

United with G-d and Each Other

Category: Holidays, Simchas Torah

When Prime Minister Begin assumed his post, he held an open house to meet all of the citizens of the country. Pretty quickly, however, his security detail brought it to an end. Sukkos is G-d's open house. But Shmini Atzeres is exclusive.

Begin's Open House

Good Yom Tov!

Menachem Begin, the late former Prime Minister of Israel, had the personal custom before he became Prime Minister of opening his home to guests and visitors every Shabbos afternoon. In those days, he lived in Tel Aviv in a ground-floor, two-room apartment. So people would come in to wish him "Shabbat shalom", drink something, and exchange opinions on the issues of the time.

When he was elected Prime Minister, he announced that he'd continue his Shabbos custom from the Prime Minister's residence in the Rechavia neighborhood of Jerusalem. The public widely embraced the idea—they'd have the opportunity to visit the Prime Minister himself right at his own home.

But the Prime Minister's security detail, naturally, saw it as one giant security nightmare. After all, how exactly are you supposed to secure the country's most significant residence when it's open to anyone who wants to just walk in?

Well, that first Shabbos, a long line formed outside the Prime Minister's residence comprised of tourists, soldiers, yeshivah students and average Jews of all types. They all stood patiently and waited for the chance to enter the house.

And in fact, the door opened and Menachem Begin and his wife greeted everyone with a smile. People brought small gifts like bottles of wine or little food items and walked in.

Begin's daughters walked around with platters, offering drinks and cookies, and people got to check out the house from the inside.

One older Jew walked right up to Mr. Begin, shoved a faded and worn photograph in his face and said: “This is a photo of my wife and four kids who were murdered in Auschwitz—and all the years whenever the Nazis would search me, I would stuff this photo into my mouth and save it from them, again and again.”

Begin looked at the photos and then warmly hugged the man. That Jew stood there with tears in his eyes, and he left Begin.

Next, a Jew from Yemen introduced himself as the owner of a grocery in one of the economically depressed neighborhoods of Jerusalem. Begin addressed him and said, “Tell your friends that the new administration will soon start a new project in those neighborhoods. With the help of Diaspora Jewry, we’ll be repairing all the buildings in those neighborhoods that look like they’re about to fall over, seeing to it that people will be proud to live them.”

The Yemeni Jew didn’t believe his ears. He wanted to bow and kiss Begin’s hands. But Begin said to him, “A Jew bows only to G-d!”

Menachem Begin then stepped out to the yard, and the entire crowd burst out in cheers. Outside, he met a deaf Jew by the name of Misha Lifo. Misha had made Aliyah from Romania a mere two days earlier—immediately after having being freed from prison there. Misha had managed to immigrate to Israel because of the diplomatic agreement in force between Israel and Romania, in which Israel would pay a sort of ransom for every Jew that they granted permission to make Aliyah to Israel.

Well, Menachem Begin shook his hand and said, “Shalom Aleichem! Baruch Haba!” The Jew was very moved and his lips trembled. Begin hugged him and said, “Mr. Lifo, you have nothing to worry about! You’re now home among brothers! You’re safe. No one can hurt you!” He then asked him, “Where did you pick up such a fluent Hebrew?”

So Misha told him that he had been in yeshivah when he was young—and when he was in prison, he met a Catholic priest who was familiar with the Holy Tongue, and they’d exchange sentences in Hebrew and thus improve both of their Hebrew skills.

Begin then asked him what “crime” he had sat in prison for. Misha told him that he had been a painter and that at the beginning, he painted exactly what the

Communist regime told him to paint. As a result, he became very famous. But then, he came back to his Jewish roots and started painting paintings with Jewish motifs. He was warned about it several times, but when he did not change his behavior, he was arrested and tossed into prison.

Begin told him that he had also been imprisoned by the Communists in 1940 and handed a sentence of eight years. His interrogator at the time had told him that he would never see the Land of Israel. But in 1941, Germany declared war on Russia, and on the heels of an agreement between Russia and the Polish government in exile, Russia freed all of its Polish political prisoners—including one Menachem Begin. A year after that, he had made Aliyah to the Holy Land.

But while Menachem Begin and Misha Lifo were chatting, a group of visitors stood up to daven Maariv. While they were davening, Mrs. Begin brought a cup of wine, a Havdalah candle and spices out of the kitchen—and no less than Menachem Begin himself made Havdalah when they were done. Right after Havdalah, he addressed the crowd of guests and said, “We’ll be going to Washington now—but I just ask you to come back here after we return to Israel.”

Right after the crowd dispersed, the head of security approached the Prime Minister and said, “Mr. Prime Minister, I’m really sorry, but if you want to continue this ‘open house’ policy, your guests will have to register first and need to undergo a security check like anyone who wants to meet with the Prime Minister.”

“That’s too bad,” commented Begin. “It was a wonderful opportunity to meet the people of your country.” (From “The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership” by Yehudah Avner; Toby Press, 2010.)

Sukkos - G-d’s Open House

During the holiday of Sukkos when the Beis Hamikdash still stood, 70 bulls would be brought up as sacrifices during the course of the holiday—and on the eighth day, the holiday of Shmini Atzeres, a single bull and single ram were brought. And Rashi (Bamidbar 29:18) comments: “The 70 holiday bulls corresponded to the Seventy Nations... and in Temple times, they would protect them.” That means that the offering up of the sacrifices, or the prayers of today established to replace the sacrifices, were (and are) there to protect the nations of the world.

And as for Shmini Atzeres, Rashi (Bamidbar 29:36) comments: “‘One bull and one ram’ correspond to the Jewish Nation. [G-d said,] ‘Remain with Me a little longer’; It expresses [His] affection [for Israel]. It is like children taking leave of their father, who says to them, “It is difficult for me to part with you; stay one more day.”

And the Midrash comments: “It is analogous to a king who made a banquet that lasted seven days and invited all the people of the country over the seven days of feasting. When those passed, he said to his beloved friend... ‘Come and bring about, you and I, of what is at hand: a liter of meat or of fish, etc.’; so too did G-d say to Israel: ‘The eighth day shall be a time of restriction for you; bring about of what you find—of one bull and one ram’ ” (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:24).

So, what does that all mean?

The entire week of the Sukkos holiday is an “open house,” sort of like Menachem Begin’s open door policy. On Sukkos, anyone and everyone can walk in. No special invitation is needed.

Exclusive Party - Shmini Atzeres

But on Shmini Atzeres, it’s a special day for family only. It’s a day on which the king gathers only with close family—and in attendance are only those invited in advance.

And it is to that party that we are invited today.

Throughout the Sukkos holiday, we held the lulav and esrog and did the spiritual movements that cosmically affect the physical climate for the coming year—that the weather be good for the entire world in this coming year; that there be no storms, floods or earthquakes and that the entire world be protected from all the forces of nature. As the Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 37b) puts it, “[The mitzvah of lulav and esrog is there] so as to stop ill winds... and ill dews.”

But when it comes to Shmini Atzeres, which is the last day of the month of holidays, a moment before we part, it is this day that G-d dedicates to his beloved son, Israel—it is a very personal holiday in which we show up to be together with our father in heaven.

However, as the Rebbe says, we are never apart from G-d. What does happen sometimes, however, is that we get separated one from the other—which causes our own distance from G-d, because it's hard to be close to G-d when you're far from one of His children (the same way it's hard to be close to a man if you're fighting with his son). As the Rebbe puts it in a Sichah: "When the 'all as one' is missing, then the 'Bless us, our Father' is also missing" (Likutei Sichos Vol. II, pg. 433).

And so, everyone is invited to the Hakafos tonight, during which we'll all unite together in the dancing—in which we are all equal: we're all rejoicing with the Torah together. And when we are united with one another, we are united with G-d.

Good Yom Tov!