



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 24, 2016
Shemini Atzeret/Yizkor

**King Solomon & the
Angel of Death**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5777 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

In Israel, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* are celebrated on the same day and that's when the Jews over there dance with the Torah. In the Diaspora, where *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* are two separate days, some communities save the dancing primarily for the second day, but in many communities the dancing starts on the night of *Shemini Atzeret*.

Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of the festival, is a day of immense joy and celebration. Where does this joy come from?

The secret to the joy of *Shemini Atzeret* is found in a story about the protagonist of our Haftorah, the wisest of all men – King Solomon.

The story involves King Solomon, a depressed Angel of Death, a ship of ammunition – spiritual ammunition – and a scheme to undermine the Jewish people's commitment and celebration, which ultimately leads to greater commitment and celebration. As our Haftorah states:

On the eighth day...they blessed the King and went to their homes, rejoicing and delighted of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had wrought for David His servant and for Israel His people.

Shemini Atzeret carries the secret to vanquishing death (and the Angel of Death). And it also reveals for us the power of *Yizkor*.

KING SOLOMON AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

1. Outrun You (Joke)

Two friends go camping. One of them wakes up in middle of the night and hears a bear rummaging nearby. He quickly wakes up his friend, and tells him that we have to get out of here, while putting on his running shoes. His friend asks him: "What are you doing? You can't outrun a bear!"

His friend replies, "I don't have to outrun the bear; I only have to outrun you!"

Would you call that a friend?

Yet, we sadly live in a "dog-eats-dog" world, in which the ruling principle is "survival of the fittest." When it comes to survival even so-called friends can turn on each other, and try to outrun each other in face of danger.

The good news is that we, the Jewish people, are here today because we chose the "road less traveled." Instead of selfishly protecting our own skin, we stood together as one. In face of danger we did not attempt to outrun one another, but returned to save each other. Indeed, this is the secret of Jewish survival: We were always in it together.

And *Shemini Atzeret* reflects this unity - one special day of the year, culminating the holiday season, when we come together to spend one final meal with G-d.

2. Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

In Israel, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* are celebrated on the same day and that's when the Jews over there dance with the Torah. In the Diaspora, where *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* are two separate days, some communities save the dancing primarily for the second day, but in many communities the dancing starts on the night of *Shemini Atzeret*.

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3. Haftorah

Our Haftorah concludes as follows:

Now Solomon observed the Festival at that time and all Israel with him, a great assemblage ... before the Lord our God, seven days and seven days, fourteen days. On the eighth day he dismissed the people, and they blessed the King and went to their homes, rejoicing and delighted of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had wrought for David His servant and for Israel His people.¹

What are the seven days, plus another seven days, totaling fourteen days? What is the Haftorah talking about?

The Haftorah – which is a selection from the First Book of Kings – begins after the completion of the building of the First Temple in Jerusalem. King David desired to build the Temple, but because King David was a warrior and the Temple was to be a House of Peace, G-d decreed that David's son, Solomon, should be the one to do it.

The First Book of Kings discusses the building of the Temple and its completion as well as Israel's celebration upon the Temple's consecration. The final verses of the eighth chapter, which describe that celebration, make up our Haftorah.

The first seven days we just mentioned, refer to the seven days of consecrating the Temple, which took place from the eighth day of *Tishrei* through the fourteenth. As we know, Yom Kippur falls on the tenth day of *Tishrei*, but that year, because of the great celebration, the people ate and drank.²

¹ I Kings 8:65-66.

² As per Rashi citing the Talmud Mo'ed Katan 9a.

The celebration continued through Sukkot – the second seven days mentioned – when the people celebrated the festival for the first time in the newly minted and consecrated Temple.

Then came the eighth day, *Shemini Atzeret*, when King Solomon sent the people home but they were still rejoicing:

On the eighth day he dismissed the people, and they blessed the King and went to their homes, rejoicing and delighted of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had wrought for David His servant and for Israel His people.

Thus we learn that *Shemini Atzeret* is more than a simple eighth day. *Shemini Atzeret* is the celebration of everything we live for, the purpose of our being, which is to build a Temple for G-d on this earth. In the times of Solomon, they celebrated the literal building of the Temple in Jerusalem. But today we celebrate the building of our micro-temples, our personal and communal homes for G-d. This is what we are celebrating today, on the eighth day.

4. A Solomon Story

To better explain what that means, let me tell you a story:³

Everyone knows that King Solomon was the wisest of men. In the First Book of Kings and in the Midrash, we read tales of Solomon's wisdom. One of the elements of his brilliance was his ability to converse with other creatures and creations, even with the Angel of Death.

It was in the month of *Tishrei* one year, when King Solomon happened upon the Angel of Death. The Angel of Death was terribly depressed and utterly crestfallen. King Solomon asked the Angel of Death why he was so down and got an earful:

³ This story is told in the name of Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibush, by Rabbi Eliezer Shlomo Shik, who was a leader in the Breslov Chassidic movement. See: <http://www.breslevcity.co.il/%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%95-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%A6%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A7-%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%96%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%95-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A2%D7%92>.

“How could I not be depressed? First, in the days of the month of *Elul*, all the Jews do *teshuvah*, returning to their divine essence. Then there is Rosh Hashanah, when the Jews blow the *shofar*, and they completely confuse me and throw off my well-laid plans.⁴ Then there is Yom Kippur, when all the Jews are compared to angels, and I have no permission to do anything to them, indeed, I have no power whatsoever on Yom Kippur.⁵ As soon as Yom Kippur concludes, when I think I’ll finally have a window to get my work in, suddenly the Jews go into mitzvah overdrive, building *sukkahs*, buying *schach*, acquiring the four kinds to shake on Sukkot, preparing meals, inviting guests, on and on.⁶ And then, of course you know, once Sukkot begins, every Jew stands with a *lulav* which looks like an arrow⁷ – and I stand there cowering as they hold these weapons against me! Should I not be depressed and broken when the Jews do this to me?”

The next year, King Solomon once again met the Angel of Death in the month of *Tishrei*. But this time, the Angel of Death had a big smile on his face. “Why are you so happy?” asked King Solomon and the Angel of Death answered him:

“Well, you see, I have found a solution to my problem. Leading up to *Tishrei*, I discovered a massive cargo shipment of *lulavim* and *etrogim* being transported to the Jews of a certain country. I drilled a hole in the ship’s hull, and the entire shipment is destined to sink to the bottom of the ocean. Without their divine armaments, I will be free to do my job, visit death upon and wreak havoc upon this country.”

A few days later, on the festival of Sukkot, King Solomon again met the Angel of Death, and the Angel of Death looked worse than he ever looked. He never looks good, owing to his dark complexion and deathly disposition, but now the Angel of Death looked like a depressed skeleton. “What’s got you down now,” asked King Solomon? “I thought you had a plan.”

⁴ Rosh Hashanah 16b; cf. Maharsha to opening of tractate.

⁵ Yoma 20a.

⁶ See Vayikra Rabba 30:7.

⁷ Menachot 62a.

The Angel of Death told King Solomon exactly what happened: “My plan worked to perfection. The entire ship sunk to the bottom of the ocean and the whole country, tens of thousands of Jews, were without their *lulavim* and *etrogim*.

I arrived to do my grave work, when, lo and behold, I see lines and lines of Jews, from young children to senior citizens, men and women, pious saints to cynical skeptics, every single Jew in the country lined up. I look a little closer and I see that somehow one person got hold of one *lulav* and every Jew from throughout the whole country is lining up to make a blessing, give it a shake, and fulfill the mitzvah. Once again, my plan has been foiled by the Jews!”

This is what we celebrate on *Shemini Atzeret* – the unity of the Jewish people. Even when we may have only one *lulav* and one set of the four species, instead of selfishly outrunning another, we share it with each other.

Such unity vanquishes every adversary, even the Angel of Death!

On *Shemini Atzeret* we celebrate the culmination of a month of holidays – of life itself, which transcends darkness, a month so filled with divine light that even the Angel of Death has no power over us.

5. Yizkor: Vanquishing Death

One of the ways we vanquish death (and the Angel of Death) is through *Yizkor* – the special memorial service we recite on *Shemini Atzeret* (as we do on Yom Kippur, and at the end of Passover and Shavuot).

By remembering our loved ones we connect with them, and we channel their souls and legacies into this world through committing to perpetrate their good deeds.

That is why we commit during *Yizkor* to making a charitable donation in memory of our loved ones, to create a living memorial – a physical manifestation of their souls in this material universe.

Thereby, we vanquish their mortality, by turning their lives into an immortal force for good, which never dies.

6. Celebrating a Victory over Darkness (Conclusion)

Of course, it is inevitable that we all will, at some point, be challenged by the dark side of life, by the “taste of death,” by things that are mortal and temporal, or even toxic, in nature. It may take the form of feeling down, in the doldrums, being depressed, or it may be succumbing to the work of the Evil Inclination (which manifests the Angel of Death⁸), or it may take shape as something more severe, G-d forbid. Whatever form it takes, it is the opposite side of life – forces that don’t make us feel very good, they can demoralize us and make us feel pessimistic, cynical and helpless.

Hopefully, these moments are just that – moments, which pass quickly. But should we find ourselves stuck in a rut, let us remember how to climb out and transcend the darkness:

The secret is to not isolate yourself and feel all alone. But to join with your fellows and be involved in non-stop good so that there is no room for the opposite. To be so consumed with angelic living that there is no room for any other kind of “angel.”

There’s a beautiful children’s song that declares:

“Don’t walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don’t walk behind me, I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend, and together we will walk in the ways of Hashem.”

Let us run together. Together we can achieve anything and everything.

Today, realizing all of the good we have accomplished over the past holiday-filled month of Tishrei – and using these days of inspiration to fuel the year’s engine – let us be joyous. Let us celebrate. Together.

This eighth day gathers together and is a celebration of everything we have accomplished over the last month or two. We began in the month of *Elul*, when we reflected upon the past year, to perfect our weaknesses and strengthen our strengths. We then continued our commitment on Rosh Hashanah, when we sounded the *shofar* and awakened our inner voice. We went on to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year when

⁸ Baba Batra 16a.

there is place for negativity. Immediately after, we started preparing for Sukkot, enthralled within the hustle-bustle of building a sukkah, purchasing the four kinds, inviting guests, cooking meals, and so on. During Sukkot itself, we sat together in the embrace of the Sukkah, bound and blessed the four kinds together as one; we enjoyed festive feasts celebrating G-d and one another...

This is how we created a home for the Divine – by being enveloped with good, by filling every moment of every day with holiness and mitzvot, by dedicating our lives to a higher narrative. By doing so, we mitigated even the possibility of some negative angel seeping into our lives. We have built and will always continue to build heaven here on earth.

And we did this all together as one.

So, tell me, how is it not possible to dance and celebrate on the eighth day, the day of *Shemini Atzeret*?

When we live like this, the wise and eternal words of King Solomon, which we recite today, sound less like a prayer and more like a prophecy and prediction:

*The Lord our God is with us, as He was with our forefathers; He will not leave us, nor forsake us.*⁹

Amen, Good Yom Tov, and Chag Sameach!

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⁹ I Kings 8:57.