

Shmini Atzeret, Hold On

Rabbi Nisson Shulman

Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, Hold On to the lessons of all the holidays, by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

SHMINI ATZERET: HOLD ON!

Today is Shmini Atzeret. What does Atzeret mean?

Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary to the Torah, offers some remarkable insights into this word, and through the word, into this holiday. He points to a primary and secondary meaning.

The primary meaning is “to gather”; to gather, not only people, but also ideas and ideals. We can see this best from its usage in connection with other holidays. Thus, the word is used to describe the seventh day of Passover. On the seventh and last day of Pesach, we are to gather all the lessons of the holiday from the first Seder night and through the holiday, and relive them all. The abolition of HAMETZ, the lesson of freedom, faith in God, trust in His prophet Moses, ATZERET, take them to heart. Review them, so that they stay with you.

Shavuot is also called ATZERET, because it is connected with Passover. The freedom lesson of Pesach is not completed till Shavuot when we received the Torah. For freedom has meaning only when we accept the responsibilities it demands. The path from Egypt leads directly to Sinai. So on Shavuot we take to heart the lessons of both holidays, Pesach as well as Shavuot. They go hand in hand. That is why Shavuot is also called ATZERET, because it is a time to gather together the lessons we have learned during the nine weeks from Pesach to Shavuot.

Now let us consider SHEMINI ATZERET. If, like on Pesach, the word ATZERET had been used for the seventh day, then like on Pesach ATZERET would be a command to gather the lessons of the entire Sukkoth. And there is, indeed, a great deal to learn from Sukkoth: God's Providence; the Clouds of Glory that protected us in the desert and stand for God's watchfulness in history that we survive, as we have till now; Thanksgiving, through the ETROG, LULAV, HADAS and ARAVA; transience of material things, that everything can fly away, HAVEL HAVALIM.... so we go out of our permanent solid home and live for the week in a flimsy hut with silly walls and no roof. All this we would learn if the SHMINI ATZERET fell on the seventh day of the holiday, like the ATZERET of Passover does.

But SHEMINI ATZERET does not fall on the seventh day of the holiday. It falls on the eighth day. And it therefore is not the additional day, but an eighth day YOM TOV all to itself. That's why there is no ETROG and LULAV on SHMINI ATZERET. That is why some don't eat in the Sukkah today, and even those who do, omit the beracha because it is not a mitzvah of the day.

The Talmud describes how different from the seventh day of Sukkoth was the Temple service on this day. The eighth day has its own special character. Why? Because the lesson of SHEMINI

ATZERET does not refer to Sukkoth alone! It refers to the entire holiday season! We are commanded on this day to gather and to take to our hearts all the lessons of all the holidays of the entire season, including Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot! Lessons such as: That G-d is One; that He is our King; that we are accountable to Him. That we are commanded to look into our own hearts, judging ourselves as He judges us all; the lessons of TESHUVA; KAPARA, SELICHA, the confidence in man that he can improve; given a second chance, start again, from YOM HAKIPURIM, washed clean again. And the joy that must follow, expressed in Sukkot. Life then is truly joyous, when a man is pure and blameless. All the holidays are gathered here today, and all their lessons. Holy days to be sure; MIKRAEY KODESH: but also good days, YAMIM TOVIM, good days if we make their inspiration last throughout the coming year.

All the holidays: and in fact not from Rosh Hashana on. Because in counting the holidays, the Torah tells us to start from Pesach! So that SHEMINI ATZERET, this gathering festival, is the last holiday of the entire year till we begin the yearly cycle again from the coming Pesach. So all the lessons of all the holidays must be gathered by us this day. Gather lessons, gather strength from them all. That is the first meaning of the word, to gather.

ATZERET has another meaning too. ATZOR means to stop. If you have seen a red stop sign in Israel, you know the word ATZOR. Put on the brakes. Stop. And in addition to stop, it also means, "Hold tight!" Don't let go! And for us that meaning is obvious. Don't let these lessons go, but hold on to them throughout the coming year. Let them last. Let them persist.

Rashi cites from the Talmud, a beautiful picture inspired by the name ATZERET. It is as if the Lord tells His beloved people, "I cannot part with you. Tarry yet a while longer." Does Rashi mean to say that God wants one more day with us in Jerusalem? As if He, KIVEYACHOL, was begging for our presence? Hardly. Rashi was teaching this lesson: that it is as if the Lord says to Israel, "Wherever you are going this year, stay in My presence! Hold tight to the Holiday lessons! Don't let go!"

The same lesson can be applied to YIZKOR, for after all, since YIZKOR is said on each holiday, then this is the last YIZKOR of the holiday year till Pesach, when we begin again. So if YIZKOR is to have a lesson and message for us, it is to gather the lessons our parents taught; make them our own – and hold on to them – lessons of martyrdom and sacrifice, of course. We are too close to the holocaust. Our parents, brothers, sisters, some times even children lost in that holocaust. Make the lessons of martyrdom so real that we should not need reminders; reminders of that which is seared across our consciousness more indelibly than pogrom and massacres of Chmielnicki or the Inquisition or Crusade or even Churban of Israel of old could ever be.

We remember their martyrdom till this very day. But we remember more. We remember heroism, scholarship, virtues of loving-kindness. We remember their love of family, and the beautiful society they created, the princely bearing the queenly beauty of fathers and mothers on Friday night surrounded by their beloved children. Truly, when compared to our forefathers, who can say, "We are better than they? Do we not suffer by comparison? AVAL ANACHNU VAAVOTENU, CHATANU. But in spirit they are here today. Their ideals are here. Their teachings are with us freshly remembered. Hold on. Keep their strength, their love, their ideals. Make it part of your lives. Don't lose it.

Yesterday, someone complained to me with the often-heard words, "Rabbi, isn't it too bad that so many of our Jews are only seen in shul at YIZKOR and YAHRZEIT? How sad must their idea of Judaism be. How little they have of our faith." It is "too bad"? No! It is wonderful! At least they come for YIZKOR and to say KADDISH. At least they have this connection, be it ever so little. What might otherwise happen to such Jews with utterly no connection to Judaism? Our precious YIZKOR and YAHRZEIT have kept countless Jews connected to Judaism, and even made better, more faithful Jews of many. From the next world our parents call to us and hold on to us, and cry out to us. ATZOR! "Hold on!" Remember our parents and their parents before them. Gather their lessons. Make it part of yourselves. Hold on to synagogues, to community, to Israel. It may sometimes seem to be a fragile link, but it is a lifeline. Hold on!

This is a YIZKOR in a critical time in our history. Once again our people are threatened, especially within their borders, but also by anti-Semitism world wide. We don't need a special command at this YIZKOR to hold on to the memories of our recent martyrs, those whose sacrifice we share with our tears, our anguish. Their sacrifice is so fresh, so close to our hearts. But we do need the message that just as we recite YIZKOR for them, so we have for countless years recited YIZKOR for previous martyrs, great souls whose lives were sacrificed so that the people of Israel shall live; live even to this time and to years to come AD BIAT HAGOEL. So YIZKOR can give us strength. Just as SHEMINI ATZERET contains the values of all our holidays, so YIZKOR can give us the courage and the ideals of all our ancestors! Moses, and the Torah; Aaron, with his Priestly vestments and holiness; Elijah and his fiery zeal, the Maccabees and their heroism. They can all strengthen us through this moment, from Abraham and Saran and their vision that spans the centuries, their faith and trust. Their lives and ideals are with us at this moment. Hold on! Hold on to their words, their spirit, their valor, their strength, and their power. It is our power too, if we make it ours. And if Providence requires that nowadays we have new martyrs and heroes to add to the list, LO BECHAYIL, VELO BEKOACH, KI IM BERUCHI, AMAR HASHEM TZEVAKOT, The power that comes, not by force of arms, but from the spirit of God of Israel, in the words of David the King, FOR IT IS G-D WHO WILL GIVE OUR ENEMIES INTO OUR HANDS, FOR THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S!