



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 8, 2012
Shemini Atzeret

Power of Restraint



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5773 Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

When something exciting comes your way do you immediately gobble it down, or do you slowly savor the experience? How many great things may we have missed in life due to our impatience?

We live today in a fast food and fast paced society, and we abhor waiting for anything. Some say that this is because it makes us realize how much time we have on our hands... This is why supermarkets place tabloids next to checkout lines, and office buildings place mirrors next to elevator banks - anything to occupy those waiting and reduce their impatience. And this is why Houston Airport devised a circuitous route for people to get to the baggage claim, making them walk for 8 minutes instead of having them standing and staring at the carousel.

But how many critical elements in life can only emerge through waiting? Love, truth, soul, happiness, peace of mind - all require process and time to blossom. They cannot be acquired with a click; they must *emerge*.

Shemini Atzeret - and especially the word *atzeret* - contains the secret to success. It teaches us how the story of love is the story of patience and restraint. When you love something you wait for it.

This sermon contains a wealth of humor about waiting, a beautiful Yizkor section honoring the patience of parents, and inspirational content about waiting for the Moshiach - all related to the inner meaning of Shemini Atzeret, the holiday that urges us to pause ... and wait for God and one another.

Absorbing the lesson of this one day holiday - defined by the single word *atzeret* - can change your life forever.

THE POWER OF RESTRAINT: LESSONS FROM THE HOLIDAY OF WAITING

1. Patience Now! (Jokes)

I want patience... AND I WANT IT NOW!!!!

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Did you hear about the teacher who, on a snowy day, was helping one of her kindergarten students put on his boots?

But even with her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn't want to go on. Before she finally succeeded, she had worked up a sweat from the struggle. And she almost whimpered when the little boy said, "But they're on the wrong feet."

Sure enough, they were.

It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool though, as together they worked to get the boots back on – this time on the right feet.

But he then announced, "These aren't my boots."

She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?!" like she wanted to.

Once again she struggled to help him pull off the ill-fitting boots. At least now she knew why they fit him so badly.

He then said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them."

She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up all the grace and courage she had left to wrestle the boots on his feet again.

And then she made the mistake of asking, "Now, where are your mittens?"

He said, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots."

*

A gentleman was lonely and decided life would be more fun with a pet. But he didn't want just a cat or a dog. He wanted something unusual – a conversation piece.

So he went to the pet store and told the owner that he wanted to buy an exotic pet. After some discussion, he finally settled on a centipede that came in a little white box. He took them home and the centipede settled in.

That night the fellow decided to take his new pet to the bar to have a drink. He bent over the box and asked the little furry creature, "Would you like to go to Frank's with me and have a beer?"

There was no answer from his new pet. This worried him a bit, but he waited a few minutes and asked him again, "How about going to the bar and having a drink with me?"

Again, there was no answer from his new friend and pet. So he waited a few more minutes while assessing the situation. He decided to ask him one more time, while putting his face up against the centipede's house, and shouting, "Hey, in there! Would you like to go to Frank's place and have a drink with me?!"

A little voice came out of the box, "I heard you the first time! I'm putting my shoes on! Just wait why don't you!"

2. Waiting and Waiting

There is waiting and there is waiting.

There is waiting which is unhealthy – like procrastination. Or the desperate and futile wait for a miracle that would never come, as in Leonard Cohen's *Waiting for the Miracle*:

I've been waiting,

I've been waiting night and day.

I didn't see the time,

I waited half my life away.

And then there is a healthy form of waiting – the restraint needed to appreciate and integrate a special experience. It is the patience needed to see a process through. It is the time needed to retain something precious.

Take for example, the nine-month wait of prospective parents for a new beautiful and healthy child. Or the anticipation of the farmer who waits for his harvest after sowing the fields.

Every new achievement, every form of growth, follows a pause – a wait – that allows the seed to develop and mature into a full grown entity.

Some waits are a waste of time, some are sacred ... as we learn from the holiday we celebrate today, Shemini Atzeret, which one could dub “the Holiday of Waiting.”

3. The Holiday of Waiting

Shemini Atzeret – a special one-day holiday that follows the seven days of Sukkot – is mandated by the Torah which states: *Ba’yom ha’Shemini Atzeret tihiye lochem*, “The eighth day shall be ... *atzeret* ... for you.”¹

I intentionally haven’t translated the word *atzeret* because it is not a simple word to translate.

The word *atzeret* shares its root with the word *atzor* which in modern Hebrew means “stop” or “halt,” but opinions of biblical commentators vary as to its exact meaning in this particular context. Suffice it to say that the most of them agree that it is something to do with delaying, holding back, waiting.²

But what is the meaning and significance of waiting and delaying?

¹Numbers 29:35. See also Leviticus 23:36.

²Saadia, Ibn Ezra, and Radak say it means “retreat,” as it is a time when one must hold back from doing work. Rashi and Ibn Ezra both say that it means “retention,” as it is a holdover holiday, an extra day added to Sukkot. And still others say it means “assembly,” a time to gather together.

4. Parable (Midrash)

The Midrash explains it 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."

So, too, 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."³

Now, let us examine this parable more closely:

At first glance, the king's request seems little more than an indulgence of sentiment. If his children are going to return to their lives apart from him anyway, what is gained by asking them to stay one more day? Other than delaying the pain of parting for 24 hours, is there anything of enduring significance in the extra day spent together?

And why this last minute realization? If the king is God, does He not know that the holiday is coming to an end?

Of course He does. But He loves us. And love is longing, so when the time comes to part, He simply wants more time with us.

The extra wait itself is sacred and expresses His deepest love: "Come let us spend one more day together."

And then the love lives on, for the waiting itself – the need and expression of one more day – allows us truly never part.

Hence a "Holiday of Waiting."

³ Cited by Rashi on the verse in Numbers 29:35.

5. The Lost Art

Shemini Atzeret offers us a tremendous lesson in life – how to reclaim what seems to have become a lost art: persistent patience.

The story of love is the story of patience and restraint. When you love something you wait for it.

Absorbing the lesson of this one day holiday – defined by the single word *atzeret* – can change your life forever.

In our fast-food generation we have forgotten the importance of waiting, of appreciating the process, of allowing things to emerge slowly.

We need to learn the beauty of patience. For all beautiful things, everything real, comes out of patience.

On ordinary days, we live in a world where the key element to success – patience – has been lost to us.

In our acquisition-oriented and commodity-based society we are always busy purchasing and acquiring items. Marketers are invested in selling us everything from hairspray and cosmetics to exotic trips and hip automobiles – all in the name of “achieving fulfillment.” We are constantly told that if we want something, we must be aggressive, a go-getter. And then whatever we seek is ours with the tiny effort of a click.

Once upon a time, in the agrarian age, people lived on farms and ate only that which they could harvest – each type of grain, fruit or vegetable in its season. Today, we can purchase any food, anytime of the year, and we have lost touch with the rhythms of life – with the *process*.

Today we abhor waiting for anything. With the press of a button we expect to acquire anything, anytime, anywhere. Some say that we dislike waiting these days because it makes us realize how much time we have on our hands...

Indeed, in response to studies that show how much we hate to wait, Houston Airport devised a circuitous route for people to get to the baggage claim. Their baggage was still down in the same 8 minutes as before but, because they were walking most of that time instead of standing and staring at the carousel, their complaints were reduced to near zero.⁴

⁴ See the New York Times, Aug. 18, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/19/opinion/sunday/why-waiting-in-line-is-torture.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>.

This is why supermarkets place tabloids next to checkout lines, and office buildings place mirrors next to elevator banks - anything to occupy those waiting and reduce their impatience.

It seems that waiting is associated in most people's minds with wasting time, and we all abhor the feeling that our time is being wasted.

But then the question arises: What do you consider time filled and time wasted? What if while waiting in a long line you strike up an engaging conversation that changes your life? That would hardly be an empty waste of time, would it?

Shemini Atzeret teaches us that waiting is never empty - when you wait for something sacred, the wait itself becomes sacred. And every moment is sacred, because every moment carries within it the potential for you to elevate existence, and that can happen whether you are standing still or walking fast.

6. The Sacred Pause

All real things in life - truth, love, God, soul, happiness, peace of mind - all require process, which takes time to blossom. They cannot be acquired with a click; they must *emerge*.

Plant a seed, fertilize an egg - and it takes months or years until it grows into a fully blown entity or adult.

All great things follow a pause. All birthings are preceded by a gestation period.

The Kabbalists call it the *ayin* - the nothingness, the void - between two states of *yesh* (being). A seed needs to patiently and slowly deteriorate in the ground as it turns into a sapling. No new entity can be born without the previous state being dissolved, or else you just have an extension of the old. You need to shed the old layer of skin in order to assume a new layer.

7. The Patience of Parents (Yizkor)

The waiting – *atzeret* – that is required for every new birthing includes also our own personal birthing, which did not come out of thin air. Every one of us here is a product of parents that waited patiently on and for us, and paid heavy prices in the process.

It's one of the oddest phenomena that we usually don't appreciate the process that brought us to where we are. The countless painstaking hours that our parents invested in providing for our every single step especially in our earliest years. I guess it's like a foundation of a structure – hidden from view it is left unappreciated, despite it holding up the entire structure.

Yizkor honors the patience of our parents. Pausing and taking a moment to honor our parents in *Yizkor* honors the patience our mothers and fathers exercised while we were growing up.

There is perhaps no greater or nobler act of patience than parenting. How many untold hours does a parent dedicate to her/his child? And no one is watching. No one is applauding. There are no Academy Awards, no Nobel Prizes, no cameras and fireworks for good parenting and the patience it takes.

So, on Shemini Atzeret, we honor that patience when we say *Yizkor*.

8. The Ugly Duckling (Inspirational Story)

We all know the story of the *Ugly Duckling*:

A mother duck's eggs hatch. One of the little birds is perceived by the duck's surroundings as a homely little creature and suffers much verbal and physical abuse from the other birds and animals on the farm.

He wanders sadly from the barnyard and lives with wild ducks and geese until hunters slaughter the flocks. He then finds a home with an old woman but her cat and hen tease him mercilessly and again he sets off on his own. He sees a flock of migrating wild swans; he is delighted and excited but he cannot join them for he is too young and cannot fly.

Winter arrives. A farmer finds and carries the freezing little bird home, but the foundling is frightened by the farmer's noisy children and flees the house. He spends a miserable winter alone in the outdoors mostly hiding in a cave on the lake that partly freezes over.

When Spring arrives a flock of swans descends on the now thawing lake. The ugly duckling, now having fully grown and matured cannot endure a life of solitude and hardship any more and decides to throw himself at the flock of swans deciding that it is better to be killed by such beautiful birds than to live a life of ugliness and misery.

He is shocked when the swans welcome and accept him, only to realize by looking at his reflection in the water that he has grown into one of them. The flock takes to the air and the ugly duckling spreads his beautiful large wings and takes flight with the rest of his new family.

How many opportunities may we have missed because of our lack of patience to see it through? How much of our own beauty – our swan within – remain unrealized because we simply continue to rush things and not allow them to mature and emerge?

9. Celebrate and Commit

As we celebrate Shemini Atzeret and honor the power of waiting – and those that have waited on and for us – let us lift a cup to the enormous power of stopping and smelling the roses.

Let us dance and celebrate the fact that we as a people have traveled thousands of years in the long marathon history, and we still stand strong and proud. Let us declare to the world, to strangers and friends alike, to our families, and to God Himself:

“Our unwavering commitment and love is that we will always wait for you. We will never give up and move on.”

Let us commit to wait on one another. When you see someone moving a little slower, wait for him, walk beside him. When you see someone lacking in any given area, stop and help him grow at his pace.

Let us resolve to be a bit more patient in our lives. When your child upsets you, deliberate a bit longer and see what is bothering him/her. When others annoy you, don't just react impulsively; step back and review the situation. Take the time to find a better solution than just aggravation. When you are driving and someone cuts you off, try minimizing your road rage by laughing it off.

In this supersonic moving world, resolve to slow down, to stop and savor the scent of a flower, the breath of a child, the gift of life, the blessings with you have been endowed.

10. Waiting for Moshiach

And resolve to continue to wait for the Moshiach though he may continue to tarry.⁵ For this is another kind of sacred waiting.

Waiting for Moshiach reflects our firm belief that the world will realize its purpose, and our staunch and unshakable commitment to goodness and kindness and to do everything possible to bring about the Final Redemption.

Despite the setbacks, the massacres, the tremendous difficulties, we have continued to wait for Moshiach. Because love and commitment does not fluctuate. It is not impacted by which way the wind blows.

And today, we declare for all to hear: we have waited for you so long. Isn't it time you showed your face? Not just speedily in our days, but today ... Now!

Amen.

⁵ See Rambam Hilchos Melachim 11:1.