

An Understanding of Hoshanah Rabbah, Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah

We Build Yerushalayim During This Time of the Year

On the ninth day of Av, as the ruins of Yerushalayim still smoldered, we begin the task of reconstructing the city in which the kingdom of Hashem was manifest.

We continued building Yerushalayim through the Teshuvah of Elul, the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah, the fasting of Yom Kippur, and the prayers we add during this intense time of the year. During Sukkos, we engage in the final stages of building Yerushalayim and with Hoshanah Rabbah, Shemini Atzeres, and Simchas Torah, the spiritual erection of Yerushalayim is completed.

The goal of this entire period, from the ninth of Av until Simchas Torah, is to build Yerushalayim.

What is the meaning of building Yerushalayim?

Yerushalayim is Malchus

Hashem created the world with seven spiritual powers. We refer to these powers as 'Sefiros' or 'Middos'. The Seventh Middah is 'Malchus', Kingship. With Malchus, Hashem is sovereign in His world.

During exile, we don't see Hashem as the King of His world. His house is destroyed and strange edifices replace it; his children, the Jewish People, are easy prey; blasphemy is the norm. 'Malchus' is exiled; the sovereignty of Hashem is not visible in the place where it should be, in Yerushalayim.

Hashem created the world so that His Presence should dwell within it^x and it is in the erected Yerushalayim that the Shechina (divine presence) finds a dwelling. The building of Yerushalayim is the ultimate goal of Hashem in His creation of the world.

From Tisha B'Av until Shemini Atzeres we are engaged in 'בנין קומת המלכות', building Malchus. During this time of the year we focus on subjugating ourselves to the sovereignty of Hashem and praying for His Malchus to be revealed over the whole world.

Sefer Devarim Corresponds to Malchus

There are two verses in Sefer Bamidbar which constitute an entire Sefer of their own. These are "ויהי בנוסע" and "ובמנחה יאמר" which describe the journeying of the Aron (Ark). Accordingly, there are not five, but seven sefarim (books) in the Torah; Bereishis, Shemos, Vayikra, Bamidbar until "ויהי בנוסע", these two verses, the rest of Bamidbar, and the Devarim.¹

Sefer Devarim, the seventh Sefer, corresponds to Malchus, the seventh Middah. It corresponds to Yerushalayim in which the Malchus of Hashem was manifest. ספר דברים is Gematria (has the numerical value of) ירושלים, (they both equal 596).

Indeed, we begin reading Devarim the week preceding the Tisha B'Av and conclude it on Shemini Atzeres. We read the sefer of Malchus during the time that we engage in בנין קומת המלכות.

The Walls of Yericho Oppose the Walls of Yerushalayim

'חומות ירושלים', the fortified walls surrounding Yerushalayim, is the phrase we use to refer to Yerushalayim when it is whole, i.e. when the Shechina dwells within her.¹

There is a city, which is diametrically opposed to Yerushalayim. When its 'חומה' is built, the 'חומות' of Yerushalayim are destroyed. This city is Yericho which is the first city the Jewish People conquered during their conquest of Eretz Yisroel.

The fortifications of Yericho were the headquarters of evil. They served as one of the walls for the house of 'Rachav the harlot'. In her home, 'לילית', the feminine aspect of the power of evil, found its haven. The walls surrounding Yericho had to come down in order for holiness to be revealed on Earth.

According to the command of Hashem, the Jewish People circled the city and blew the Shofar for six days. On the seventh day, they circled Yericho seven times and then blew a mighty blast. The impenetrable fortress fell without as much as a single catapult. This showed the world the great power of Hashem.¹

Destroying the חומה of Yericho on Hoshanah Rabbah

On the first six days of Sukkos, the entire congregation circles the Bimah (the center table of the synagogue on which we put the Torah to read from) once with their 'swords', the Lulav, unsheathed for battle. They recite 'Hoshanos', a prayer that begins and ends with the words – 'Hosha Na', '[Hashem] Please help!'

On Hoshanah Rabbah, the seventh day, the congregation circles the Bimah seven times, and recites seven different 'Hoshanos' prayers.

On Hoshanah Rabbah, the verdict we were handed on Yom Kippur is finalized. It is referred to as the 'יום החותם', the day that our verdict is sealed.

חומת, seal, has the same letters as the word, חומת, fortress. The circling of the Bimah that takes place on Hoshanah Rabbah destroys חומת Yericho, the fortresses of evil, and the verdict is sealed, חותם, that the side of holiness will receive all the bounty and the powers of evil will not be able to partake of it.

Every year on Hoshanah Rabbah, before Shemini Atzeres when the חומה of Yerushalayim is to be completed, we first destroy the חומה of Yericho, i.e. the powers of evil.

The Power of Hoshanah Rabbah

On Hoshanah Rabbah, we take off the rings that are on the Lulav before shaking it. Taking off these rings has symbolic meaning.

In Megilas Esther, we find that the authority of the King was vested in his ring because it contained the royal signet. Achashveirosh gave Mordechai the power that Haman had wielded, by taking 'the ring that he had removed from Haman and giving it to Mordechai.'¹

When we remove the rings of the Lulav, Hashem passes the power of Judgment to the Jewish People. Achashveirosh told Mordechai "כתבו על היהודים כטוב בעיניכם", decree for the Jews as you see fit'. We hold the signet of the King in our hand and with the power of our Service render a verdict for the Jewish people 'as we see fit.'

The Awesomeness of Shemini Atzeres

¹ In fact, it is Hashem Himself who is the true fortress of Yerushalayim. "וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָּהּ נֶאֱמָר ה' חוֹמַת אֶשׁ סָבִיב וּלְכָבוֹד - אֶהְיֶה בְּתוֹכָהּ" (זכרי' ב:ט)

Hoshanah Rabbah, Shemini Atzeres, and Simchas Torah are very powerful days, the Baal Shem Tov teaches. Praying with concentration and devotion on these days will pave the way for proper praying the entire year.

The physical world is governed by the power of seven; there are seven days in a week, seven continents etc. When we come to the number eight, we enter the realms of the supernatural. On the Seven days of Sukkos we are still connected to this world; on Shemini Atzeres, the eighth day, we are in Heaven.

On Sukkos, we hold the Esrog, which is the פרי עץ הדר, fruit of splendor. On Shemini Atzeres we don't hold the הדר in our hands, because the day itself is הדר, the Ramban teaches¹.

הדר also refers to Hashem as it says in Tehilim, "הדר הוא לכל חסידיו", He is הדר for all his devout ones. When the Divine Presence manifests itself on a Jew, the Jew is then called הדר. On Shemini Atzeres, the day of הדר, Hashem, the הדר, rests on His people and they are called הדר.

The Exclusive Relationship Between Hashem and the Jewish People

On Sukkos, we sacrifice seventy oxen on behalf of the seventy gentile nations. On Shemini Atzeres we sacrifice only one, on behalf of the Jewish People.

Rashi¹ describes this with a parable. On Sukkos, all the nations of the world are invited to partake of the banquet of the King. When Shemini Atzeres comes, we escort all the dignitaries of the nations to the door, we present them with gifts and are glad to see them go. It is time for the King, Hashem, and the Queen, the Jewish People, to be alone together.

When Yosef revealed his identity to his brothers the verse tells us, "ולא עמד איש אתו בהתודע יוסף", אל אחיו¹, no man was with him when Yosef made himself known to his brothers. The Zohar explains that יוסף alludes to Hashem who 'מוסיף', increases, the Jewish People. When Hashem will בהתודע, make Himself known, to אחיו, the Jewish People who are called his brothers² it is in complete privacy, ולא עמד איש אתו.

Shemini Atzeres is when Hashem makes himself known to the Jewish People. Our relationship reaches its most intense point and is compared to the relationship of marriage which is a completely private one.

The Gentile nations are satisfied with the gifts, i.e. the bounty they received on Sukkos by means of the sacrifices, with which they will sustain themselves for the year. The Jewish People give the bounty *they* received hardly a glance. We focus on the genuine treasure; we want our beloved, Hashem Himself.

Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah – A Time for Dveikus

There is one commandment in the Torah which is the purpose of the entire Torah. This Mitzvah is "ובו תדבק", you shall cleave to Hashem. The Zohar explains that all 612 commandments are really methods by which we can attain this essential mitzvah.

We have no specific Mitzvah for Shemini Atzeres because it is reserved for the ultimate one - Dveikus. Being in a state of Dveikus is the greatest pleasure that exists. Tzaddikim who are in a constant state of intense Dveikus cannot tear themselves away from this bliss for even a moment. On Shemini Atzeres, the Dveikus that tzaddikim have with Hashem is evident as they cannot tear themselves away for anything else.

² As the verse says in Tehilim perek 132, "למען אחי ורעי וכו'".

On Shemini Atzeres, a chassid in a jubilant mood, went over to his Rebbe, the Hornsteipler Rebbe, and wished him, "The Rebbe should have a long life."

The Rebbe completely ignored him. Later, the frightened Chassidim asked the Rebbe, "Why did the Rebbe not answer Amen to the blessing of a long life?"

The Rebbe looked at them in wonderment, "I should tear myself away from the Dveikus of the Shemini Atzeres to focus on something like a long life?"

People who have not yet reached the level of intensely cleaving to Hashem every moment are not precluded from the Mitzvah of Dveikus. Every Jew can fulfill this Mitzvah according to his ability - even the lowest Jew can cleave to Hashem.

Attaining Dveikus includes working on enjoying Mitzvos. Learning Torah and praying are tremendously pleasurable activities for the neshama. A person should work that his pleasures should come from holiness; he should be gratified and excited with Torah and Mitzvos.

Shemini Atzeres – Ensuring a Sweet Verdict, Jewish Sovereignty

"וביום השמיני עצרת תהי' לכם", upon the Eight day you must restrain from doing forbidden work. The Maor Vashamesh sees something deeper in the word עצרת, restraining. On the eight day, we have the power to restrain all severity and punishment from befalling the Jewish people.

R' Sholom of Belz said, "What the dancing on Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah can accomplish, I cannot reveal. But this much I will share with you: Any prayer that didn't enter heaven a whole year (because it was deemed unfit) is elevated through this dancing."

The word עצרת can also mean 'Sovereignty'³. On Shemini Atzeres, Jews merit Sovereignty. It is the day in which we are on the top.

Receiving the Torah

The Gemara states: A day of rain is as great as the day of the giving of the Torah". The 'day of rain' is Shemini Atzeres when we when we recite תפילת גשם, the prayer for rain which is the source of all sustenance.

The spiritual correspondent of water is Torah. We see that water really refers to Torah from the verse, "אין מים אלא תורה", there is no water other than Torah⁴. When a Torah Jew prays for rain, he has rain in mind, as a symbol of livelihood, only peripheral to Torah. What he really asks for as he says, בעבורו על תמנע מים, do not withhold water from us, is that Hashem should shower him with bounty in Torah. The Zohar says that wellsprings of Torah are opened on Shemini Atzeres.

Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah are days to ask Hashem for an abundance of understanding in Torah and to merit praying with Dveikus.

The Ingathering of All the Avodas Hashem of the Entire Year

³ As the verse in Shmuel uses it, "זה יעצר בעמי" (שמואל ט:ז), this one [referring to King Shaul] will rule my nation.

⁴ In truth, the entire physical world represents spiritual realities. The Chasam Sofer questioned the reward for the fulfillment of Mitzvos, "ואספת דגניך ותירושך ויצהרך", you will gather your wheat, wine and oil, "I'm not a farmer, I don't gather my crops. What kind of reward is there for a Torah Scholar?" He explained that wheat refers to Halacha, wine to Aggadah (the moral teachings of the Gemara) and oil refers to the secrets of the Torah.

Simchas Torah is the last day in a succession of great days. As a Tzaddik leaves this world, during his last moments, all of his Torah, prayer, and mitzvos are gathered together and his power of holiness is greatly compounded.⁵

On Simchas Torah all of the Torah, tefilah and Mitzvos of a whole year gather together so there tremendous spirituality is available. It is an opportune time to grab some to last for a whole year! There is so much available!

On Simchas Torah, we take out all the Torah Scrolls from the Holy Ark. The 'Yesod Yosef' explains that this symbolizes that Hashem opens all of his treasure houses on this day. There are great, holy lights for everyone to enjoy according to each individual's spiritual capability.

A fool ruins all that he is given. Let us not be fools! So much goodness is being showered upon us; we must not let it go to waste!

Benefits

Although the prime focus of the day is spiritual, on Shemini Atzeres one can also ask for a bountiful livelihood.

King David was ecstatic when the Aron of Hashem [which contained the Torah] was bought to a more permanent dwelling. He danced and jumped with all his strength. His wife Michal looked askance at her husband. She thought it was beneath his dignity to dance like this in front of the nation. Her punishment was that she never had any children during her lifetime⁷.

The positive is always stronger than the negative. If the punishment for not dancing with the Torah is to be denied children, then through dancing with the Torah one can merit giving birth to children and having nachas from children.

Each Jew is Connected to His Root in the Torah

The Tanya teaches that each Jew is rooted in the Torah. Through sin he severs himself from his roots and is distanced from the Torah. There used to be Tzaddikim who were able to reconnect Jews to their roots. Nowadays, there are no Tzaddikim who can do this. This does not mean that we will be permanently detached from holiness. If there is no tzaddik who can attach us to the Torah, Hashem Himself will.⁶

Through the avodah of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we rectified ourselves and were drawn nearer to our roots in the Torah. On Sukkos, we are beneath the צילא דמהימנותא, the shadow of Hashem. Hashem protects us and brings us closer to Him and His Torah. On Simchas Torah every Jew receives an Aliyah to the Torah (he makes a blessing before the Torah is read).

The Jew has returned to his roots in the Torah.

⁸ תניא

⁵ Elisha Hanavi, the disciple of Eliyahu Hanavi, requested that his rebbe give him double of his own spiritual power. How could this be possible?

Eliyahu Hanavi responded that if Elisha is there as he departs from this world, his wish will be fulfilled. At the moment of his passing, Eliyahu possessed the spiritual power of all the days of his life combined, and he was able to give Elisha double of what he usually had.

⁶ A Tzaddik who can affect salvations for Jews is referred to as a 'פוּעַל יְשׁוּעוֹת', maker of salvation. In the prayer of Ahavah Rabbah we say to Hashem "קַל פּוּעַל יְשׁוּעוֹת אַתָּה", you are the פּוּעַל יְשׁוּעוֹת. If there are no Tzaddikim today who can connect a Jew to his roots in the Torah, then you Hashem do it for us!

במדבר י:לה,לו^ב
שבת קט"ז ע"א^ג
יהושע פרק ו'^ד
אסתר ח:ב^ה
אסתר ח:ה'^ו
רמב"ן ויקרא כג:מ'^ז
סוף פ' פנחס^ח
בראשית מה:א^ט
במדבר כט:לה'^י
תענית דף ז' א'^{יא}
בבא קמא דף פ"ב א'^{יב}
שמואל ב פרק ו'^{יג}