

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Leah *bas* Yitzchok Zev *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Shavuos and its Sister Festival

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR 5776

(The following is based largely on a discourse of the Nesivos Shalom, vol. II, pp. 335-336.)

Among the array of special days that mark the Jewish calendar, we find certain *yamim tovim* (festivals) that function as pairs in some sense. For instance, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur coalesce as a unit, together comprising the *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe). Even Chanukah and Purim share a certain association: they constitute the only two rabbinically mandated festivals, we recite *Al Hanissim* on both, etc. And then there is the relationship between the *yamim tovim* of Shavuos and... Shemini Atzeres.

This partnership emerges from a somewhat enigmatic statement of Chazal in praise of the phenomenon of rain. The Gemara states: גְּדוֹל יוֹם הַגְּשָׁמִים כְּיוֹם שְׁנִיתָנָה בּוֹ תוֹרָה – “The ‘day of rain’ is as great as the day on which the Torah was given” (*Ta’anis 7a*). This appears as a somewhat surprising assertion; while rain no doubt is beneficial and even essential to life – and we obviously owe great thanks to Hashem on its account – the comparison seems unclear. What does a rainy day have to do with the great revelation on Mount Sinai? Thus, the *sefer Avodas Yisrael* understands this teaching as referring not just to any ordinary rainy day, but to a specific “day of rain.” This is Shemini Atzeres; it is called as such since it occurs at the beginning of the rainy season, and is the day on which we begin to recite the prayer for rain.

Shared Characteristics

We see here, then, that Chazal draw a parallel between Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres. This association is further reinforced by another factor: namely, both festivals share the same title. Shemini Atzeres, of course, is called “Atzeres” (literally meaning, “Convocation”), as stated expressly in the *passuk*: בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצֵרַת תִּהְיֶה לָּכֶם – “On the eighth day, there shall be to you an *atzeres*” (*Bamidbar 29:35*). But in the parlance of Chazal, Shavuos is likewise referred to by this name. This appears in the Mishnah’s list of the various *yamim tovim* and the role they play as days of judgment. As the Mishnah states (*Rosh Hashanah 1:2*):

בְּאַרְבָּעָה פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בַּפֶּסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֲצֵרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לִפְנֵי כְּבִנֵי מְרוֹן... וּבְחַג נְדוּנִין עַל הַמַּיִם.

“At four periods (of the year) the world is judged: On Pesach (the judgment) concerns produce; on **Atzeres** (i.e., Shavuos), it concerns the fruits of the tree; on Rosh Hashanah, all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him as sheep... and on Sukkos, it concerns water.”

Aside from the aspect of title, the very *nature* of these two days is quite similar. Most festivals entail specific mitzvah practices, such as eating matzah on Pesach and taking the *lulav* on Sukkos. But both Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres are noted for a lack thereof. Essentially, there are no concrete mitzvah acts applicable to the individual on these days; rather, their observance takes the form of simply preserving the day’s sanctity by refraining from labor.

And while there are no mandated practices of either biblical or rabbinic origin, both festivals are observed in a similar fashion. That is, both are customarily observed as celebrations

revolving around Torah. Shemini Atzeres (especially in Eretz Yisrael, where only one day is observed) is connected with Simchas Torah, while Shavuos – marking the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai – is characterized by intensive Torah study.

The Common Denominator

We have thus far outlined a number of shared characteristics between these two *yamim tovim* that certainly point to a close association. What we have yet to uncover, however, is what binds them together. Is there a common theme around which these similarities revolve?

The Nesivos Shalom identifies the element that serves as the foundation for this pair of festivals. Every *yom tov*, of course, represents an opportunity to gain inspiration and be spiritually uplifted. But these two festivals, more than any others, afford one the ability of extraordinary closeness with Hakaddosh Baruch Hu. During Sukkos, the Temple service is marked by a profusion of sacrificial bulls offered on behalf of all the nations of the world. However, only a single bull is offered on Shemini Atzeres, which follows Sukkos; this bull is offered exclusively on behalf of Yisrael. Chazal perceive in this arrangement a manifestation of Hashem's great love for His people. They liken the situation to a king who conducts a large celebration on behalf of all of his servants. When it is all over, however, he turns to his most beloved servant and tells him: "Prepare a small feast for me, so that I can enjoy your company alone" (*Sukkah 55b*).

Shavuos is similarly characterized as a day upon which one can form an unparalleled connection with Hashem. In fact, Chazal liken this day to a wedding between Hashem and Yisrael. The *passuk* in Shir Hashirim (3:11) makes reference to "*Yom chasunaso* – His wedding day." The Gemara identifies to what this refers: זָה מִתּוֹן תּוֹרָה – "His wedding day": This is (the day of) the giving of the Torah" (*Ta'anis 26b*).

In short, these *yamim tovim* provide a unique opportunity for a Jew to attain an unprecedented degree of *deveikus* (attachment) to Hashem. This could explain why there are no actual "active" *mitzvos* pertaining to these festivals. At these times, one draws especially close to Hashem – so much so that these days exist on a plane above that of any other. They transcend mere physical existence; as such, the form of *avodah* (service) to Hashem then cannot take the form of a physical act such as eating matzah or taking the four species. The absence of concrete mitzvah acts is actually reflective of the supremely exalted nature of these particular days.

It is for this reason, as well, that the observance of these *yamim tovim* involve a celebration and dedication to Torah. For Torah is the ultimate vehicle through which one is able to cleave to Hashem. As the Zohar famously declares: קוֹדֵשׁ אֶחָד הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל כּוֹלְהוּ חַד – "The Holy One Blessed is He, the Torah, and Yisrael are all one." In essence, it is not possible for a person to connect himself to Hashem. After all, he is a mere mortal; how could he deign to attach himself to Hashem, whose essence is one of total purity and sanctity?! But Hashem granted us the Torah for this very purpose – it serves as the bridge linking Yisrael with Him. His sanctity and Presence resides within its sacred words; by immersing himself in Torah, then, a Jew is able, to some extent, to become attached to Hashem Himself.