

Leadership

For somebody in the workforce, this holiday is particularly difficult to explain to a non-Jewish firm or employer...

Everybody's heard of RH, YK, many have even heard of Succot (Tabernacles). But after taking off Thurs-Friday for RH, and another Thurs-Friday for Succot: "What do you mean another holiday? *Shmini* what? Never heard of it!"

It's a hard day to define.

In Halachic terms Shmini Atzeret is characterised as a dialectic. On the one hand, it is the 8th day of Succot, יום השמיני. On the other hand, it is a *רגל בפני עצמו* - a separate a distinct holiday in many respects. We say the brocho of Shehechyanu when we light candles or recite Kiddush, as if it is a new holiday. The temple offerings for this day are completely different than the rest of the holiday. On the one hand it is a part of Succot, and on the other hand, it is apart from Succot.

In this regard, it speaks to the **dialectic** of the **Jewish experience**:

On the one hand, we are a PART of the world community. Succot speaks to universality, to shared values of faith with all humanity. The 70 animals offered through the holiday correspond to the 70 nations of the world. The Haftorah speaks of a time when all the nations will come to celebrate Succot.

On the other hand, we are also APART, separate and distinct from the world community. הן עם לבדד ישכן ובגוים לא יתחשב *They are a nation that dwells alone, and is not counted amongst the nations* (Numbers ch.) We have our own unique history, and our own destiny. And the Midrash, linking the 70 offerings to the nations of the world, also states that this holiday is for the Jewish people, as if, קשה עלי פרידתכם it is difficult to say goodbye. *One more day just for you....* To celebrate our Jewishness, to celebrate our unique values and beliefs, to celebrate who we are!!

This is also the dialectic of the **Modern Orthodox Community** as well:

- To be a part of the broader Jewish community – to believe strongly in כלל ישראל, in the totality of the Jewish people, in the unity and coming together of all parts and facets.
- And Yet – המבדיל בין קדש לחול – to be distinct in many ways from other parts of the community, with the values and beliefs of Torah – written & oral – Halacha as our guide – that gives us a unique understanding of Jewish life.

In many ways, it is easier to escape this dialectic, by shifting to one side or another: by embracing humanity and humanism as the soul spiritual value, or embracing Jewish life by itself, without any regard for the broader community. It's a SAFER approach. It avoids feelings of conflicting loyalties and values.

It's easier to know who you are, and what you are!

- EITHER by embracing secular values, and see Judaism as a culture and history, but with no obligations, no responsibilities, and therefore NO CONFUSION.

- OR, on the other extreme, by embracing a total religious seclusion, isolation from the broader world, and from the broader community. It's a safer Jewish life, with no external values entering the safe arena of the home, and nothing to threaten the purity of Jewish life. Everybody knows who they are, and what their roles in life are to be.

Either extreme poses an EASIER path because it avoids the conflict of the dialectic!

But I don't believe that G_d wanted us to choose the EASIER path. דרכיה דרכי נעם – *The Torah's ways are pleasant* – not *easy*! שווער צו זיין א ייד

This dialectic is a fundamental part of who we are as Jews! And *Shmini Atzeret* speaks specifically to that dialectic:

- PART – and APART
- reaching out & holding firm
- sharing cultures while preserving values.

Not always are we completely successful. When you walk a tightrope, sometimes you teeter to one side or another. But the accomplishment is much more meaningful!

It's this dialectic that is at the core of what one would term Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy, or Contemporary Orthodoxy as Rav Soloveitchik preferred.

This congregation is a beautiful example of living and balancing this dialectic of Jewish life. It has born the flag of contemporary Orthodoxy in this community proudly for 75 years!

Its membership spans the largest spectrum of Jewish observance of any synagogue in Toronto, demonstrating its value of openness, tolerance, and acceptance.

It has played and continues to play a unique role in bridging the various Orthodox and non-Orthodox segments of the community, making all feel comfortable, and helping to foster peace and שלום בית. It has hosted, under its roof events attended by members of the clergy from the Vaad Harabonim to Holy Blossom. Rabbis from non-Orthodox pulpits have spoken from this pulpit in this Sanctuary. And prominent members of the clergy of non-Orthodox synagogues come often to spend Yom Tov davening here, because here they feel comfortable. And I am, as I'm sure you all are, particularly proud of this.

Shaarei Shomayim also challenges the status quo of religious life in many areas, seeking, for example, to broaden the participation of women in synagogue and communal life, while remaining firmly within the framework of a total commitment to halacha as our authority and guide:

- While Simchat Torah is often perceived as a difficult holiday for women, at Shaarei Shomayim it is one of the most meaningful holidays for women especially, because of the women's Hakafot with a Sefer Torah, and the Women's Dvar Torah program – a program so successful that it has been emulated by other communities!
- Our Bat Mitzvah program has evolved into an opportunity for young women to share words of Torah and learning with the entire congregation. And it continues to evolve.

- The women's megillah reading is the only one of its kind in this city within the parameters of Jewish law.
- Tefillah groups for Bat Mitzvah programs, and Rosh Chodesh programs.
- And Shaarei Shomayim is the only Orthodox synagogue in Toronto with women serving on its board of directors, and, hopefully soon, in positions of senior leadership as well.

But this inclusiveness is and must always be anchored firmly in the sources of Jewish texts and learning, with total respect to halachic process and authority. For that is what defines us as an **Orthodox** community and not just a **modern** community!

Indeed, Shaarei Shomayim Congregation has demonstrated great courage and leadership over the years, taking broad, bold, and courageous steps to upgrade halachic standards, and strengthen its commitment to halachic authority.

When this shul was built in the early 60's, there was a wave through North America of Orthodox shuls pulling out their mechitza's and going "Conservative". At that time, this congregation demonstrated incredible **foresight** and **courage** by PUTTING IN a mechitza where the old Shaarei Shomayim had separate seating only. It did this because it believed, and still believes, in a halachic authority and process – while preserving our values of inclusiveness & community.

Similar courage was demonstrated over the years when major decisions were taken to enhance the synagogue's commitment to the halachic process by removing the microphone, and closing its parking lot.

These steps taken were **not** necessarily popular, but they were always **visionary**, born of a recognition that this Synagogue must not only serve its past, and its present, but its **future** as well!

They were the right decisions, taken out of respect for halachic authority, taken with courage and leadership, taken not with any intent to exclude members participation, but on the contrary, to continue to walk the tightrope balancing the dialectic of inclusiveness without compromising our core Jewish principles and beliefs, taken to ensure a continued strong Modern Orthodox leadership in this community for the next generation.

The 75th Anniversary celebration this coming Wednesday evening is an opportunity to pay tribute to the leadership of this visionary synagogue, to recognise its past achievements, to thank the lay-leadership who have guided this synagogue through the years, and to reaffirm our commitment to this Synagogue's future as a voice for a strong vibrant contemporary or modern Orthodoxy! It is an opportunity to come together as a family, to share, to rejoice, to celebrate what we have offered, what we offer, and what we shall continue to offer to our next generation!

It is vitally important that everybody who can come do so! Come, participate, and help celebrate Shaarei Shomayim, help confirm our commitment not only to our past 75 years, but to our next 75 years as well!!