

Shemini Atzeret – Simchat Torah, 5784, 2023:

Rabbi David Etengoff

*Ashreinu!*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

We know that the transformation of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into Simchat Torah originated in Babylon. Yet, exactly when this change took place remains lost in the sands of time. As Rabbi Ari Enkin, quoting Rabbi Avraham Yaari's widely respected work, *Toldot Chag Simchat Torah (The History of the Festival of Simchat Torah)*, notes:

The evolution of Simchat Torah as part of the Shemini Atzeret celebrations first originated in Babylon and was not even observed in Israel until the end of the Gaonic period [11<sup>th</sup> century]. For Babylonian Jewry, Simchat Torah was the celebration of the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle. The Torah had been divided up into 54 separate parshiot, with a different *parasha* (and sometimes two at a time) being read every Shabbat, thereby completing the entire Torah each year. (<http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2008/10/simchat-torah.html>, brackets my own)

Significantly, however, the name “Simchat Torah” does not appear in the Babylonian Talmud. This is particularly of note since this work contains material up to and including the Sixth century CE. Therefore, we can readily surmise that Simchat Torah is, in all likelihood, a product of the post-Talmudic period. Rav Amnon Bazak, a noted Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, suggests that the transformation of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into the holiday of Simchat Torah by Babylonian Jewry was part of the overall conceptual transference of the *chagim* from agriculturally focused to essentially Halakha-based days of celebration:

As opposed to the “Biblical Jew,” for whom agriculture stood at the center of existence,

the “post-Temple Jew” concentrates his religious life in the proverbial “four cubits of Halakha.” Therefore, the agricultural calendar was replaced by the “Torah calendar.” In this system, the festival of the first harvest (Shavuot), which commemorated the first opportunity to benefit from one’s produce, was transformed into the holiday of *Matan Torah* [the Giving of the Torah], the first step in the nation’s acceptance of the Torah. Shemini Atzeret, which, for the agrarian society, was celebrated as the end of the year, evolved into the celebration of the completion of the Torah reading, Simchat Torah. (<http://vbm-torah.org/sukkot/shmin-bazak.htm>, brackets my own)

At this juncture, it is clear that the *Chachamim* of Babylonia Jewry changed the nature of the second day of Shemini Atzeret into a day with its own unique identity and purpose—a day wherein the annual completion of the reading of the Torah was celebrated.

Why, however, did *Chazal* create Simchat Torah? I believe this passage from the *Siddur* helps answer our question:

Therefore, we are obligated to thank You, praise You, glorify You, bless, sanctify, and offer praise and thanks to Your Name. We are fortunate (*ashreinu*)—how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our inheritance! (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, page 27, with my emendations for clarity and parentheses my own)

The first mention of this citation is found in the Gaonic work, *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon*. We must recognize that Rav Amram did not compose this section. Rather, the overall purpose of his work was to report, and thereby effectively formalize, the liturgical practices prevalent in the Babylonia of his day. As such, the origin of this section predated Rav Amram’s classic work by an indeterminate number of years.

In my estimation, Simchat Torah’s underlying rationale is found in the words, “We are fortunate (*ashreinu*)—how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our inheritance”—one of the most popular phrases we sing and dance to during the course of the *Hakafot*. *Ashreinu* follows the introductory statement, “we are obligated to thank

You, praise You, glorify You, bless, sanctify, and offer praise and thanks to Your Name.” This phrase is, perhaps, one of the preeminent formulations of *hakaret hatov* in our liturgy. No wonder we are so fortunate! No wonder we give such effusive thanks! Our inheritance (*yerushatainu*) is the Torah itself, the words of the Creator of the Universe! “Moshe commanded us the Torah, it is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Ya’akov.” (*Sefer Devarim* 33:4).

We can now understand why Simchat Torah was created: *Chazal* designated this time as a celebration of the Torah, in order to give voice to our innermost feelings of *hakaret hatov* to the Almighty for giving us this gift. In a word, on Simchat Torah we strive to emulate *David HaMelech* when he danced with passionate abandon while bringing the *Aron Kodesh* to *Yerushalayim*. (*Sefer Shmuel* II: 6:5). As such, it is the perfect day to fulfill his inspirational words: “Serve Hashem with *simcha* come before Him with praise.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 100:2, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

May this Simchat Torah be a special time when we strengthen our connection to Hashem and demonstrate heartfelt *hakaret hatov*, joy, praise, and love of Him as never before. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*!

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>.

Please contact me at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)