

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

V'Zot Haberachah

From the Classic Masters:

MOSES BREAKS THE TABLETS

And there arose not since a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom G-d knew face to face; [who performed] all the signs and wonders which G-d sent [Moses] to do in the land of Egypt... [who equaled] that mighty hand, those great awesome things, which Moses did before the eyes of all Israel

Deuteronomy 34:10-12 (closing verses of the Five Books of Moses)

"That which Moses did before the eyes of all Israel" — that his heart emboldened him to break the Tablets before their eyes, as it is written, "[I grabbed hold of the two Tablets and threw them from my two hands] and I broke them before your eyes."

Rashi's commentary on verse

Which is Higher?

Which takes precedence, the Torah or the Jewish people? Are the people only here in order to fulfil the Torah? Or is the Torah only here to reveal the richness of the soul? Or are they an indivisible whole?

When Moses saw the people standing below reveling in their worship of a golden calf, two options lay before him. On the one hand, Torah; on the other, his people. But he could not have both. Because if his people would receive the Torah in the state to which they had descended, they would be destroyed.

Without hesitation, Moses threw down the tablets and saved his people.

Meaning that there is something about these people that is present even when they are committing the gravest sin. Something that makes them more valuable than even the Torah, than G-d's innermost wisdom.

It would seem, then, that the soul is greater than the Torah.

Yet, how do we know that this is so? How do we know the value of any human life? Only because the Torah tells us this story. Without the Torah, we would not know the greatness of the soul and of the people.

So we have two sides of the coin: The soul cannot realize its greatness without the Torah. And the Torah cannot be fathomed to its depth until it is shattered for the sake of the people.

Therefore, the ultimate Torah, as G-d truly wanted it to be received, could only enter once Moses had sacrificed it for his people. Only then came the Torah as it made room for forgiveness, for human input, for that which is beyond the letter of the law. The essential Torah, as it is one with the people who are receiving it.

Breaking Limits

Everything Man is given comes in a finite package. True, the Unknowable, the source of wisdom and blessing, is infinite. But we are not. So, we can only receive wisdom and blessing piece by piece, in parcel form.

Even the tablets Moses carried down from Mount Sinai were defined and bounded. There was a limited set of laws, no more and no less. If you obeyed them, you were good. If not, you were bad. And that was that.

And so, when G-d saw Moses mourning over the broken tablets, He told him, "You have done well by smashing the tablets. For now you will receive a Torah you may extend wider than the sea."

With the second tablets came the ability for the human mind to extend the Torah within the framework of the Oral Law. As well, there came the possibility that a Jew could fail and yet restore his place with G-d.

So, too, with every failure. In truth, there is only one thing that can put you further ahead than success, and that is failure. When you are successful, you are whole and complete. That is wonderful, but with wholeness you cannot break out beyond your own universe.

When you fail, you are broken. You look at the pieces of yourself lying on the ground and say, "This is worthless. I must go beyond this."

Now you can escape. Now you can grow to join the Infinite. The shell is broken, the shell of a created being. Now you discover that G-d Himself was hidden inside. You discover the Infinite.

The Whole Torah

Why not remain broken? When broken, you can

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achieve the highest heights. When you are nothing, you can receive everything.

But you are not made only to receive. You must also face the real world and challenge its chutzpah over and over. To do that, you need supreme wholeness, as though you were Adam in the Garden before his fall. You need wholeness, as the second tablets were whole.

Once the people had achieved forgiveness and atonement for their failure, Moses was told to carve a second set of tablets. These were not the work of G-d, as the first ones. Rather, they were the achievement of human work. They were merited through the repentance of the people and the stubborn pleading of Moses. These remained whole.

Living a Paradox

Both the second, whole tablets and the original, broken ones were placed together in the Ark. So too, in the Ark of your heart lie two sets of tablets, one broken and one whole. After all, when you find the Infinite, where will you put it? In your broken vessel? It will not stay. In a new, whole one? It will not fit.

So you allow your heart to feel broken in bitterness for its confines. And yet it is whole in the joy of a boundless soul.

And if you should say, "But it is impossible! It is beyond the capacity of a created being to be both something and nothing at once."

You are right. It is impossible. That is precisely the advantage that Man holds over the angels: Only the human heart can be broken and whole at once. That is why G-d created you. To join heaven and earth. Nothingness and Being. To make the impossible real.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe,
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TORAH IN THE WINTER

Each week of the year, another of the Torah's 54 *parshiot* (sections) is studied, publicly read in the synagogue, and its lessons applied to daily living. Thus the Jew lives with the Torah: the Five Books of Moses are his calendar, their chapters and verses marking, defining, molding and inspiring the weeks and days of his year.

Simchat Torah is the day on which we conclude the annual Torah-reading cycle. On this day, we read the Torah section of *VeZot Haberachah*, (Deuteronomy 33-34), and immediately begin a new Torah-reading cycle with the reading of the first chapter of Genesis.

Simchat Torah means The Rejoicing of the Torah, for the Torah rejoices on this day. The Torah is the stuff of the Jew's life: his link to his Creator, his national mandate, the very purpose of his existence. But the Jew is no less crucial for the Torah than the Torah is for the Jew: it is he and she who devote their life to its study, teaching and practice; he and she who carry its wisdom and ethos to all peoples of the earth; he and she who translate its precepts and ideals into concrete reality.

So if we rejoice in the Torah on Simchat Torah, lifting its holy scrolls into our arms and filling the synagogue with song and dance, the Torah, too, rejoices in us on this day. The Torah, too, wishes to dance, but lacking the physical apparatus to do so, it employs the body of the Jew. On Simchat Torah, the Jew becomes the dancing feet of the Torah.

Why Not on Shavuot?

Simchat Torah immediately follows the festival of Sukkot. Indeed, the biblical name for Simchat Torah is *Shemini Atzeret*, which means the Eighth Day of Retention; for the function of this festival is for us to retain and absorb the attainments of the seven days of Sukkot.

(Outside the land of Israel, where the festival of *Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah* is observed for two days, the name *Shemini Atzeret* is usually applied to the first day and *Simchat Torah* to the second—the day on which the actual conclusion and beginning of the Torah takes place. In essence, however, the two days constitute a single festival, and the name *Shemini Atzeret* applies to both its days).

But why celebrate Simchat Torah on *Shemini*

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Atzeret, the 22nd (and 23rd) day(s) of the month of Tishrei? As a rule, the festivals are located at points on the calendar that mark the historical sources of their import and significance: Passover is observed on the 15th of Nissan, the anniversary of our Exodus from Egypt on Passover; Rosh HaShanah occurs on the 1st of Tishrei, the date of the creation of man; and so on. Accordingly, would it not have been more appropriate to rejoice over the Torah on the 6th of Sivan, the day in which G-d revealed Himself to us at Mount Sinai and granted us the Torah as our eternal heritage?

Indeed, we mark that date with the festival of Shavuot—a festival devoted to reexperiencing the revelation at Sinai and reiterating our covenant with G-d forged by Torah. Yet our joy in the Torah is reserved for the festival of Shemini Atzeret—a date with no apparent historical connection to our relationship with the Torah.

One might explain that our living with Torah through the annual reading cycle, studying it and implementing it in our daily lives, is of greater significance than our original receiving of it at Sinai. But this itself requires explanation: Why do we conclude and begin the Torah on Shemini Atzeret? Why did Moses, who established the Torah reading cycle, not schedule it to end and recommence on the festival of Shavuot?

Calendar Twins

Actually, a closer look at Shemini Atzeret and Shavuot reveals a striking resemblance between the two festivals. Shavuot, too, carries the name Atzeret, for it, too, serves as a vehicle of retention and absorption for the festival that precedes it. The resemblance is further intensified by the fact that, like Shemini Atzeret, Shavuot is also an *eighth* day of retention—a one-day festival which culminates a cycle of seven. Shemini Atzeret immediately follows the seven days of Sukkot, while Shavuot closes the seven-week *sefirah* count begun on Passover.

The two Atzerets mirror each other across the yearly cycle. The Jewish year is like a circle with two poles—two key months, Nissan and Tishrei, are both considered, each in its own realm, to be the first and head of the entire year. Nissan 15 is the date of the Exodus, and begins the seven-day festival of Passover. Exactly six months later, on the 15th of Tishrei, begins the other seven-day festival of the Jewish year, Sukkot. And both of these seven-day festivals are capped by a one-day Atzeret. The only break in the symmetry is the fact that the Atzeret of Sukkot is a literal, contiguous eighth to its seven days, while Passover's Atzeret is a more distant eighth, following a count of 49 (7 times 7) days that begins on the second day of Passover.

This leads the talmudic sage Rabbi Joshua ben Levi to say: The Atzeret of the festival of Sukkot ought to have been fifty days later, like the Atzeret of Passover.

Why, indeed, does Shemini Atzeret immediately follow Sukkot? Rabbi Joshua offers the following parable in explanation:

A king had many daughters. Some of them were married off nearby, and some of them were married off in faraway places. One day, they all came to visit with the king, their father. Said the king: Those who are married off nearby have the time to go and come; but those who are married off afar, do not have the time to go and come. Since they are all here with me, I will make one festival for them all and I shall rejoice with them.

Thus, with the Atzeret of Passover, when we are coming from winter into summer, G-d says: They have the time to go and come. But with the Atzeret of Sukkot, since we are coming from summer into winter, and the dust of the roads is difficult, and the byroads are difficult ... G-d says: They do not have the time to go and come; since they are all here, I will make one festival for them all and I shall rejoice with them (Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs 7:4).

What is an Atzeret?

To better understand the significance of Rabbi Joshua's question and the answer provided by his parable, we must first examine the concept of Atzeret. Why does a festival require an Atzeret? What is the difference between an Atzeret that immediately follows a festival and one that comes several weeks later?

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The Chassidic masters explain that an Atzeret is the absorption and internalization of what was earlier realized and expressed on a more external level. Atzeret is what digestion is to eating, what assimilation is to study, what conception is to marriage.

Our receiving of the Torah on Shavuot is the Atzeret of our liberation from slavery seven weeks earlier. On Passover we became a free people—free of the taskmasters whip, free of subjugation to the cruelest, most debased society on earth. But what is freedom? How is it to be digested, internalized and integrated into our day-to-day existence? Is it freedom from responsibility, from the burden of moral choices, from purpose and definition to life? If such is freedom, then the most liberated creature on earth is ... the slave! Indeed, this was the freedom some Jews yearned for when they complained to Moses several months later, We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt, for free.

When G-d revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush and charged him with the mission of taking the children of Israel out of Egypt, He expressed to him the nature of the freedom to be bestowed upon the newborn nation. This is your sign that I have sent you, said G-d. When you take this nation out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d at this mountain.

The purpose of the Exodus was that it should lead to Sinai. The freedom that G-d promised to Israel was not merely freedom from the geographical borders of Egypt, but freedom from all constraints and limitations, physical or psychological, external or internal. Freedom from doubt, freedom from hazard and inconsistency, freedom from servitude to one's own nature, drives and desires. Freedom which enables the soul to realize her full potential, to experience her intrinsic bond with her essence and source, to actualize her mission and purpose in life. In other words, the freedom to be fully and uninhibitedly oneself. Such freedom is possible only through Torah, the divinely authored blueprint for creation which guides and directs us toward the understanding and actualization of who and what

we truly are.

So every year, after receiving the gift of freedom on the 15th of Nissan, we embark on a 49-day process of absorbing and internalizing it—a process which culminates in the Atzeret of Shavuot. For seven weeks we labor to assimilate the true, inner significance of the Exodus into the 49 traits and sub-traits of our souls, to mature a circumstantial liberty into a state of inherent freedom.

Thus we graduate (as Rabbi Joshua expresses it) from winter to summer. From the chill of aimlessness to the warmth of passionate purpose; from the hardship of struggle to the delight of achievement; from the gloom of ignorance to the clear summer light of wisdom and understanding.

Then, six months later, come the festivals of Tishrei.

The Second Tablets

For life is not the unbroken progression of development and growth that we plan it to be. Instead, there are blunders, failings and regressions. Our life as a nation was no different: a few short weeks after we stood at Sinai, beheld our Creator, and attained the pinnacle of freedom and perfection, the Golden Calf was being worshipped in the Jewish camp.

But every fall also provides the momentum for a subsequent rise. The debacle of the Golden Calf gave us Yom Kippur—the holiest day of the year, and the source of an even deeper connection to Torah than the revelation at Sinai on Shavuot had achieved.

Following the revelation at Sinai, G-d gave Moses the Two Tablets of the Covenant on which He had inscribed the Ten Commandments which encapsulate the entirety of Torah. Upon beholding Israel's violation of everything the Tablets stood for, Moses threw the Tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. But out of the shattered tablets and covenant was born a second set of tablets—a set of tablets containing the Torah on a level that the earlier set did not, and could not, include. On the 10th of Tishrei, observed ever since as Yom Kippur, G-d gave us the Second Tablets, conveying to us a dimension of Torah that only the regenerative power of *teshuvah* (repentance, lit. return) can evoke.

On the most basic level, the Torah is a set of divinely-ordained precepts, a list of do's and don't's

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which outline the manner in which the Creator of life desired that it be lived; to act accordingly is to connect to G-d as the instrument of His will. This was the dimension of Torah that G-d inscribed on the First Tablets. But the Torah is much more than that, as evidenced by the fact that Torah itself provides the formula for *teshuvah*.

To rebuild a shattered relationship, one must access that part of the relationship that was never damaged in the first place. The possibility of *teshuvah* means that even when a person violates the divine will, G-d forbid, the essence of his connection with G-d is not affected; and the fact that the Torah itself includes the precept of *teshuvah* means that Torah is the vehicle not only for the connection between ourselves and G-d which is expressed and actualized by our observance of its commandments, but also for the inviolable bond that remains forever unaffected by our deeds. So also one who has shattered the First Tablet dimension of his relationship with G-d can reach deeper into Torah, to the very heart of the relationship tapped by the hunger, the longing, the recoil of *teshuvah*, and rebuild it anew.

As long as we did not stray from the straight and true path of life ordained by Torah, there was no need—and no opportunity—to employ the power of *teshuvah*. This is why the First Tablets contained only the conventional aspect of Torah—the connection with G-d achieved through the fulfillment of His will—while the deeper function of Torah remained locked in sublime latency. It was the Second Tablets, the product of our repentant response to our first (and prototypic) fall as a people, upon which G-d inscribed the essence of Torah—the bond between Him and us that transcends its laws and commandments.

Hidden and Revealed

And Sukkot is the celebration of Yom Kippur.

Teshuvah, by its very nature, is an introverted act: a soul secludes herself with her G-d, agonizes over the distance she has created between them, and in the depth of her anguish finds the redeeming element of her iniquities, the power to repair and sublimate her defective past.

The private nature of *teshuvah* is demonstrated by a marked difference between the manner in which we received the First and Second Tablets. On Shavuot, the entire Jewish nation gathered around Mount Sinai amidst a tremendous display of divine power; there was thunder and lightening, clouds of fire and smoke, and the triumphant blast of the *shofar* as the Almighty communicated the Ten Commandments to all of Israel and summoned Moses to the top of the mountain to receive the Tablets of the Covenant. But when Moses received the second set of Tablets on Yom Kippur, no one was there; G-d instructed that it be a silent and private affair, befitting the still, deep waters of *teshuvah*.

So Yom Kippur is hardly the environment for manifest joy and celebration. And yet, what greater joy can there be for the Jew than his joy in the Torah of the Second Tablets, in the essence of his eternal, all-enduring bond with his Creator? And the nature of joy is that it refuses to confine itself to the inner sanctum of the heart. It bursts its seams, floods the body, pours out the throat in song and sets the feet dancing. Hence the festival of Sukkot, The Time of Our Joy, five days later on the 15th of Tishrei. Sukkot is the joy of Yom Kippur come to light—the joy that the solemnity and inwardness of the day had kept concealed.

For seven days the joy mounts. But as with the freedom gained on Passover, the joy of *teshuvah* must be absorbed and internalized. Instead of remaining a once-a-year experience, it must be integrated into our nature and daily existence. So the seven-day festival of Sukkot is followed by an Atzeret—a day in which our joy with the essence of Torah reaches its peak, and is immediately married to the cycle of our year-round lives.

Summer and Winter

Thus, the Passover-Shavuot orbit on the one hand, and the Yom Kippur-Sukkot-Shemini Atzeret constellation on the other, represent two dimensions of Torah and its role as the facilitator of the bond between us and G-d.

The journey from Passover to Shavuot represents the straight and true path outlined by Torah: the careful climb from the ignorance and selfishness of infancy to spiritual and moral maturity; the step-by-step progress of the righteous individual (*tzaddik*) who labors for a lifetime to develop the inherent goodness and perfection of his soul while safeguarding himself from the pitfalls of a corporeal and corrupting world.

On the other hand, the Second Tablets of Yom Kippur,

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and their celebration and internalization on Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, represent the triumph of the *baal teshuvah* (master of return)—the one who, having succumbed to the trials of earthly life, has exploited the negativity of his condition to touch the very core of his soul and stimulate its most quintessential powers.

This is reflected in the alignment of these two festival-systems with the seasons of the year. The springtime festival of Passover and Shavuot, marking the passage from winter to summer, embody the *tzaddiks* measured progression from bud to bloom, from darkness and cold to light and warmth, from spiritual infancy to maturity. The autumn festivals of Tishrei represent the *baal teshuvahs* return to the cold and gloom of winter to uncover the treasures hidden therein.

The Parable

Now we might understand Rabbi Joshua's parable and how it explains the difference between the Atzeret of Passover and the Atzeret of Sukkot.

The Supernal King has many married daughters—many souls who have embarked on the mission and challenge of physical life. The soul comes down to earth and is joined to a body in order that their union should yield a progeny of good deeds: deeds which sanctify their material environment and fulfill G-d's purpose in creation by developing it as a dwelling for His presence. Hence, the depiction of the soul's earthly sojourn as a marriage.

Some of the King's daughters are married off in a near place. These are the souls of the righteous, who, though they descend into physical life, never lose sight of their royal origins. They deal with the material, developing and refining their own physical natures and the world about them; but without falling prey to its adverse influences. They have left their father's home, but never wander too far off.

But the King also has daughters whose marriages have led them to faraway places: souls whose involvement with the material reality has taken them far from the royal palace; souls who have become deeply enmeshed in the mundanity they came to

redeem.

There are *tzaddikim* and there are *baalei teshuvah*, and there is also the *tzaddik* and the *baal teshuvah* within each and every one of us. We each have our moments and areas of perfect righteousness—moments and areas of our lives that remain forever unsullied by the evil we must contend with. And virtually every man has had the experience—to a greater or lesser extent—of grappling with that evil, being tainted by it, and being challenged to surmount the fall—only to be driven by it to even greater heights than the perfect self could ever attain.

Passover is the festival of the *tzaddik* and of the *tzaddik* within us. On Passover we taste the pure, untarnished freedom of a newborn people. So the Atzeret of Passover comes fifty days later. For it is springtime; the roads are clear, and we have the time to go and come. We are free to methodically make our way through the 49 steps from the revelation of Passover to the internalization of Shavuot. It is a gradual, step-by-step journey, characteristic of the gradual, step-by-step trajectory of the *tzaddik's* path through life.

But on Sukkot we celebrate our capacity for *teshuvah*, our bond with G-d embodied by the Second Tablets. At this reunion of the daughters that are married afar with their Father and King, they have not the time to go and come. For we are coming from summer into winter, and the dust of the roads is difficult, and the byroads are difficult. We are journeyers along the volatile path of *teshuvah*, where opportunities must be grasped as they come, and lives are unmade and remade in a single, explosive moment.

So we plunge directly from Sukkot into the Atzeret of Simchat Torah—directly into the immediate internalization of the Second Tablet edition of Torah and its retention through the winters and summers to come.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com