YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Simchat Torah**

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It is the customary practice in all Jewish communities to complete the annual public Torah reading cycle on Shemini Atzeret, which is the day of Simchat Torah. The origin of this practice is unclear, however. Some have argued that the goal was to create a correspondence between the two days of "Atzeret": The Torah was given to Israel on the festival of Shavuot, which *Chazal* refer to as "Atzeret," and on Shemini Atzeret the people of Israel complete the annual cycle of reading the Torah in public. In this way we connect the primary focal points of the conclusion of the major holidays in relation to the Torah.

While this is a fine explanation, we wish to offer a broader perspective on the relationship between Shemini Atzeret and the conclusion of the Torah.

**The Cycle of the *Terumot* and *Ma’aserot***

The Torah commands us to set aside *teruma* for the *Kohanim* from our grain, wine, and oil and to separate a tithefor the *Levi’im* (*ma'aser rishon*, "first tithe"), in exchange for their service in the *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash.* The Torah further commands that the *Levi’im* who receive *ma'aser* should relate to it as "grain from the threshing floor" – that is to say, as if it were grain that grew on their own land. They thus set aside from it "a gift for the Lord, a tithe of the tithe" for the *Kohen* (*Bemidbar* 18:25-32). This *teruma* is commonly referred to as *terumat ma'aser.*

In addition to this, the Torah commands us to set aside another tithefrom our produce, bring it up to the place which God will choose, and eat it there in joy and purity. This is what we call *ma'aser sheni*, "second tithe." The Torah adds that if this involves a long journey, one may redeem the produce set aside as second tithe, bring the money up to the place that God will choose, and purchase food with this money and eat it there (*Devarim* 14:22-27):

You shall surely tithe all the increase of your seed, that which is brought forth in the field year by year. And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place which He shall choose to cause His name to dwell there, the tithe of your corn, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herd and of your flock; that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. And if the way be too long for you, so that you are not able to carry it, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God shall choose to set His name there, when the Lord your God shall bless you; then shall you turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and shall go to the place which the Lord your God shall choose. And you shall bestow the money for whatever your soul desires, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatever your soul asks of you; and you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. And the Levite that is within your gates, you shall not forsake him; for he has no portion nor inheritance with you.

Finally, the Torah commands us to give the tithe in the third year to the poor. This is the tithe commonly referred to as *ma'aser ani*, "poor man's tithe" (*Devarim* 14:28-29).

According to the Halakha that follows the traditions received by *Chazal*, the setting aside of *terumot* and *ma'aserot* follows a three-year cycle. In the first and second years of the sabbatical cycle, one must set aside *ma’aser sheni*, and in the third year of that cycle, one must set aside *ma’aser ani*. This cycle is repeated during the second half of the sabbatical cycle: In the fourth and fifth years, one must set aside *ma’aser sheni*, and in the sixth year, *ma’aser ani*.

The Torah further instructs us that at the end of each three-year cycle, the tithes must be removed from the house and a declaration must be made that they were properly set aside and distributed (*Devarim* 26:12-15):

When you have made an end of tithing all the tithe of your increase in the third year, which is the year of tithing, and have given it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, that they may eat within your gates, and be satisfied, then you shall say before the Lord your God: I have put away the hallowed things out of my house, and also have given them to the Levite, and to the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all Your commandment which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed any of Your commandments, neither have I forgotten them. I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I put away thereof, being unclean, nor given thereof for the dead; I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord my God, I have done according to all that You have commanded me. Look forth from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel, and the land which You have given us, as You did swear to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.

At the end of each tithing cycle, at the end of the third and the sixth years of the sabbatical cycle, one must remove all of the *terumot* and *ma'aserot* from one's house (*biur ma'aserot*) and deliver them to their proper recipients – the *Kohen*, the *Levi*, and the poor man – and testify to the execution of all these tasks as we were commanded (*viddui ma'aserot*). Since the produce of the third year is eaten after the harvest over the course of the winter of the fourth year, *Chazal* established the time for the removal of tithes as Pesach of the fourth and the seventh years.

Thus, in each sabbatical cycle, the Torah established two cycles of setting aside *terumot* and *ma'aserot*, and between them *biur ma'aserot* and *viddui ma'aserot*, which is sort of a reckoning regarding the proper fulfillment of the *mitzvot* of setting aside *terumot* and *ma'aserot*.

**The Public Torah Reading Cycles**

It is the customary practice to read the Torah in public on Shabbat and to complete the reading of the entire Torah.

The Babylonian custom, which was later accepted in all Jewish communities, was to complete the entire public reading of the Torah once a year on Simchat Torah. The cycle begins with the reading of *Parashat Bereishit* on the first Shabbat after Sukkot, and it is completed with the reading of *Parashat VeZot HaBerakha* on Simchat Torah – which is the day of Shemini Atzeret in *Eretz Yisrael* and the second day of Shemini Atzeret in the Diaspora.

The early practice in *Eretz* *Yisrael* was different from our practice today. The custom was to complete the public Torah reading cycle once every three years, and not once a year: "The people of the west [*Eretz Yisrael*] complete the Torah in three years" (*Megilla* 29b). It was not the customary practice in *Eretz* *Yisrael* to read a complete *parasha* each Shabbat, but rather to read a *seder* – about a third of a *parasha* – so that the cycle of public Torah reading would be completed in three years.

` Precisely how long was each public Torah reading cycle in *Eretz* *Yisrael*? There is a difference of opinion regarding this question. The *gemara* cited above asserts that the people of *Eretz* *Yisrael* completed the reading of the Torah in three years. However, the book "*Ha-Chilukim She-Bein Anshei Mizrach U-Venei Eretz Yisrael*" ("The Differences between the People of the East [Babylonia] and the People of *Eretz* *Yisrael*"), which was written at the beginning of the Geonic period, states: "The people of the East [Babylonia] celebrate Simchat Torah every year, whereas the people of *Eretz* *Yisrael* [celebrate it] every three and a half years."

Prof. Shlomon Naeh has proposed that the order of the Torah reading in *Eretz Yisrael* was fixed, and the people of *Eretz Yisrael* completed their reading of the Torah twice in seven years.[[1]](#footnote-1) If we adopt his fundamental approach, it may be suggested that it was established that the reading of the Torah be completed for the second time at the end of the sabbatical cycle on Sukkot, as a remembrance of the *mitzva* of *Hakhel*, the commandment to assemble all Jewish men, women, and children to hear the reading of the Torah by the king of Israel once every seven years during Sukkot in the year following the sabbatical year. For this reason there were different divisions of the Torah into *sedarim*, in order to allow the time of the conclusion of the second cycle of Torah reading to fall out at the time of the *mitzva* of *Hakhel.*

It was Moshe who instituted public Torah reading on Shabbat (*Yerushalmi*, *Megilla* 4:1). This enactment, according to the practice followed in *Eretz Yisrael*, was designed in such a way that the entire Torah would be read twice in seven years, which was then followed by the *Hakhel* ceremony, a sort of reenactment of the assembly at Mount Sinai. The *midrash* draws a parallel between the verse referring to the assembly at Mount Sinai, "Assemble me the people, and I will make them hear My words" (*Devarim* 4:10), and the verse dealing with the assembly of *Hakhel*: "Assemble the people… that they may hear, and that they may learn" (*Devarim* 31:12). The *midrash* concludes: "The day of *Hakhel* is like the day on which the Torah was given" (*Midrash Ha-Gadol*, *Parashat Vayelekh*). The essence of the assembly of *Hakhel* is the great impression that it creates, that it solidifies the fear and dread in the encounter with the word of God. In complementary fashion, the public reading of the Torah on Shabbatot is intended to connect the people to the Torah and occupy themselves with its contents.

**The Cycle of the Torah and the Cycle of the Land**

Completing the public reading of the Torah at the end of the sabbatical year completes the twofold cycle of the covenant between Israel and God: the covenant of the Torah, on the one hand, and the covenant of the land, on the other. The two of them join together at the *Hakhel* assembly during Sukkot in the year following the sabbatical year.

It was already noted above that the setting aside of *terumot* and *ma'aserot* is executed in two cycles every seven years. The seventh year is the sabbatical year, a Sabbath for God, and at the end of that year we enter into a new covenant regarding the land and the Torah.

A person needs two types of nutrition: material nutrition and spiritual nutrition. Scripture attests: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live" (*Devarim* 8:3). We have here a striking comparison between bread and that which proceeds from God's mouth. The *gemara* draws various comparisons between the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* and the blessings recited over the Torah (*Berakhot* 20a), and according to many opinions these are the only two blessings that we are commanded by Torah law. The completion of the agricultural cycle of *terumot* and *ma'aserot* in the sabbatical year together with the cycle of the public Torah reading gives expression to this comparison and demonstrates how just like a person cannot live without food, he cannot live without the Torah.

Man's body is nurtured by the good that God showers upon him, and his soul is nurtured by the word of God that comes down to us through His Torah. The two together – the Torah and the fruit of the land – give life to the people living in God's land and occupying themselves with His Torah.

Simchat Torah, at the end of the Torah reading cycle, serves as a remembrance of the *Hakhel* assembly. According to the customary practice in *Eretz Yisrael*, this source of joy was celebrated every seven years, at the end of the double cycle of Torah reading. Our custom, the custom of Babylonia, also preserves this tradition and sets the conclusion of the reading of the Torah each year in the time during which the *mitzva* of *Hakhel* would apply in the seventh year. The Abravanel writes in similar fashion (*Devarim* 31):

I have already seen it written that every year the High Priest or a prophet or a judge who was also a great Torah authority would read part of the Torah on the festival of Sukkot, and he would complete the books of *Bereishit*, *Shemot*, *Vayikra,* and *Bemidbar* in six years, and during the seventh year, the sabbatical year, the king would read the book of *Devarim…* Of this remains the custom in our time, that on the eighth day [of Sukkot], the festival of Atzeret, which is called the day of Simchat Torah, the day on which we complete the Torah… similar to the action of the kings in that divine time.

According to what we have said, it may be added that even the Babylonian custom demonstrates the connection between the agricultural cycle and the Torah reading cycle. The reading of the Torah begins each year on *Shabbat Bereishit* – the first Shabbat of the new agricultural year, at the beginning of the period of sowing – and it ends during the harvest period, at the end of the agricultural year. This cycle expresses the connection between working the land of *Eretz Yisrael* and the reading and study of the Torah – the connection between body and soul, between matter and spirit, and between the earth and the heavens.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Prof. Shlomo Naeh, "*Sidrei Keri'at Ha-Torah Be-Eretz Yisrael – Iyun Mei-Chadash*," *Tarbitz* 67:2 (1998), pp. 167 ff. I accept his fundamental approach, but propose a different path. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)