



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5771 Enter the Heart”*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Shemini Atzeret 5771 > The Deepest Love
September 30, 2010

2010

SHEMINI ATZERET 2010

The Deepest Love

ABSTRACT

The cyclical concept of Jewish time could best be compared to a coiled spring – because it is cyclical, revolving around repeating themes, but always reaching upwards. We see this in Jewish history, we see it in the Jewish holiday cycle, and we see it in the day-to-day Jewish calendar.

This concept is especially apparent on Shemini Atzeret – an enigmatic one-day holiday mandated by the Torah, which expresses the Torah’s lessons of love most poignantly (and even romantically). Above all, it teaches us the secret of eternal love – one that never dies.

“Can we mortals actually connect to the immortal?” is one of the big questions we all have. This question acutely looms for those that are here on Shemini Atzeret to observe *Yizkor* – to remember a loved one or loved ones: Can we connect to the departed souls of our beloved, or do we remain forever apart?

Shemini Atzeret provides us with a powerful answer: We have the ability to never part from our loved ones. Your actual being here to observe *Yizkor* means their spirit lives on in you. And as you think about them, as you remember the example they set, think as well how you want to be remembered. How you want your spirit to live now and live on.

For such is the nature of Jewish time – that the actions of each generation become embedded in the ever-revolving, ever-escalating cycle that brings us closer and closer to a better, more perfect world, when we will literally feel the embrace of God, and eternally connect to the spirit of our loved ones.

1. What is Jewish Time?

What is Jewish time?

And the answer is not: being late for everything. Granted, that is many people's idea of Jewish time. It's like an 11th commandment: "Though shall not be on time for any Jewish event." If the wedding is called for 6:00 that is the time that the really neurotic people actually get into their cars. The others? "*Ven* I get there, I get there..."

No, that is not what I am talking about.

What is Jewish time? Jewish time is cyclical – like a coiled spring. It is dynamic time, revolving around repeating themes, but always reaching upwards. We see this in Jewish history, we see it in the Jewish holiday cycle, and we see it in the Jewish day-to-day calendar.

You know the joke about the rabbi in space. No? Yes? Let me tell it to you anyway:

NASA had sent many shuttles to orbit the earth and made an attempt to include passengers of all races, color and creed. But then they realized they had excluded the clergy... so they invited a priest, a minister and a rabbi to orbit the earth in a space shuttle...

Upon their return, the press was waiting to hear their impressions. First the priest emerged, beaming and happy. His statement was full of joy. He said, "It has totally amazing, I saw the sun rise and set, I saw the awesomeness of creation." Then the minister emerged; he was also happy and at peace. He said, "I saw the magnificent earth, our home. I saw the sun rise and set. I saw the majestic cycle of time. I'm truly in awe."

Then the rabbi came out. He was completely disheveled, his beard was a tangled mess, his yarmulke was hanging off his ear, his tallis was ripped. He seemed too exhausted to speak. So they asked him, "Rabbi, how did you enjoy the flight?" He threw his hands in the air and replied, "ENJOY?! What was to enjoy? Every

5 minutes the sun was rising and setting! On with the *tefillin*, off with the *tefillin*, on with the tallis, off with the tallis... *mincha, maario, shacharit, mincha, maario... Gewalt!!!*"

That is Jewish time in action.

2. Cycles of Growth

The phenomenon of Jewish time as cyclical – as a cycle of progressive growth – is especially apparent now.

And speaking about cycles, how is life like a bicycle?

Well, first you need to put on a helmet, so if you fall you won't hurt yourself. In life, our protective helmet is our strong sense of values and close relationships – including with those we love, with our neighbors and strangers, and with God.

Now once you put your helmet on and you start riding your bicycle, it's exactly like life: If it's hard, it means you are climbing upward. If it is easy, it means you are going downhill. And if you fall, you've stopped.

Moral: You can never stop. You must always work on yourself and grow.

We are here to celebrate our growth, for we have grown. We began the Hebrew month of Tishrei with Rosh Hashana and moved onto Yom Kippur. In those early days – the Days of Awe – we stood with trepidation before God. Then we moved onto Sukkot – the Days of Joy. We entered the embrace of the *sukkah*, and we began to integrate the awesome intensity of the first half of the month.

The Kabbalah explains the psycho-spiritual nature of all developmental growth as having two primary stages. First comes the exterior *makif* stage. *Makif* means "surrounding," and in this stage we surround ourselves with – or steep ourselves in – an experience. Next comes the interior *pnimi* stage. *Pnimi* means "inside," and this is when we allow the experience to penetrate us, to be integrated and internalized.

3. It's About Love

All growth is about love. Indeed, all of life is about love. All of Torah, the blueprint for life, is about love. "You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." And "You shall love you neighbor as yourself." All else is commentary.

Existence is essentially about building a loving relationship between man and man, and man and God.

Now, every relationship consists of the two stages that Kabbalah speaks of: 1) *makif* – the loving embrace, when we engulf each other in an all encompassing union; and 2) *pnimi* – when we internalize the love within.

This is true whether we are speaking about romantic love or parental love. And because we observe Yizkor today, this insight carries a particularly poignant message for us who remember the love we received from those who are no longer with us.

And as for our relationship with God – which has been renewed on Rosh Hashana, sanctified on Yom Kippur, and celebrated on Sukkot – it is now consummated on Shemini Atzeret (the "Eighth Day of Assembly").

4. Romantic Progression

This progression is dramatically illustrated by the romantic words of the *Song of Songs*:

- Elul – the month of preparation before we reach *Tishrei* and Rosh Hashana – is an acronym for this verse from the *Song of Songs*: "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me."¹
- The Days of Awe – which begin with Rosh Hashana and end with Yom Kippur – correspond to another verse from the *Song of Songs*: "His left hand [the hand of judgment] is under my head."²
- Sukkot corresponds to "His right hand [the hand of kindness] embraces me."³

- Hoshana Rabba corresponds to “He shall kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” since the ceremony of Hoshana Rabba involves the willow whose leaves resemble the lips.⁴
- And finally comes Shemini Atzeret which corresponds to the loving union itself.

Can we appreciate how romantic – and how beautiful – that is?

5. Three Levels of Love

The observance of Shemini Atzeret stands out among the holidays as a single day dedicated exclusively to us – Ba’yom ha’Shemini Atzeret tihiye lochem, “The eighth day of assembly this day shall be to you” – an intimate time that each of us spends with God alone. As the Midrash explains with a parable:

There was once a king who invited his children for a banquet lasting several days. When it came time for them to go, he said: “My children, please stay with me one more day for your parting is difficult for me.” At the end of the holiday season God says to the Jewish people: After spending so much time together during the holidays (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot), I find your parting difficult for Me. Let us spend one more day together – just you and I – let us feast and celebrate before you go off to your daily lives.

Shemini Atzeret is a time when we are intimately alone with God – it is thus a day of love.

Consider that three levels of love are possible for a human being – and we see this with the love we feel for our partners, for our children and for our parents (whether they are still with us or not):

- If you love someone dearly, anything that your loved one asks, you will do, even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient.

¹ Song of Songs 6:3.

² Song of Songs 2:6.

³ Song of Songs 2:6.

⁴ Song of Songs 1:2.

- If you love someone even more than that, you don't wait to be asked, you respond to the slightest hint in order to satisfy your beloved.
- If you love someone with all your heart, you don't even wait for hints. You anticipate what might bring your beloved pleasure, and you do it.

When it comes to God, many of the customs that developed among the Jewish people are not mandated by the Torah. And that makes them of the highest level. Simchat Torah is one such custom. On this day, we anticipate what would give God pleasure and we do it - we dance with the Torah.

6. Significance of Shemini Atzeret

In the parable cited above, the king does not say, "*our* parting is difficult for me." He says, "*your* parting is difficult for me." Indeed, God is everywhere and so He never parts from us. It is we who part from God, moving on to a state of diminished awareness of our relationship with Him.

"Your parting" has yet another meaning - the parting we take from each other which, in God's eyes, is synonymous with us parting from Him. When we are one with God, we are also one with each other, united as children of a royal father. And the same applies in reverse - when we are one with each other, united in the common identity as God's children, we are one with God.

This parting is distressful to God. So He retains us one day longer, for an eighth day of "retention" or "assembly" or "ingathering." This is Shemini Atzeret - a day when dwelling in a *sukkah* is no longer obligatory, but on which the unity of Sukkot suffuses us nonetheless.

On this day, it is not so much that we are in the *sukkah*, but the *sukkah* is within us. On this day, we are empowered to internalize the unity of Sukkot and store it in the depths of our soul so that we may draw on it in the months to come.

And speaking of storage, did you know there is a website dedicated to giving advice on how to enjoy yourself in the *sukkah*?

A big part of this website has to do with advice concerning the intrusion of bees.

One post advises: "Have a *l'chaim*! If you are drunk enough you won't notice them."

Another says, "Since we put up a sign in big clear letters - NO BEES ALLOWED, SO BUZZ OFF! - we've had no had problems. By-the-way, we also now store the honey in a *closed* container."

Yeah, okay, I should have told you about that *before* the start of Sukkot, not now when we are departing from it.

7. Yizkor: Painful Parting

Departures are always difficult. Parting from a loved one is painful. Especially when it feels final. The most difficult part of death is the sheer finality of the loss. We no longer are able to touch, to see, to speak with a person whom we love so dearly. For years we were connected, and now we seem separated.

God's words to us on Shemini Atzeret - "My children, please stay with Me one more day for your parting is difficult for Me" - communicate a very powerful message of comfort: The pain of parting is felt not only by us mortals but also by immortal God!

At the same time God is telling us: Remember that this is "*your* parting." Because you are material beings of limited vision, you feel that your body has parted from the body of your loved ones. But this is only true on the body level. Your souls never part. Though your eyes cannot see your loved one, the soul of your loved one can see you.

When God says, "Stay with me one more day," He is saying to us, "If you stay with Me and allow your soul to connect with Me, by extension, you will also connect with the soul of your loved one."

Love never dies, as the soul never dies. Yet, living on this *material* side of the curtain, completely consumed by our physical senses, we find it difficult to relate to the soul on the *spiritual* side of the curtain. Yet, on this singular day of Shemini Atzeret, we have the divine power to part its folds a little bit and catch a glimpse of the hidden reality.

This is the power of *Yizkor*. We do not allow the spirit of our loved ones to die with their bodies. We remember. We mention them by name. We connect to their personality and experiences we had with them. We allow them to live on through us.

And we rededicate our lives to the eternal values that never perish.

Shemini Atzeret is one day, but its impact can be forever.

8. Immortality on Earth

If you dedicate yourself to doing what God wants, you will bring immortality to your life – to never part from the values and the people you love.

Even more than that, you will change everything in your life for the better. Because every fiber of your body and every moment of your day will be constantly infused with a new vitality. You will be connecting to something that is so much higher than yourself and, at the same time, you will be uncovering who you really are. And that is a very exciting thing.

So on this special holiday, ask yourself: How much of your life is dedicated to what God wants?

And then, name one thing that you know God wants you to do but that you don't do.

And do it.

9. Jews at Heart vs. Jews at Work

Now, I am sure that some among you may wonder why it isn't good enough to be a Jew at heart. Is *doing* something actually necessary?

It is true that to some of the world's religions action is not as important as what is going on beneath the surface. But Judaism says that what is beneath the surface does not truly change unless there is action above the surface.

It's like a contract that is never signed and executed.

Imagine, for example, that you give a brilliant presentation and your customer heartily responds: "What a wonderful project! I'm in! I'm with you 100 percent!" But if he doesn't sign a contract, if he doesn't invest in your project, what do his words ultimately matter? It's nice that he gave you his *emotional* support, but what you want and need is his *active* support.

The material world is about bottom lines. It is driven by action, and it can only be transformed by action – not just any action but action which spiritualizes the material. This is why it is not enough to be a Jew at heart.

The amazing thing is that through action, it is possible to spiritualize everything in life including your body. It is actually possible to retard the aging process.

The Book of Genesis tells us about Abraham, who lived to be 175. And it says, "Abraham aged, and he came into his days." And about this, the Zohar says that Abraham aged very slowly because he spiritualized every moment. By doing so, his life became eternal.

Today, four thousand years after he lived, millions of his people the world over remember not only his name but also everything he did, which is recorded forever in the Torah. That's immortality.

10. Call to Action

And if you dismiss this by saying, "Ah well, that was Abraham," let me suggest to you that if you are here on Shemini Atzeret to observe *Yizkor*

- to remember a loved one or loved ones - those you remember internalized this very lesson in one way or another. They are remembered by you, their memory lives on, because in some way they spiritualized their lives so they would not be forgotten. Their spirit lives on in you - not only in your memory but in your actions.

And as you think about them, as you remember the example they set, think as well how you want to be remembered. How you want your spirit to live now and live on.

As you honor their memory, consider how much of your life will be remembered by others?

And right here and right now, make a mental list of things you did - or plan to do - which you want to be remembered forever.

For such is the nature of Jewish time - that the actions of each generation become embedded in the ever-revolving, ever-escalating cycle that brings us ever closer to a better, more perfect world, when we will literally feel the embrace of God, and when we will never have to part from Him and from each other again.