



WHAT ARE WE CELEBRATING ON SIMCHAS TORAH?

The joyous holiday of Sukkos, and indeed the entire *Yomim Noraim* season, culminates with our celebrating the completion of our yearly Kerias HaTorah cycle with the reading of *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, the last *parshah* in the Chumash. The day on which we engage in this celebration, with much spirited singing and jubilant dancing, is known, of course, as Simchas Torah. In Eretz Yisrael, its observance coincides with the day known as Shemini Atzeres, while in the Diaspora, where an “extra” day of each of the *shalosh regalim* is added, the observance takes place on this additional day, the day after Shemini Atzeres (the yom tov day that is technically the second day of Shemini Atzeres, as is clear from the identification of this holiday in Kiddush

and in the Shemoneh Esrei). It must be noted, however, that there is no Scriptural source, nor even a Talmudic source, pointing to any special kind of celebration on this day, in Eretz Yisrael or in the Diaspora, other than as a regular day of yom tov with its attendant requirements.

The directive to read *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah* on the second day of Shemini Atzeres in the Diaspora is, however, found in the Gemara in *Megillah* (31a), but it seems that this had nothing to do, at least originally, with the completion of an annual Torah reading cycle. Rather, as the Ran there states (11a in Rif, *d”h le-machar*), this *parshah* was selected for this day because it contains the blessings bestowed upon the Jewish people

by Moshe Rabbeinu just prior to his death and is therefore an especially fitting reading for the conclusion of the yearly festival cycle, and one may add, of the intense *Yomim Noraim* season, which comes to a close on this day, as people prepare to return to their normal daily lives. Maran HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik added that it would appear from the Gemara in *Sukkah* (48a), as explained by Rashi there (*d”h berachah*), that on Shemini Atzeres, the Jewish people would bless the king, and he would bless them. Since Moshe Rabbeinu had the status of a king in some ways (see Devarim 33:5, with the comments of Ibn Ezra and Ramban there), we read about his blessing the Jewish people on this day when the king traditionally blesses the people.

Nonetheless, the joyful celebrations of Simchas Torah and the reading of *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah* are primarily associated with our completing the annual cycle of weekly *kerias HaTorah* on this day; indeed, the Ran himself writes elsewhere (*Chidushei HaRan* to *Megillah* there, *d"h le-machar*), that we read *VeZos HaBerachah* on this day because that is when we complete the Torah. While there was a long-standing practice in Eretz Yisrael, as referenced in an earlier Gemara in *Megillah* (29b), to conclude the Torah (through a weekly public reading) only once every three years (or every three and a half years, as implied in *Masseches Soferim* 16:10), a practice that apparently extended until the time of Geonim, that practice was eventually abandoned universally in favor of the Babylonian practice of completing the Torah, specifically at the end of Sukkos, every year, as attested to by the Rambam (*Hilchos Tefillah* 13:1). The *Shulchan Aruch* thus codifies (*Orach Chaim* 668:2 and 669:1) that *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, concluding the Torah, is read on Shemini Atzeres in Eretz Yisrael and the next day in the Diaspora.

What remains somewhat shrouded in mystery is the precise origin of the festive celebratory activities currently associated with Simchas Torah (including the very name “Simchas Torah” itself). Clearly the practice to observe this day in a unique fashion clearly began in Babylonia during the days of the Geonim. Eventually it was also accepted in Eretz Yisrael and spread to Jewish communities throughout the world. As time went on, various customs were adopted in different places to enhance the day’s observance and its celebration. To this day, while

the Torah reading cycle is indeed completed on Simchas Torah across the globe, different communities have different unique practices as to exactly how the rejoicing in honor of this accomplishment is observed.

As for the source of marking the completion of the Torah with some expression of joy and happiness, the *Or Zarua* (2:320), cited by the *Beis Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* 669, *d"h ve-nohagim*),

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points to a Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:9 and *Koheles Rabbah* 1:1) regarding something done by Shlomo HaMelech. The *pesukim* (Melachim Aleph 3:5-15) describe that when Shlomo was told that he would be granted by Hashem whatever he would ask for, he requested wisdom and understanding, which he indeed was given (along with various other valuable blessings), ultimately resulting in his becoming the wisest of all men. He subsequently offered many sacrifices as a token of his thanks, and then celebrated the occasion with a special feast. From this example of Shlomo, the Midrash states, we learn that it is proper

to mark the attainment of a measure of Torah wisdom by completing a significant section of Torah (such as when one makes a “*siyyum*”) with a joyous feast. The Ramban (to Shemos 24:11) cites this idea to explain the difficult verse there which indicates that certain people ate when achieving a level of perception of Hashem at the time of the giving of the Torah. Similarly, we rejoice on Simchas Torah in order to celebrate the completion of an important Torah accomplishment, namely, the annual *kerias HaTorah* cycle.

Rav Soloveitchik, however, noted that the precedent set by Shlomo HaMelech does not really seem to work as a basis for celebrating the conclusion of a major Torah project. After all, when Shlomo held his festive meal, he had not yet actually completed anything in terms of his Torah achievement. Rather, he was granted the ability to attain a great level of achievement in the future, but he hadn’t accomplished anything noteworthy yet. How, then, can the Midrash derive from Shlomo that one should celebrate when completing some form of Torah learning and, by extension, when concluding the Torah-reading cycle on Simchas Torah?

Rav Soloveitchik therefore explained, citing his father Rav Moshe, that what we are truly celebrating is not the completion of the Torah with the reading of *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah*, but rather the fact that by having finished our reading of the whole Torah, we are now invigorated and inspired to begin it anew with the reading of the beginning of *Parshas Bereishis*. Having completed reading the Torah in its entirety, we have now been infused with wisdom and understanding, just



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as Shlomo was when Hashem granted his request. There is no doubt that Shlomo HaMelech had knowledge of Torah even before making and being granted his request; what he received was the ability, looking to the future, to significantly deepen and enhance that knowledge, and that is what he marked with his festive meal. In a similar vein, when we conclude our reading of the entire Torah, we have amassed a certain amount of Torah knowledge, but through that we can now begin the Torah again and read it this time with a significantly deeper and more enhanced level of comprehension. And that is what we celebrate on Simchas Torah each year.

According to this approach, Shlomo HaMelech, who was not marking the completion of anything with his special feast, but rather was projecting forward to what he would be able to accomplish in the future, was more like the “*Chassan Bereishis*,” who is honored on Simchas Torah with the *aliyah* with which we start the Torah again,

as opposed to the “*Chassan Torah*,” who receives the *aliyah* with which we conclude the Torah. Like the *Chassan Bereishis*, Shlomo was celebrating the excitement of a new beginning, the beginning of something to be characterized by greater perception and insight than that which he experienced up until that point. And that is actually the primary reason for our current observance of *Simchas Torah*, as we wish to highlight our great happiness at being able to go back to *Bereishis* once again, and this time to read it, delve into it, and learn it as never before.

Indeed, as Rav Soloveitchik noted further, the custom in some communities, though not widespread today, was that the same person who was called up as the *Chassan Torah* was then also called up as the *Chassan Bereishis*. This was as if to stress this idea that the completion of the Torah with the reading of *Parshas VeZos HaBerachah* is really just an introduction to the restarting of the Torah with the reading of *Parshas*

Bereishis, which is the real reason for our celebration on Simchas Torah. With this in mind, it was actually Rav Moshe Soloveitchik’s preference (even though the common practice is to honor the rav of the shul or a prominent talmid chacham with the *Chassan Torah aliyah*) to be honored with the *Chassan Bereishis aliyah*, because that *aliyah* more closely represents the theme of this holiday when we joyfully anticipate beginning the Torah again with greater wisdom and understanding.



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