



Rejoicing with Hashem and His Torah

Rabbi Danny Mirvis

With the reading of the final *parasha* of the Torah – *VeZot HaBeracha* – on Simchat Torah, we celebrate the completion of the Torah reading cycle. Outside Israel, this joyous celebration is a festival of its own, coming the day after Shemini Atzeret. In Israel, however, where there is no need for an extra day of Yom Tov, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated on the same day.

Whereas the practice of having one day of Yom Tov is clearly the ideal (as is living in Israel in the first place), this combination of celebrations requires explanation. When it comes to celebrating our joyous occasions, there is a clear rule in the Gemara: “We do not mix a *simcha* with a *simcha*” (Moed Katan 8b). From this Gemara, we learn not to combine two separate joyous events, but rather to celebrate them separately, so one *simcha* does not detract from the other. Every *simcha* deserves proper focus and attention without being in the shadow of any other celebration.

Based on this principle, how can we explain the combination of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah in Israel? Is it possible that our practice in the Diaspora is more appropriate? The answer lies in understanding the source of the *simcha* of these festivals.

Why do we celebrate Shemini Atzeret? *שְׁמִינִי עֶצְרָה* means the “assembly/stopping of the eighth day.” Rashi explains with a parable: “I kept you with me like a king who invites his son to a feast for a number of days. Seeing as the time has come to part, He says, ‘My son, please stay with me for one more day, for your parting is difficult for me’” (Vayikra 23:36).

Having spent seven days of Sukkot celebrating with Hashem, we celebrate Shemini Atzeret on the eighth day as a symbol of our special relationship with



Him. Our build-up to Shemini Atzeret commenced long before Sukkot. Since the beginning of Ellul, we have been focused on the practical, emotional and spiritual preparations for our festive season. Shemini Atzeret is the conclusion of this period, when instead of rushing back to our everyday lives, we spend an extra day celebrating with Hashem.

Why do we detract from this special Yom Tov by combining it with the completion of the Torah reading cycle?

In truth, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah do not detract from each other, because they are one and the same *simcha*. Our special relationship with Hashem and our special relationship with His Torah are one and the same thing. The Zohar expresses this clearly in numerous places where it states, “The Holy One Blessed be He and Torah are one.”

We cannot divorce our relationship with Hashem from our relationship with His Torah. We cannot expect to come close to Hashem or grow in spirituality if we fail to show commitment to His Torah. The very best way

to develop a meaningful relationship with Hashem is to make His priorities our priorities through the observance of *mitzvot* and to learn more about Him and His lessons for our world by learning His Torah.

At the same time, we cannot treat our observance of *mitzvot* or Torah learning as purely academic or intellectual exercises. A commitment to Torah and *mitzvot* that does not strengthen our relationship with Hashem is off base.

Not only do the *simcha* of Shemini Atzeret and the *simcha* of Simchat Torah not detract from one another; they cannot exist without each other!

By deepening our relationship with Hashem, may we merit to take part in the ultimate celebration of Hashem and His Torah with all of Am Yisrael celebrating one day of Yom Tov together in Israel.

Rabbi Danny Mirvis is the incoming Deputy CEO of World Mizrahi, after six years as Senior Rabbi of Mizrahi Melbourne.