated alongside Shmini Atzeret, we complete the public reading of the Torah, only to roll it immediately back to its opening words, *"In the beginning."* The ending becomes another beginning. The cycle never truly ends, it simply invites us to begin again with renewed hearts.

Perhaps that is the lasting gift of Shmini Atzeret. Long after the festivals have passed and the decorations have been packed away, its quiet message continues to accompany us. Our relationship with G-d is not sustained only by life's dramatic spiritual moments or extraordinary acts of devotion. It is nurtured in the ordinary moments when we linger a little longer, make room for gratitude, and simply show up. Sometimes the holiest invitation is also the simplest, stay one more day. Sit a little longer at the table. Allow yourself to be loved. Then carry that quiet joy into every ordinary day that follows.

Dancing Toward Wholeness



Rabbi Elan Mazer
CEO, Mizrachi Canada

Several months after October 7, we stood amid the destruction of Kfar Aza carrying a new Sefer Torah.

The story had begun in Toronto, when Shira Mark came to speak about the terrible losses suffered by her family. Her cousin, Elchanan Kalmonzon, was killed on October 7 after rushing with members of his family from Otniel to defend the communities near Gaza. Her brother, Pedaya, was killed several weeks later while fighting in Gaza.

Members of the Clanton Park community were deeply moved and wanted to dedicate a Sefer Torah in memory of those who had fallen. The family agreed, but asked that it be placed specifically in Kfar Aza.

It was an unlikely meeting. Otniel is a religious community generally associated with one part of Israeli society; Kfar Aza is a largely secular kibbutz associated with another. Before October 7, their residents might never have entered one another's lives.

Yet on October 7, none of those distinctions mattered. Members of the family from Otniel ran south to defend Jews they had never met.

In February, families from Otniel and Kfar Aza gathered with members of our Toronto community. Together, we carried the Torah through the scarred pathways of the kibbutz toward its synagogue. Then we began to dance.

We danced through a place where so many had been murdered.

We circled the *bimah* as though it were Simchat Torah. At one point, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan, passed with a delegation of ambassadors from around the world. They entered and joined the dancing.

For a few moments, it felt as though the world needed to witness this sight: Jews from Kfar Aza, Otniel and Toronto - religious and secular, Israeli and Diaspora - gathered around one Torah.

The feeling of *shleimut*, wholeness, was unmistakable. And yet nothing was whole.

That paradox may contain the meaning of Simchat Torah after October 7.

Simchat Torah is built around completion. We reach the Torah's final words and immediately return to its beginning. Since 2023, however, the same day has also signified rupture: The question is therefore not simply how we can feel happy while mourning. It is how we can celebrate Torah as a complete reality while inhabiting a profoundly broken world.

Jewish thought does not answer by denying suffering.

Kohelet speaks openly of life's fragility: "*All is vanity,*" and "*one who increases knowledge increases pain.*" Torah does not make suffering disappear. It gives suffering a context larger than itself. It allows pain to be real without becoming the total meaning of existence.

This is also why simcha cannot simply mean cheerfulness. The heart cannot be commanded to stop grieving. The Rambam distinguishes genuine joy from laughter, drinking and distraction. True simcha is "*the joy with which a person rejoices in performing a mitzvah and in loving the God who commanded it.*" Simcha is not an

emotion in conflict with sadness. Grief responds to what has been lost. Simcha responds to what is eternally meaningful.

The Maharal deepens this idea, teaching that joy emerges from shleimut. Sadness reflects absence and fragmentation; joy appears when something is connected to its purpose and becomes fully itself. At first, that seems impossible after October 7. How can there be wholeness when so many people are missing? But shleimut does not mean that nothing is broken. It means that the fragments are gathered around a true centre.

The Torah itself, the Maharal explains, is a *metziut shalem*, a complete reality. It connects individual lives and moments to a larger order that we cannot always see or understand. We do not possess the whole, and we cannot explain how every tragedy fits within it. But through Torah, we remain connected to the possibility of wholeness.

That was what we experienced in Kfar Aza. The Torah did not restore those who had been lost. It did not repair the irreparable. But it gathered people who had once lived in separate worlds and revealed that they were parts of one people.

Where terror creates fragmentation, we create relationship. Where it produces helplessness, we assume responsibility. Where it seeks to isolate us, we gather.

We dance not because the world is already whole, but because Torah calls us to bring it toward wholeness. We dance with our grief, not in denial of it. We dance because we remain capable of gathering, carrying one another and beginning again.

A Symphony of Torah, Prayer and Song



Mrs. Rifka Sonenberg
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Imagine you are in shul on Simchat Torah. Close your eyes and listen. What are the sounds of Simchat Torah? Joyous singing and stomping feet as the Torahs are paraded around the shul; the chanting of the final parsha as it is read, reread, and reread again; *bracha* after *bracha* as aliyot are distributed; the crinkling of candy wrappers as children wave their flags and enjoy their treats; the singing of *Hamalach Hagoel* as the children are called up for their special *aliyah*; the crowd joining in as the *ba'al koreh* completes the description of each day of creation; the melodies of Hallel and other tuneful prayers; the chanting of *Birkat Kohanim*. Simchat Torah is a day of sounds - of singing, learning, praying and dancing.

There are deep connections between song, prayer, and Torah learning, and they all converge on Simchat Torah. The many dimensions of the holiday allow for multiple entry points in our relationship with Hashem and His Torah.

Rabbi Sacks writes:

*Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we daven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward Heaven. Nor do we read the Torah. Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation... Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.*¹

In Berachot 6a, Abba Binyamin highlights the connection between song and prayer, teaching that the two belong together and that this connection is most fully realized in a synagogue.

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“One’s prayer is only fully heard in a synagogue... ‘to listen to the song and the prayer’ (I Kings 8:28). In a place of song, there should be prayer.”

The Ben Ish Chai² expands on this idea, explaining that singing transforms our tefillot into praise, allowing the requests embedded within them to bypass forces that might otherwise challenge our worthiness. He therefore encourages us to incorporate melody and song into our prayers whenever possible.

In *Ben Yehoyada*,³ however, the Ben Ish Chai offers a different interpretation of the Gemara. There, he explains that “*rina*” refers not to song but to Torah study, and he teaches that prayer is most powerful when it is connected to Torah learning:

“Arise, cry out (roni) in the night...” (Lamentations 2:19). “Cry out” refers to the sound of Torah, while “pour out your heart like water” refers to prayer. Prayer is more readily accepted in a place where Torah is studied. Therefore, “In the place of rina [Torah study], there should be prayer.”

In the Tanya,⁴ Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi adds a beautiful facet to the concept of “*keriat haTorah*”, usually translated as “reading or studying [the Torah]”. The Baal haTanya explains the verb *koreh* as “calling”.

This [phrase] means that in Torah study, one calls G-d to come to him, so to speak, as a man calls to his friend to come to him or as a child will call his father to come and join him...⁵

Rav Dov Singer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Makor Chaim, understands the verb similarly but in the opposite direction. He challenges us to ask ourselves: what is “*keriat haTorah*” [the call of the Torah]? What does the Torah say to you personally?⁶

Torah learning, in both these approaches, is a method for connecting to Hashem as an individual. The Aruch HaShulchan, in his introduction, however, describes Torah learning in a way that situates the personal connection within a greater national experience:

*The disagreements of the Tannaim, Amoraim, Geonim, and Poskim are all the words of the living God, and each has its place in halacha. This diversity is the glory of our holy Torah. The entire Torah is called a song, and the beauty of a song lies in the fact that its voices are different from one another; that is the essence of its harmony.*⁷

In addition to singing, praying, and learning, Simchat Torah adds one more element: movement.

The Rema⁸ records the custom of taking all the Torah scrolls from the ark on Simchat Torah, singing songs and praises, and circling the bimah with the Torahs.

On Simchat Torah, all these approaches to connecting with Hashem come together. We sing, learn, pray, and dance, creating a uniquely powerful experience of connection and an ideal setting for our prayers to be accepted. No matter how you connect—whether through listening, movement, study, or song—there is a part of Simchat Torah designed for you. The Torah belongs to all of us, and it is accessible to us through different, but harmonious, paths.

1 <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayelech/torah-as-song/>

2 Benayahu on Berachot 6a

3 Ben Yehoyada on Berachot 6a

4 Likkutei Amarim, Chapter 37

5 https://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/7916/jewish/Chapter-37.htm

6 Heard from Rav Dov personally

7 Aruch HaShulchan, introduction

8 Orach Chaim 669

The Two Atzerets: A Relationship That Never Ended



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On almost every Chag, the Torah gives us a physical object through which to experience the aura of the day. On Rosh Hashana, it is the shofar. On Sukkot, the sukkah and the lulav. On Pesach, matzah. This pattern is consistent even through the rabbinic holidays like Purim and Chanukah. The energy of the day is anchored in a physical action through which to channel our observances.

But Shmini Atzeret is strikingly different, there is no unique mitzva associated with it. I think if we look for a moment at the only other Yom Tov that shares this quality, the deeper meaning behind this absence can begin to emerge.

Shavuot too is barren of any defining mitzvah. And these two “Atzerets” share too much in common for that to be coincidental. The Torah never associates either day with a calendar date. Shavuot is described only in relation to Pesach — fifty days later. Shemini Atzeret too is never identified as the 22nd of Tishrei, but only as “*the eighth day*” following Sukkot. This is true even though Chazal emphasize that it is a *regel bifnei atzmo*, a distinct Chag in its own right.

Even their structure mirrors one another. Shavuot arrives fifty days after Pesach, while Shemini Atzeret falls exactly fifty days after Rosh Chodesh Elul, the day we begin blowing shofar and climbing toward the Yamim Noraim. And of course, the biblical name of Shavuot itself is “Atzeret.”

There seems to be something hidden in plain sight connecting these two days.

In 1990, Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht z'l traveled to America to attend the historic 9th Siyum HaShas held in Madison Square Garden, the first Siyum HaShas ever hosted there and attended by more than 20,000 Jews. For many, it felt like a turning point in the story of Torah learning in America. The founding Rosh Yeshiva of Kerem B'Yavneh was deeply moved by something he heard there. We know this because only a few days later, while visiting KBY alumni at Yeshiva University, he repeated an insight he had heard Rav Elya Svei z'l share in the name of Rav Aharon Kotler z'l explaining why Shavuot has no mitzvah uniquely associated with it.

The idea was that a mitzvah is only needed when a Chag commemorates something that no longer physically exists. The mitzvah becomes a kind of time-portal, allowing us to reconnect to a distant experience.

On the Seder night, for example, we are obligated to see ourselves “as if” we left Egypt. “As if” are the key words. We are not actually leaving Mitzrayim, but the crunch of the matzah and the taste of the maror help us enter that world and feel, in some small way, the tension between slavery and freedom.

But Shavuot is different because we are celebrating something we still possess.

Regarding Matan Torah, the Torah describes the voice at Sinai as “*kol gadol v'lo yasaf*” (Devarim 5:19). Rashi famously explains: “*lo pasak*” — *the voice never stopped*. The revelation of Sinai is not merely a memory from the past. The Torah we received there is still alive. The voice still reverberates. We are celebrating something as relevant and present in 5787 as it was when our ancestors stood at the foot of Har Sinai.

No time-portal mitzvah is needed because we are not commemorating something that ended.

Perhaps the same is true about Shemini Atzeret.

The Gemara (Sukkah 55b) describes the day through the mashal of a king who hosted his beloved children for many days and, when the time came for them to leave, said: קשה עלי פרידתכם — *“It is difficult for Me to part from you. Stay with Me one more day.”*

Most Yamim Tovim help us reconnect to something that once happened. Shemini Atzeret is different. It is not about reconnecting to the past, but about refusing to let the experience become the past at all. After all of Elul and Tishrei, after the teshuva, tefillah, sukkah and lulav, Hashem asks us to remain just one more day because the relationship itself is still here.

Perhaps that is why it is so fitting that Shemini Atzeret became Simchat Torah. The two Atzerets are the bookends of our relationship with Torah — one marks the beginning of the journey, the other the completion of the annual cycle.

And maybe that is why there is almost nothing left to do on Simchat Torah besides dance. No lulav. No sukkah. No matzah. Just a Jew holding a Torah and refusing to let go. Some holidays help us remember what once was. The two Atzerets remind us that some relationships never ended.

Simchat Torah War Through the Lens of a Spiritual Journey



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As we explore the spiritual and halachic dimensions of the Yamim Noraim, it is fitting to pause and reflect upon Simchat Torah 5784, also known as October 7, 2023. That day remains etched into our collective memory as one of profound tragedy and heartbreak. Yet, amidst the devastation, it also revealed extraordinary courage, resilience, decisive action, and a renewed call for Jewish unity and *emunah*.

Our neighborhood in Yerushalayim was, and continues to be, blessed with exceptional leadership that has elevated our community's perspective, while deepening our appreciation for Am Yisrael and our relationship with Hashem. As many of our neighbors were called to reserve duty and our growing community in East Jerusalem confronted the unique realities of wartime, our Rabbi, Rav Tzadok Ben Artzi, offered insights that reshaped the way we understood and experienced the unfolding events. His lessons influenced the thoughts we would like to share here.

At first glance, the chagim of Tishrei appear to stand independently of one another, each with its own mitzvot and flavour. Yet as we dive into *Pnimiyut haTorah*, the essence of the Torah teachings, we learn that the chagim are considered successive stages of a spiritual journey, from *achor b'achor* ("back-to-back") to *panim b'panim* ("face-to-face").

The roots of this journey reach back to the creation of humanity. The Torah tells us:

"וַיִּפֹּל ה' אֱלֹקִים תְּרִדְמָה עַל הָאָדָם וַיִּשָּׁן... וַיְבֶן ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַצֶּלַע."¹

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Chazal explain that Adam and Chavah were created as having two “faces”, before being separated into two distinct individuals.² The *mekubalim* call their separation process *nesirah*, allowing Adam and Chavah to stand independently and making a true *panim b’panim* relationship possible.

The Arizal teaches that this process is reenacted every year throughout Tishrei, expressed through the eternal bond between HaKadosh Baruch Hu and Knesset Yisrael.³ Before a face-to-face relationship can emerge, there must first be *dormita*, a spiritual slumber similar to Adam’s slumber that precedes *nesirah*. As Rabbi Chaim Vital writes in the name of the Arizal:

"כאשר רוצים לחזור פנים בפנים צריך שתקדים בחינת הפלת הדורמיטא... כדי שתיעשה הנסירה... ואחר כך יחזרו פנים בפנים."⁴

The inner structure of Tishrei is elaborated on through these teachings: Rosh Hashana begins this process through Yom Kippur, and Sukkot expresses Hashem's embrace of "שמאלו תחת לראשי" "וימינו תחבקני" Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah culminate in *yichud*.

The bond between HaKadosh Baruch Hu and Knesset Yisrael is eternal. Periods of *dormita* and *nesirah* do not weaken that bond; they prepare it for a fuller revelation.

Viewed through this lens, the events of Simchat Torah 5784 take on profound significance.

The months preceding the war were marked by painful division within Israeli society. The unity of Knesset Yisrael was deeply strained. Then came the devastating events of Simchat Torah.

If *dormita* describes a state of spiritual slumber, and *nesirah* the painful separation that prepares a deeper encounter, then the path our nation has travelled bears a striking resemblance to the

process described by the Arizal. The painful divisions that preceded the war reflected a national *dormita*, a spiritual slumber that left us vulnerable. They were followed by the terrible rupture of war, recalling the movement from *dormita* to *nesirah* described by the Arizal. Yet in his teachings, *nesirah* is never the end result. Its purpose is to prepare the way for *panim b'panim*, a close relationship between Hashem and His unified people.

The rebirth of Knesset Yisrael in its Land has entrusted the Jewish people with responsibility for our own security, our future, and our destiny. The extraordinary unity, sacrifice, and courage revealed since Simchat Torah remind us that Jewish sovereignty is not merely a political achievement. It is a spiritual calling. Standing together as one nation enables us to stand before Hashem in a bond of *panim b'panim*, living a *yichud* with Hashem.

Tishrei is thus revealed as far more than a sequence of holidays. It is the journey from feeling distanced to becoming closer, a personal spiritual process, as well as a national process of Yisrael with our Creator. As we continue to rebuild our national life in our Land, may we merit the complete revelation of that eternal bond, until the words of the prophet are fulfilled:

"וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ; בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי ה' אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד."⁶

1 Bereishit 2:21–22

2 Berachot 61a; Eruvin 18a

3 Rabbi Chaim Vital, Sha'ar HaKavanot, Derushei Rosh Hashanah; see also Sha'ar HaTefillah and the concept of *Ze'ir Anpin* (representing the masculine dimension) and *Nukba* (representing the feminine dimension)

4 Rabbi Chaim Vital, Sha'ar HaKavanot, Derushei Rosh Hashanah

5 Shir HaShirim 2:6

6 Zechariah 14:9

Blessings for a New Year

As we come to the close of this Tishrei Companion, we reflect on the journey we have taken together through the Yamim Noraim, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah. From the first sounds of the shofar during Elul and on Rosh Hashana to the circles of dancing with the Torah, these months have invited us to engage every part of our being.

Throughout these pages, we have explored the chagim through the three pillars of **דיבור**, **מחשבה**, and **מעשה**: thought, speech, and action. We began with the inner world of *machshava*, seeking *kavana*, insight, and renewed perspective. We moved to the power of *dibur*, through tefillah, brachot, song, learning, and words that can heal, uplift, and connect. And we grounded our inspiration in *maaseh*, through halacha, mitzvot, and practical actions that bring our ideals into the world.

The opportunity given to us now is to carry this momentum beyond the chagim. The holiness of these days is not meant to remain only in the machzor, the sukkah, or the moments of celebration. It is meant to shape the way we think, speak, and act in the weeks and months ahead. When our thoughts are constructive, our words become more careful and compassionate. When our speech is elevated, our actions become more intentional. And when our actions reflect Torah values, we help build a stronger, kinder, and more unified community.

This journey is personal, but its impact is collective. Every positive thought, every thoughtful word, and every meaningful action adds light to the *klal* and strengthens Am Yisrael.

May we be blessed to continue nurturing this cycle of growth throughout the year ahead. May our minds be filled with clarity and hope, our mouths with tefillah and words of kindness, and our hands with mitzvot and acts of goodness.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה, ושנה טובה ומתוקה.



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