STAM TORAH

SIMCHAS TORAH 5778

“UNINHIBITED JOY”

One year on Simchas Torah, the Chelkas Yaakov[[1]](#footnote-1) noticed one of the members of his shul dancing with intense fervor and devotion. The man was not well versed in Torah, and didn’t learn much throughout the year. For some time, the Chelkas Yaakov watched in fascination as the man danced with the enthusiasm of a seasoned scholar, but after a while his curiosity got the better of him. He approached the man and politely asked him why he was dancing so passionately.

The man replied, “Rabbi, a short time ago, on Yom Kippur I read the confession. One of the numerous sins delineated was that of accepting a bribe[[2]](#footnote-2)*.* I am not a judge nor a Rabbi; when would I have the opportunity to accept a bribe? It seems clear that this is a communal confession, and I am confessing for the sin of a Rabbi who may have accepted a bribe. If I confess for the Rabbi’s sins, should I not be able to dance for the Rabbi’s Torah?”

With that the man walked back to the circle and resumed his fervent dancing. The Chelkas Yaakov admitted that it was a good rationale.

The month of Tishrei contains more holidays than any other month on the Jewish calendar. Even after the seven days of Succos have concluded, the final climactic day of Shemini Atzeres is dedicated to joy and celebration. Chazal compare the day’s joy to a king who invited his family to celebrate with him for some time. When the celebration was about to end, the king requested that they remain for one more day.

So too, G-d says to us, as it were, “We have spent so much time together throughout the last few weeks of Rosh Hashnah, Yom Kippur and Succos. קשה עלי פרידתכם – Your separation is difficult for me. Please stay one more day”. Shemini Atzeres is therefore an added day, an opportunity to spend the day simply enjoying an intimate connection with G-d, and reflecting all that we have accomplished throughout the previous weeks.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Torah writes *“Shivas yomim tochog laHashem Elokecha... V’hayisa ach samayach -* For seven days you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d... and you shall only rejoice.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The Gemara[[5]](#footnote-5) explains that this verse is teaching us that there is a mitzvah of joy on the eighth day too (e.g. Shnmini Atzeres).

Generally, the word *“Ach -* only*”* usually implies an exclusion, i.e. only this and not that. Why, in regard to Shemini Atzeres, does the verse teach us an inclusion, i.e. that the joy of the holiday applies to Shemini Atzeres as well, utilizing a word that generally implies an exclusion?

The Gra explains that for the duration of Succos we have three major mitzvos to fulfill: Living in the succah, shaking the Four Species, and to be in a state of constant joy. On Shemini Atzeres there is no longer a mitzvah to sit in the succah[[6]](#footnote-6) or shake the Four Species, we are left with only the mitzvah of being in a state of joy. Thus, the word “ach” indeed is exclusive, in that it excludes the other mitzvos of Succos. What remains is the mitzvah of being joyous, the only mitzvah that still applies to Shemini Atzeres as well.

The Gra’s explanation still does not adequately answer our questions. If the word ‘ach’ generally connotes a clear exclusion, why here does the gemara say it includes the mitzvah of joy on Shemini Atzeres? How does the Gra understand that the removing the other two mitzvos of Succos teaches us that there is a special mitzvah of joy on Shmini Atzeres?

The Gemara[[7]](#footnote-7) states a general rule: We do not perform many mitzvos together. Tosafos[[8]](#footnote-8) explains that each mitzvah requires complete devotion and concentration. If one performs multiple mitzvos simultaneously, he will be unable to give each mitzvah the proper focus.

On Succos however, we are instructed to perform many mitzvos at the same time. The inevitable result is that because we are so focused on the mitzva of succah and the Four Species, we are unable to devote our full concentration to the mitzvah of joy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

On Shmini Atzeres when two of the mitzvos are no longer applicable, a person’s full attention is then directed towards the mitzvah of being in a state of joy. Therefore, the sole focus of the day is to rejoice in the knowledge that he is a vital part of the Chosen Nation, worthy of keeping G-d’s Torah and mitzvos.

An integral component of that joy is devoted to our celebration upon the completion of our annual cycle of Torah reading[[10]](#footnote-10). Our celebration on Simchas Torah seems peculiar: If Simchas Torah is indeed a celebration for our completion of the Torah, why don’t we learn the whole day, thereby proving our dedication and joy in Torah?

Rabbi Moshe Jacobson zt’l[[11]](#footnote-11) explained that everyone has an equal share in the joy of Simchas Torah. Although not everyone is able to learn in depth, everyone can clutch the Torah tightly, and hold it close to his heart.

Simchas Torah is not merely a celebration for the study of Torah, but also for the fact that we are the Torah nation. Our uniqueness stems completely from our connection to Torah, and for that alone we rejoice. Therefore, even those who may not have a tremendous portion of *Torah learning* can rejoice with their connection to *Torah living*.

*During the final year of his life, the Chofetz Chaim was bedridden. On Simchas Torah morning he informed his family that he wished to be transported to shul so that he could dance with the Torah. When the Chofetz Chaim entered the shul, the students who had been dancing, gathered around their revered Rebbe and danced with all their strength.*

*His beloved student, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman zt’l began to dance in front of the Chofetz Chaim alone, with unparalleled fervor and enthusiasm. The Chofetz Chaim looked up from his coat and smiled. Then he gathered every ounce of energy, and, after not standing for weeks, stood up to weakly to dance with Rabbi Elchonon.*

The joy of Simchas Torah is not something to be taken lightly. Our dancing represents our love and dedication to G-d. That joy is not limited to proficient scholars. Every Jew rejoices for his personal connection to Torah, and the uninhibited joy he feels in being a member of the Chosen Nation.

“For seven days you shall rejoice before Hashem”

“And you shall only rejoice”

*Rabbi Dani Staum, LMSW*

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1. Rav Mordechai Yaakov Breish of Zurich, the Chelkas Yaakov (1895-1976). Following a life-threatening incident with the Nazis, who had just come to power, Rav Mordechai Yaakov and his wife decided to escape Germany. After a brief time in Lance, France, they settled in Zurich, Switzerland, where he nurtured the Jewish community for 40 years. In 1967, he established the Kollel Le’horaah Chelkas Yaakov in Bnai Brak. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “*Al chayt shechatanu lifanecha b’chapas shochad’* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. see Rashi, Vayikra 23:36 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Devorim 16:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Succah 48a [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Outside of Eretz Yisroel we sit in the succah on Shemini Atzeres because of ‘*Sefaykah d’yoma* – the doubt of the days’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sotah 8a [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moed Kattan 5b [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although, joy is the inevitable result of performing the other mitzvos properly, it becomes the result, and not the sole focus. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Outside Eretz Yisroel we observe Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah on separate days. However, they are inextricably bound. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen Denmark [↑](#footnote-ref-11)