In loving memory of Harav Yitzchak Yoel ben Shlomo Halevi

Volume 33 | #54

10 October 2020
22 Tishrei 5781

Candle Lighting:
Candles for Shabbat and Shemini Atzeret, and a long-lasting candle, should be lit by 6.06pm

Candles for Simchat Torah should be lit on Saturday night after 7.05pm from the long-lasting candle

Yom Tov ends in London on Sunday night at 7.03pm

Jerusalem Times:
Shabbat and Shemini Atzeret candles by 5.34pm

Shabbat and Yom Tov end at 6.49pm

Please look regularly at the social media and websites of the US, Tribe and your community for ongoing updates relating to Coronavirus as well as educational programming and community support.

You do not need to sign into Facebook to access the US Facebook page. The US Coronavirus Helpline is on 020 8343 5696.

May God bless us and the whole world.

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The ‘Corona’ of Torah
by Rebbetzen Rina Shindler

One Day More
by Rabbi Daniel Epstein

Soviet Jewry and Israel
by Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits a’h

Chag Sameach from the United Synagogue

The Feast of the Rejoicing of the Law at the Synagogue in Livorno, Italy by Solomon Hart, 1850
This year, along with an endless string of other drastic changes to the “old normal,” Simchat Torah is going to be very, very different to the exuberant dancing and singing we look forward to all year.

When we received notice of the completely different setup that was going to be required in shul this year, a poignant song written by Abie Rotenberg immediately sprang to mind. Entitled “The man from Vilna”, it tells the story of an elderly gentleman who, as a young man, was returning to his home town of Vilna after the horrific experiences he went through during World War Two. He and scores of other young people began to rebuild their lives and to seek healing.

One day, they suddenly realise that Simchat Torah is that night. They tentatively approach the old shul but find it barricaded. “And we tore apart the barricade, in defiance we would dance / But the scene before our eyes shook us to the core / Scraps of siddur, bullet holes, bloodstains on the floor.” Despairing, they see that the Holy Ark is bare and there are no Torah scrolls with which to dance. They unexpectedly see two young children whom no one recognises. Realising that these are the only two Jewish children around, “We danced round and round in circles as if the world had done no wrong / From evening until morning, filling up the shul with song / Though we
had no Sifrei Torah to gather in our arms / In their place we held those children, the Jewish people would live on...Am Yisrael Chai!”

This year, instead of the boisterous celebrations we are familiar with, some of us will be at home, whilst those of us who do attend shul may be barred from singing, dancing or even holding a Sefer Torah as we normally would. This should not, however, preclude our joy and excitement at the culmination of a year-long journey through the Torah. Torah is the central core of our very existence as a people, and the true “simchat Torah,” joy of Torah, is not limited to the physical movement around a bimah whilst holding scrolls and sticky hands, trying to avoid being poked in the eye by an enthusiastic flag-waver.

Joy in Torah is found wherever we ourselves create a reality of the primacy of Torah in our lives. To hold the words and values of the Torah close to our hearts and to live by its precepts is worthy of utmost jubilation, expressed in the decisions and choices we make to uphold and venerate it. The idea that we ourselves are the receptacles of the Torah is seen in the Talmud (Shabbat 105b) which says that if a person is in the presence of one who has passed away, he tears (kriah) as if a Sefer Torah had been burned in front of him.

Perhaps this year our Simchat Torah will look externally different, but just like those young men in Vilna all those years ago, we can find the spark of Torah inside ourselves and appreciate the promise of a vibrant future for our people and for the Torah.
So here we are, in the final stretch of what has been one of the most unusual “spiritual seasons” of the year. We have spent more hours involved in active Jewish ritual than at any other time of the year. This goes for almost everyone, no matter how active we are during the rest of the year. Even if we did not manage to make it to shul as often as we would have liked, the festivals have come and gone and we have had new and interesting experiences.

We have prayed, some of us have heard the shofar, we have eaten apple and honey, we have fasted, we have eaten, we have drunk, we sat in the Succah, we have taken the Four Species.

And now we reach a day that is sandwiched (outside of Israel, at least) between the festival of Succot and Simchat Torah, the day we celebrate the completion of the cycle of reading the Torah and beginning it again.

Shemini Atzeret is a day of epic importance and sublime grace; yet it is almost a complete mystery. It is such a strange day that many people are not quite sure what to do with it, or even on it. Some people have the custom to eat in the succah and some people do not.

What is this day all about?

Firstly “atzeret” means assembly or gathering, and is used in modern-day Hebrew to describe a large gathering or solidarity march of a positive kind. So it carries with it a notion of substance.

Secondly, it is inexorably linked to the previous days of Succot. We even use the same words “Zman Simchateinu” (“the Time of our Joy”) to describe it in our prayers.

Another fascinating observation is that the same number and type of offerings in the Temple were brought on Shemini Atzeret as were brought on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. So it seems that the essence of the day is related to the Days of Awe (Yamim Noraim). In fact, it could even be considered a “day of judgment” in its own right, as we entreat God to bless us as we begin our annual prayers for rain.

Yet when all is said and done, the day is one of sublime joy – a “holiday in itself”, as the Talmud states (Succah 47b). There is one reason given for this joy. Farewells.

How can we say “goodbye” – as it were – to the festive month of Tishrei, to the prayers and the celebration we have enjoyed, without just one more day to reminisce and reflect on what has just been? This year, more than ever!

Rashi (1040-1105) picks up on an additional meaning of the word Atzeret, from the root meaning “to stop” or “tarry”. Rashi cites the parable of a king who invites his children to dine with him for several days, but when the time comes for them to leave, he asks them to stay for just one more day, as “parting is such sweet sorrow”.

With the many additional challenges that we have had to endure this year, maybe this Shemini Atzeret will allow us one extra day to gather strength and resolve for the months ahead. May we be blessed with feeling God’s protection always.

Shemini Atzeret is a day of epic importance and sublime grace; yet it is almost a complete mystery.
At this point I must turn to a drama which, although acted out far from both Israel and Britain, had considerable bearing on Israel, its policies and my assessment of them. I had always taken a deep interest in the plight of Soviet Jewry, having already pledged in my Installation Address that I would seek to concentrate among my priorities ‘on alleviating the religious attrition and communal isolation of our Russian brethren – the most painful Jewish problem of our day’. I had taken a prominent role in numerous rallies, protests, marches, statements to the press, and interventions with government and Church leaders. I had participated in the first Brussels Conference on Soviet Jewry in February 1971, intended to draw international attention to this agonizing story which had really been brought on to the Jewish agenda with the wondrous reawakening among Soviet Jews themselves in the wake of the Six Day War.

In January 1972 I was invited by the Jewish Agency on a three-day visit to Schönau Castle, the transit centre near Vienna, to greet some of the then mounting flow of Soviet Jews on their way to Israel. It was still a hush-hush operation, and I was cautioned not to reveal in public what I had seen, particularly the considerable numbers involved who spent only a couple of days at the transit centre before proceeding to Israel. The experience was overwhelming as I for the first time in my life encountered living Jewish martyrs - Jews who cheerfully exposed themselves to harassment and other grave risks inside Russia simply because they were determined to live as Jews. I was both humbled and exalted as many of them told me the story of how they had rediscovered their Jewish identity and persevered in their resolve to be reunited with their people in Israel.

Taken out early one morning to the main railway station in Vienna to witness the arrival of some of them in the separate railway carriage assigned to them, I was embraced by a Jew from Georgia who presented me, the first rabbi he had ever met, with a beautiful copperplate of Moses and the Tablets which he had made at home and which I treasure among my most prized possessions to the present day. Another identified himself on the platform in fluent Yiddish as a young Jew from Vilna and introduced me to his little daughter Dakara. Asked about the significance of this unusual name, he explained that he decided on it when he heard of the sinking of the Israeli submarine Dakar so that he and his family would never forget what they owed to the sacrifice of Israelis to enable them one day to live in Israel. In utter humility I could only comment that it had not occurred to any of us Jews living in freedom to immortalize the gallant Israeli sailors in this way.

In December 1975, the then Chief Rabbi, Lord Immanuel Jakobovits (1921-1999), made a groundbreaking official visit to the Soviet Union where millions of Jews were denied the right to practise Judaism or emigrate to Israel. This was the first such visit by any Chief Rabbi from a Western country. In his book, ‘If Only My People. . .Zionism in my life’, published in 1984, Rabbi Jakobovits wrote a chapter describing his visit, the background to it taking place and his subsequent reflections. The start of the chapter appears below, to be followed by further abridged extracts in coming weeks. We thank the Jakobovits family for permission to reproduce this material.
The final chapter of Sefer Yehoshua discusses how the people gathered to hear Yehoshua’s final speech before he died. In contrast to his speech in the previous chapter in which he issued warnings to the Jewish people, he now gives an overview of their history. Yehoshua begins with Avraham’s father and descendants. Then he describes the exodus from Egypt, the journey to Israel and its conquest. Through the mention of Avraham, Yehoshua is reminding the people of God’s promise, made generations ago, that the Land of Israel will be given to the Jewish people. The location of the gathering, Shechem (Nablus), is not a coincidence. This was the first place Avraham and Sarah came to when God commanded them to leave their home and journey to the Land of Israel (Bereishit 12:6). By linking his generation back to those ancestors, Yehoshua is showing them that their arrival in the Land is the realisation of God’s promise. He does this to encourage the people to keep on going; they will succeed in conquering and settling the entire Land.

Yehoshua then reminds the nation to serve God wholeheartedly and sincerely. The people’s response is unanimous, crying out “We will only serve God” (24:21). This national promise to keep the Torah is reminiscent of the national acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai (Shemot 24:7). Once again, this links back to another important figure, Moshe, serving as a reminder that the generation standing before Yehoshua is another link in the chain of Jewish continuity.

The chapter continues with Yehoshua and the people agreeing a covenant which is sealed in two ways, a written text and a physical symbol. The latter is a stone that is placed in the doorway of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Once again, this echoes Moshe who, after the revelation at Mount Sinai, erected twelve stone pillars, one for each of the twelve tribes (Shemot 24:4). Yet another link to our greatest leader, Moshe, it shows that Yehoshua has become his worthy successor. In fact, on his death, he is described as “Yehoshua, the servant of God” (Yehoshua 24:29). This phrase was used repeatedly to describe Moshe; only this one time it is used to describe Yehoshua. Until now, it was not clear if Yehoshua would succeed in actualising the legacy of Moshe. He needed to conquer and settle the Land of Israel, whilst keeping the people focused on their service of God. However, by the end of the book of Yehoshua, we see that he was not only worthy but successful too.

The final lines of the chapter describe the burial of Yosef’s bones in Shechem, as he had requested before dying (Bereishit 50:25). This closes a circle, since Avraham and Sarah entered the Land in Shechem. Yosef, while living a relatively comfortable life in Egypt, still longed for the Land of Israel. He insisted that his coffin be transported to Israel when the people eventually went back there, emphasising his love of the Land.

The Book of Yehoshua represents a fulfilment of that ancient promise, and it ends on a positive note. Yehoshua does however remind the people that there is still work to do. Even though he has done his job as leader, the question remains as to whether the people live up to expectations and continue to serve God once Yehoshua has died. Join us as we continue our study of Tanach with the next book, Sefer Shofetim (the Book of Judges), to see what happens.
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SHEMINI ATZERET: TREASURED TORAH!

ON SIMCHAT TORAH WE DANCE WITH THE TORAH, ALTHOUGH THIS YEAR - CORONA EDITION - WILL BE A LITTLE DIFFERENT.

EVEN IF WE CAN'T CELEBRATE WITH THE TORAH IN SHUL LIKE NORMAL, WE CAN STILL BRING THE TORAH INTO OUR HOMES AND INTO OUR HEARTS. IN THIS TRUE STORY, WE SEE HOW AN ELDERLY MAN WAITED MANY YEARS TO BRING HIS TORAH BACK HOME.

During Communism, Jews in the Soviet Union were not allowed to learn Torah and do Mitzvot. Life was very tough and anyone trying to practice Judaism faced harsh punishments. With the fall of Communism in 1991, Jews were finally free to keep Mitzvot. Sadly, they were not able to, as they had never had a chance to learn about them.

In Odessa, the Jewish community was blooming. Finally, they decided it was time to write their own new Sefer Torah. They planned a Nachmasat Sefer Torah - a celebration to bring a new Torah scroll to the community. Normally, the existing Torah scrolls are brought out to welcome a new one, but of course there weren't any left in Odessa.

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A PROCESSION WAS PLANNED WITH MUSIC AND DANCING. THEY WOULD PARADE THE NEW SEFER TORAH THROUGH THE STREETS, GIVING EVERYONE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE. THIS WAS UNBELIEVABLE AS IT WAS GOING TO BE THE FIRST PUBLIC DISPLAY OF JEWISHNESS SINCE THE END OF COMMUNISM.

The atmosphere was electric. A new era of Jewish life was beginning for the community. Suddenly...

The crowd waited as the elderly gentleman carefully made his way down the stairs to the street, clutching something very precious.

FOR SO MANY YEARS WHEN JEWISH LIFE WAS FORBIDDEN, I KEPT THIS LITTLE TORAH SAFE, HIDDEN IN MY HOME. NOW, THANK GOD, I CAN FINALLY BRING IT OUT AND BRING IT TO WELCOME THE NEW TORAH TO OUR COMMUNITY.

WAIT!

WAIT!

WAIT!

WELCOME HOME!

Tribe is the Young People's Department of the United Synagogue: Creating a future for our community through engaging, educating and inspiring the next generation.

www.tribeuk.com