



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 16, 2014
Shemini Atzeret

Knishes & Jewish Unity



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

This sermon is about knishes and synagogues.

To start with, nobody wants to go to synagogue. Not the adults, not the children, not even the rabbi. But everyone wants to eat a knish. Have you ever seen anybody turn one down?

So if only a synagogue could have the appeal of a knish.

But it does! Let me explain:

How is a knish made? There is a square sheet of dough lying flat on the counter. In the center is placed the filling, whatever it may be. Then, all four corners are pulled and squeezed together over the core filling, creating a complete encasement around the core. The knish is then baked and ready to eat.

What can the knish teach us about Judaism in general and synagogues specifically?

Everything.

The connection between synagogues and knishes is Shemini Atzeret – specifically the word *atzeret*, which is translated in Aramaic by the Targum as *kneish*, which means to “assemble.”

A knish is an assembly of various ingredients; it is the gathering of all the four corners of the dough as one; it is the enveloping of the filling in one scrumptious cocoon.

This is what happens on Shemini Atzeret. This is what happens in a Bei Knishta, Beit Knesset, House of Assembly – what we call today a synagogue.

All of the above insights are garnished in this sermon with a classic Baal Shem Tov story – about how a synagogue should never, ever be full of prayers, for prayers should never stay down below filling a space, instead they should rise above the synagogue and climb to the heights of heaven.

KNISHES & JEWISH UNITY

1. Going to the Synagogue (Joke)

Benjamin woke up one Shabbat morning in a bad mood. When he came down to breakfast, he put on his yarmulke and sat across the table from his mother.

“I’m not going to synagogue today!” he said emphatically.

“Yes, you are,” his mother replied calmly.

“No, I’m not. I don’t think I want to go ever again!” Benjie said with obvious irritation. “The congregants hate me, the cantor despises me, I never get to sit in the front row, nobody is nice to me. I won’t go back.”

“Yes, you will go today, and you will continue to go every week,” his mother declared with confidence.

“Why must I?” whined Benjie?

“I’ll give you two reasons,” said his mother. “Number one, you are 45 years old, and number two... you’re the rabbi!”

2. Why Does Nobody Want to Go to Synagogue?

Nobody wants to go to the synagogue. Not the adults, not the children, not even the rabbi.

Why? Why do synagogues get such a bad rap? Why does no one want to go to the synagogue?

Perhaps it has to do with what a synagogue is *perceived* to be and what a synagogue is *meant* to be.

To help us examine this topic, let's introduce an elemental ingredient in the dish of Jewish experience: the knish.

Unlike the synagogue, everyone loves the knish. Have you ever seen anybody turn one down?

So if only a synagogue could have the appeal of a knish.

But it does! Let me explain...

3. The Knish

A knish – as we all know – is a core product (such as potato, beef, chicken, spinach, mushroom) enveloped in a hug of dough.

How is a knish made? Let me describe how my mother/wife makes it:

There is a square sheet of dough lying flat on the counter. In the center is placed the filling, whatever it may be. Then, all four corners are pulled and squeezed together over the core filling, creating a pocket that encases the core. The knish is then baked and ready to eat.

By-the-way, did you know that a knish is very similar to kreplach? Yes, while a knish is a dough pocket that is baked, kreplach is a dough pocket that is boiled (typically in chicken soup). And it is a custom to eat kreplach on Purim, Erev Yom Kippur and Hashana Rabba.¹

¹ Among the reason given for this custom: The meat enclosed in the dough symbolizes judgment (meat, gevurah) being encompassed and dominated by loving kindness (dough, chesed) -- the theme of Hoshana Rabba (as well as Erev Yom Kippur and Purim) -- sweetening judgments.

How many in this congregation did that yesterday? A show of hands? (Well, clearly you need to hear this sermon.)

Which reminds me of the following joke, if you will bear with me:

A mother comes to a rabbi for advice. Her concern – her little boy hates kreplach. How is he going to grow up as a good Jew if he rejects such an important culinary staple of his people? The rabbi commiserates and then advises that she engage him in the cooking process. If he participates in the making of kreplach, he will like kreplach.

So the mother tells the boy, “Sammy today we are going to make something special together, okay?”

“What is it?” he asks.

“It will be a delicious surprise,” the mother promises. The boy is game and they begin. They cook the filling, they roll out the dough. The boy enjoys making the little dough pockets and pinching them closed. The mother then places the finished product in soup and a short while later serves it to her son. He is so excited, he can hardly wait for the soup to cool.

Finally with a great big smile, he spoons a mouthful, only to immediately spit it out with: “Ugh! Kreplach!”

4. The Shemini Atzeret Connection: Atzeret Equals Kneish

All kidding aside, what can a dough pocket teach us about Judaism in general and the synagogue in particular?

Everything.

And the connection is Shemini Atzeret – specifically the word *atzeret*.

From where does Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of Sukkot, get its name? From this Torah verse:

*The eighth day shall be atzeret for you; you shall not perform any mundane work.*²

From that verse, we know that the eighth day of the Festival of Sukkot is called atzeret. What does atzeret mean?

Targum Onkelos translates *atzeret* into Aramaic as *kneish*.³ And what does *kneish* mean?

Kneish comes from the Aramaic word *knishta* which is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew word *knesset*, which means to “assemble/gather/collect.” Thus, the Torah verse actually reads:

The eighth day shall be an assembly for you; you shall not perform any mundane work.

Now what does “assembly” really mean? What does *atzeret* really entail?

A knish is an assembly of various ingredients; it is the gathering of all the four corners of the dough as one; it is the enveloping of the filling in one scrumptious cocoon. And this is what happens on Shemini Atzeret. This is what happens in a Beit Knesset, House of Assembly – what we call today a synagogue.

5. Bei Knishta

All kidding aside, a synagogue – which is called in Hebrew a Beit Knesset – is called in Aramaic Bei Knishta.⁴ Bei Knishta does not mean a “house of knishes,” some Mesopotamian fast-food chain. Bei Knishta literally means “House of Assembly,” which translated into Greek is “synagogue.” As the prefix “syn” (from synergy, synchronicity) implies, synagogue means to gather together, to come and meet, to become a collective whole – a part of which, of course, is prayer.

But only a part.

² Bamidbar 29:35.

³ Kinishin in Targum Yonatan. Rashi cites the Talmud (Chagigah 18a, Sukkah 55b) that *atzeret* mean to “refrain/restrict.”

⁴ See Berachot 7b for example.

As a true House of Assembly, a synagogue is meant to assemble people, to unite Jews, to create community, through many mediums: social and educational programming, schooling for children, classes for adults, presenting inspiring content for all ages. It is meant to be a place where people may network and find livelihood, a place of charity, of healthy relationships, of families being built and growing.

Unfortunately, synagogues today are all too often the exact opposite. They are not places of collective community, but places of alienation, denominations, and country-club-like associations. And, as our opening joke suggests, even the rabbi is horrified by the prospect of going to synagogue.

Jews are one people. And the place where they come together – the synagogue – may be compared to the bellows that helps fan the divine ember that lives within us all.

A synagogue does not create that divine spark that lives within us, but synagogue programming, classes, prayers, and sense of community can fan our spark until it burns with a complete passion and heavenly glow.

6. Gathered as One

The nature of this physical world is that we are naturally not gathered as one. You have your corner, and I have mine. You have your seat and I have mine. These distinctions exist at work, at home, at the country club ... everywhere. They should not exist in the synagogue as well. A synagogue is supposed to be a place where all Jews assemble not to highlight their differences but to underline their commonality.

However, often times the structures we built precisely to transcend differences – like houses of worship – often do divide us more than they unite us.

Therefore, we have a holiday like Sukkot, where conventional structures are completely irrelevant and the differences start to fall away. We invite guests into our sukkah – a haphazard hut – where people feel comfortable like they never could in a luxurious dining room, like they never could in an exalted synagogue sanctuary. It is a lot easier and more comfortable to sit on a flimsy folding chair in a make-shift Sukkah than it is to sit on a luxurious cushion in a fancy-schmancy temple.

But a sukkah is temporary. And it is not a collective, not an assembly; in a sukkah there are still distinctions between hosts and guests.

But then comes *atzeret*, *knishta*, *knesset*, the eighth day of Sukkot, the bridge between the sukkah and the synagogue, between the sukkah and the dining room, when all hosts and guests blend together... and all that's left is a gathering of equals.

We are taught⁵ that on Shemini Atzeret all of Israel transcends to its source and assembles there as one unified being. For, obviously, at our core, we are all one.

It is a synagogue's job to remind us of this throughout the year. And for this, as previously mentioned, we have the knish.

A knish is a square piece of pastry dough, with four different corners. In the center of the dough is placed a dollop of scrumptious meat. This meat is the core, the nucleus, the soul of the knish. Then, the cook takes all the four corners of the dough and pinches them together as one.

7. Zohar Teaching

The Zohar⁶ teaches that throughout Sukkot all the many guests come to the table of the king. And the king's household serves the many guests and celebrates with them. The first seven days of Sukkot is like hosting an awesome party for many people.

But, then, on the eighth day, after all the guests have left, the household itself gathers for its own private and intimate party. Here, there are no guests but one unified collective.

This, teaches the Zohar, is Shemini Atzeret. While Sukkot is a party for guests; Shemini Atzeret is a party for the intimate family.

For seven days we invite all different types of Jews – *ushpizin* – into our sukkah. On Shemini Atzeret, every single Jew is gathered together as one, as one family.

⁵ Likkutei Torah, Drushim l'Shmini Atzeret, p. 84d; Ohr Hatorah, Shmini Atzeret (Devarim vol. 4, p 1'978).

⁶ Emor 104b.

8. Back to the Knish

Sometimes, a delicious metaphor can help us mere mortals understand and internalize these celestial ideas.

The ingredients of a knish may be divided into two: the dough, and the filling. The dough, the outer layer, is spread out into four corners, but the filling, the internal core, is a united ball.

But to make a delicious knish, something more needs to happen. The cook needs to take the four corners of the dough, pull them together around the core and unite the whole thing as one.

This is the Jewish people. In our source, in our filling, in our core, we are one collective. Only in our outer layer, our dough, are we spread out to four corners of the world.

But *atzeret* – the *kneish* – is gathering all four corners over our core and collectively making us one glatt kosher knish.

And this is a true Bei Knishta, a true House of Assembly:

9. A Beautiful Synagogue

A synagogue is a place of assembly that unites factions and gathers together opposites. Just as we gather the four corners of our *tallis* with the four tassels of *tzitzit* to recite the *Shema*, the declaration of God's oneness, so too we come together in a synagogue, a Beit Knishta – a place that gathers in the tasseled Jews from all the four corners of the earth.

Sadly, synagogues are too often forces that separate us – I go to *this* synagogue, you go to *that* synagogue. But is that truly what a synagogue is for – to separate people?

The Talmud⁷ describes what a beautiful synagogue truly looks like and it gives as an example the basilica of Alexandria:

[In this huge synagogue,] the people did not occupy their seats randomly, but goldsmiths sat separately, silversmiths separately, blacksmiths separately, metalworkers separately and weavers separately...

⁷ Sukkah 51b.

Why? To create divisiveness? To separate Jews? So that doctors shouldn't talk to lawyers? No! The exact opposite:

So that when a poor man entered the place he recognized the members of his craft and by sitting with them he obtained a livelihood for himself and for the members of his family.

A synagogue is a place that unites the brothers and sisters of Israel together. Be it through prayer, through study, or through finding a job.

After sitting in the sukkah for seven days, on this eighth day, let us harness the power of the knish – to bridge the warmth and collectiveness of the sukkah and create a sense of community that will last the entire year.

10. Baal Shem Tov Story

And now, let me tell you a Chassidic story:

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, was traveling with some of his students, as was his wont. When they came to a town they entered one of the big synagogues to pray with a *minyan*, a group of at least ten men. Upon entering, they saw a large group of worshippers involved in the daily prayer service, but the Baal Shem Tov motioned to his students to leave, saying “This synagogue is filled with prayers.”

The group then walked to the next house of prayer and entered. Again they found the synagogue filled with worshippers saying their morning prayers. The Baal Shem Tov paused, then motioned for his students to leave. “This synagogue,” he said, “is too filled with prayers.”

The group then went to a third synagogue. This was a small synagogue with the bare minimum of worshippers. The Baal Shem Tov entered and paused to feel the tempo of prayer. He told his students: “This is the place for us to pray since this little synagogue is not filled with prayers.”

After the prayer service, the students sat down to eat with their teacher. And they asked him what was the reason that he chose not to pray in the first two synagogues. Was it because those synagogues were filled with prayers and didn't need more prayers, while the last little synagogue did not have enough prayers?

The Baal Shem Tov replied that it was just the opposite. The first two houses of prayer were too full from the prayers – that is to say that the prayers of the assembled did not go up into the heavens to be deposited at God's mail box, so to speak. The prayers remained down in the synagogue and made it too stuffy. The last little synagogue was empty of prayers, meaning that those who prayed there had elevated their prayers up to the heavens and therefore the place was empty of lingering prayer that did not rise up.

Too often houses of worship are full of prayers because they hit the ceiling and get stuck there; the prayers do not rise to heaven and make the synagogue stuffy.

You and I together, this year and forever, will ensure that this synagogue is always filled with prayer but never stuffy, as all of our prayers will grow wings and soar to the greatest heights.

How do we insure this? By doing everything in our power to turn this sanctuary into a true Beit Knesset, a true Bei Knishta, a true communal house of gathering and assembly.

11. Divine Work (Conclusion)

The Torah verse, which we quoted at the outset, states:

The eighth day shall be assembly for you; you shall not perform any mundane work.

There are two ways to read this verse:

- Because it is a holiday of assembly, where all the Jews are one unified collective, we should not be focusing on mundane work, a physical element which divides us, but rather on divine work, a spiritual element which unites us.

- On Shemini Atzeret, on the eighth day when all the Jewish people are gathered as one unified collective, how is it *possible* to do mundane work? We should not perform any mundane work because, when we are one assembled people, any work that we do is not mundane – any work that we do is divine!

On Shemini Atzeret, we realize that when we gather as one community, our actions truly do become holy and divine, never mundane.

This is what a synagogue, a Beit Knesset, a Bei Knishta, a House of Assembly, means in the truest sense of the word – it is a place where we come together so that our actions are never mundane, but always divine.

As we celebrate today together, may we carry this collective energy into the rest of the year, and may every single Shabbat and indeed every single day have a taste of Shemini Atzeret.

Then, with such beautiful energy, certainly the entire congregation – yes, even the rabbi – will jump for joy when it comes time to go to the synagogue.