

BS”D

Three Gifts, Three Gestures, Three Holidays

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I will also make you a light to the nations, so that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth
– Isaiah 49:6

As the people of Israel set out on their desert journey to nationhood, they enjoyed no small number of miracles; yet the Gemara singles out only three for special distinction: “Three great leaders arose for the Jewish nation: Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam. And three gifts were given through them: the well, the clouds of glory, and the Manna. The well was in the merit of Miriam, the clouds of glory in the merit of Aaron, and the Manna in the merit of Moses” (Taanit 9a; Num. R. 1:2).

What is so special about these three things that they are denoted as *the* gifts? Certainly, there were other things that could be considered gifts in the desert. The tablets? Moshe’s staff? Aaron’s staff? Perhaps these are not cited as they were not of direct benefit to the people. But what about their clothes and shoes that never wore out (Deut. 29:4) or their feet that never swelled (Deut. 8:4)? My point is that while there was no lack of “gifts” in the desert, the Gemara designates these three because they are of profound significance, not just in the desert, but for all time.

To understand, I turn to *Worship of the Heart* by R. Soloveitchik, who, following Kant’s three *Critiques*, categorizes human endeavor into three “gestures”: the intellectual, the ethical, and the aesthetic (pp. 40-62). R. Soloveitchik explains that it is through these gestures that we express ourselves, and it is through these gestures that we connect with the divine:

God not only addresses Himself to man through the logos, by emanating wisdom and knowledge to the finite mind; not only through the ethos, revealing to natural man, driven by insensate desires and impulses, a great order of absolute values and ideals, but also through aesthesis – the immediate sensible apprehension of reality which is beautiful and grandiose (p. 57).

It is my contention that these three “gestures” correspond directly to the three divine gifts described in the Gemara. In bestowing these gifts, God made known the ways in which humans can both express themselves and develop their relationship with the divine.

Ethical

The ethical gesture – i.e., defining and performing moral action – is epitomized by Moses and the Manna.

Moses, because he is the lawgiver, the one who went to Heaven to accept the Torah, the divine law, is the paragon of the ethical gesture. For the Torah, as a compendium of right and wrong, is a book of ethical law. But the Torah is not just another book on ethics. It is unique, because it presents a framework of objective morality, as only a law given by the Creator can be objective (see, e.g., Berkovits, *God, Man and History*, p. 106; Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 28-29).

In consonance, the Manna typifies the ethical gesture in that it, like the Torah, is from Heaven. It is not only dependent on God, but strictly defined by divine law (*hok*-like) – i.e., how much one can take (Ex. 16:16, 22), when one can take (Ex. 16:21), when one cannot take (Ex. 16: 25, 29), until when it can be stored (Ex. 16: 19, 23). Indeed, God Himself views the observance of the laws of Manna as exemplary of all His laws, “Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven (Manna) for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in My law, or not” (Ex. 16:4; see Rashi ad loc.). In addition, the Midrash (Mechilta DeReb. Yishmael, Beshalach) teaches that the Torah was given only those who ate the Manna. On this R. Yosef Salant explains that we must learn that we are “sustained” (*nizonim*) – i.e., physically and spiritually – only from the hand of God (Be’er Yosef, Vol. 2, Emor, p. 58). The point is that just as our lives depend on physical nourishment – which is ultimately from the hand of God, so our lives depend on ethical “nourishment” – a framework of objective morality that is only from the hand of God. And finally, R. Bechayei (Ex. 16:4) writes that God fed Manna to the people who were to receive the Torah in order to refine their cognitive capacity to grasp the divine wisdom in the Torah. The Manna is thus directly related to being able to grasp the objective morality that is the Torah.

Intellectual

The intellectual gesture – i.e., applying reason – is represented by Miriam and the Well.

Miriam, while recognized as a prophetess (Ex. 15:20), is defined by her logical reasoning, as is evident in the following two defining moments. The first occurs in her youth, when her father Amram declares that all Jewish couples should divorce to forestall Pharaoh's decree to throw all Jewish baby boys into the river (Sotah 12a). At this, Miriam makes the logical claim: "Father, your decree is worse than Pharaoh's, for he only decreed against the males, but you decreed against both the males and females ... With Pharaoh's decree there is a doubt whether it will be fulfilled or not, whereas in your case ... it is certain to be fulfilled."

The second example occurs in Miriam's later years, when she sees that Moses has separated from his wife. Here, again, she makes a logical claim against such a separation, explaining to her brother Aaron, "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only with Moses? Hath He not spoken also with us?" (Num. 12:2). That is, if we, as prophets, can remain married, why should Moses not also? (see Rashi ad loc.). This time, of course, reason is shown to have its limits, as it can fail to account for all circumstances – in this case, that Moses was on a very different level than they were (Num. 12:6-8).

In addition to these vignettes pointing to Miriam as representative of "reason," she is the only woman of the three leaders; and it is specifically women whom the Gemara (Nidda 45b) describes as being endowed with "extra reason" (*bina yeteira*).

And as Miriam, so too the well is representative of reason. On the proverb, "Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well" (Prov. 5:15), R. M. Alshich writes: "while a cistern is collected water, a well is living waters that emanate (*nov'im*). The cistern is analogous to the wise sage that has collected wisdom ... but if after this he turns his ear to reason (*tevuna*) ... such that he can understand one thing from another (*davar mitoch davar*), this is [analogous to] a well." In consonance, the Mishna (Avot 2:8) likens Rebbi Elazar ben Arach to overpowering well because he was "a master of

reason (*baal sevara*) and would innovate ideas from his own intellect” (Rabbeinu Yona, ad loc.).¹

Aesthetic

The aesthetic gesture – i.e., consisting of phenomenal experience – is represented by Aaron and the Clouds of Glory.

The Clouds of Glory are God’s very presence that both surround the Mishkan and rest within it (Tanhuma, Num. 13; Otzar Mid., Melechet HaMishkan, p. 304). Accordingly, the Clouds of Glory are the all-enveloping experience of God, the Mishkan being the place where people come to encounter God, to commune on a non-cognitive level. That is, the Mishkan, and ultimately the Temple, is the place where one comes, not to study about God, not to think about God in the intellectual or even ethical sense, but to be inspired by His presence. The Temple is the place of aesthetic connection to God (see my essay: [The Aesthetics of a Young Traveler](#)), a connection that is both exceptional and essential. In the words of R. Soloveitchik, “Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend G-d instead of comprehend Him...” (*Worship*, p. 59). Aaron, as high priest of the Temple, is agent of the aesthetic and thus exemplifies the aesthetic gesture.²

Holidays

Internalizing these three gestures is so important that, I suggest, they are celebrated on three distinct days of the year – each with its own holiday.

Shavuot

¹ Note: while the Mishna uses the term “ma’ayan” as opposed to “be’er”, the Gemara (Shab. 25a) explains that Miriam’s “be’er” was a travelling “ma’ayan.”

² Noteworthy is link, made by the Gemara, between the Temple and the elemental aesthetic gesture, “so long as the Ark and the Shechinah are not settled in their appointed place marital relations are forbidden” (Eruv. 63b).

Shavuot, the day that celebrates the Giving of the Torah (Hinuch #309), naturally corresponds to Moses who received the Torah. Accordingly, Shavuot is the day that celebrates the ethical gesture – the quest for *objective* morality that can only come, as noted above, through passive reception from the Creator. How fitting, then, that Moses is described as “receiving” the Torah, and the holiday itself as the “giving” of the Torah – a divine bestowal rather than a human achievement.³ And indeed, all the laws of the Torah must be approached as divine imperatives (*hukkim*) if they are to stand the test of time and remain a framework of objective morality (see R. Soloveitchik, *Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. I, pp. 100-105; Navon, “[The Psychology of Being Commanded](#),” *B’Or Ha’Torah* 18).

As explained, the ethical gesture, in its dependency of God, is symbolized by the Manna from Heaven. Similarly, the two loaves of bread (*shtei halechem*) offered on Shavuot carry this same symbolism of dependency on God.⁴ On the *shtei halechem*, the Sefer HaHinuch⁵ writes that the purpose of the offering is to acknowledge that God “renews the produce of grain each year to sustain His creations.” And this is the same lesson of the Manna, “That they will be in need of Me each day” (Ibn Ezra, Ex. 16:4).

This lesson of dependency on God is not only physical but, again, ethical. For, just as God provides us with sustenance, God provides us – defines for us – objective morality. This can be understood from the Rashbam’s interpretation of the Manna: “Through their being dependent on Me for their daily bread, they will believe in Me and follow my Torah” (Ex. 16:4). And it is this message that R. S. R. Hirsch explains is at the heart of the *shtei halechem* offering: “On the day of remembrance of the giving of His Law, Shavuot, ... Israel appeared before God with the *shtei halechem*, with the bread of Freedom and Independence, and acknowledged thereby, that, at the price of subordination under His Torah it [Israel] finds itself enjoying freedom and independence” (Lev. 2:11).

³ Regarding the Mishna (Avot 1:1) that describes Moses as “receiving” the Torah as opposed to all the human transmissions that followed described as “giving,” see fn. 8.

⁴ Note: while I am linking the Manna to the *shtei halechem* of Shavuot, some commentaries link the “omer” of Manna to the “omer” offering on Pesah.

⁵ These words are on mitzvah #302 (omer offering), however the Hinuch writes that these words are to be applied equally to mitzvah #307 (*shtei halechem*).

His point is that only by submitting to the objective morality of the Torah do we enjoy “freedom and independence,” because it is only in so doing that we express our freewill. Such is the essence of the Gemara that teaches, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except the fear of Heaven” (Ber. 33b). Yeshayahu Leibovitz put it as follows:

“Willing acceptance of a way of life which does not derive from human nature implies emancipation of man from the bondage of raw nature... [Conversely,] man activated by his “own” nature is, in effect, nothing but a robot activated by the forces of nature, just like the cattle grazing in the pasture, which are also “free from Torah and Mitzvoth”; that is, from any law externally imposed” (*Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. E. Goldman, Harvard U. Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 21).⁶

In sum, Shavuot, the celebration of Torah from Heaven, is the celebration of the ethical gesture, of receiving an objective moral framework that allows us to express our freewill.

Shemini Atzeret / Simhat Torah

It is a fundamental belief that the Torah from Heaven, the objective moral framework embodied in the written Torah, was accompanied by explanations and principles, no less objective, given as the oral Torah (see, e.g., Ber. 5a; Mish. Torah, Intro.; R. Yona, Avot 1:1). This is the “oral Torah” in its narrow sense. There is, however, the concept of the “oral Torah” in its broad sense, which includes not only the explanations and principles of the original oral transmission from Heaven but also the discussions and applications of those explanations and principles throughout history. Chaim Eisen explains it as follows:

“At the heart of [the] ongoing process of development in Torah is the dynamism that characterizes the growth of *Torah shebe'al-peh* [oral Torah] from its inception at Sinai. ... the growth of *Torah shebe'al-peh* represent[s] a process of historical development predicated upon the basic truths and principles of Torah [received by

⁶ Interestingly, Kant, though he believed that the individual could, in fact, define objective morality, agreed with Leibovitz that “a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same” (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals 4: 447).

Moses at Sinai], applied and reapplied throughout time. While these truths and principles are immutable and static, their applications are dynamic and endless” (Mosheh Rabbeinu and Rabbi Akiva, *Jewish Thought*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 85).

The need for both the objective Torah from Heaven and the subjective *Torah Shebaalpeh* (i.e., broad oral Torah) is explained by R. E. Berkovits as follows: “The supreme principle of the law to which man is subject is theonomous, its ultimate source of authority is the will of God; the interpretation of the law and its application to the innumerable and forever-changing life situations is autonomous” (*Not In Heaven*, p. 83).⁷ His point is that there is a need for objective law – theonomy – that is expressed as the ethical gesture; and there is a need for the interpretation and application of that law – autonomy – that is the expression of the intellectual gesture.

Accordingly, whereas the Torah from Heaven is *mediated* by the prophet, *Torah Shebaalpeh* is *reasoned* by the sage.⁸ In consonance, whereas Shavuot is identified with Torah from Heaven, the holiday of Shemini Atzeret / Simhat Torah is associated with *Torah Shebaalpeh* (broad oral Torah). This is found first and foremost in the Tikunei Zohar which explains:

Shemini Atzeret is a festival unto itself, in it is the well-spring of the Torah, which irrigates the Tree which is planted in the garden (Tikun 13, p. 29b).

This cryptic passage is explained by R. Tzadok MiLublin (Pri Tzadik, Devarim, Shemini Atzeret, 37) as follows. The “garden” is the Garden of Eden, and the “Tree” is the Tree of Life, which is a symbol of the Torah from Heaven. This Tree is watered by the Oral Torah which is an endless well of Torah innovation. So the given Torah, with its ethical

⁷ Similarly, the Gemara (Eruv. 21b, s.v., *hizaber*) notes that the oral Torah is an endless job of writing ethical codes, upon which the Etz Yosef (ad loc., s.v. *asot sefarim*) explains that this is because every generation has a need for new adaptations of the law to their circumstances.

⁸ Perhaps this also explains the Mishna (Avot 1:1) that describes Moses as “receiving” the Torah as opposed to all the human transmissions that followed described as “giving.” That is, once the divine, *objective* transmission (which included both the written and “narrow” oral Torah) had occurred, the human transmissions include the *subjective* “broad” oral Torah. This is not to imply that the objective Torah (written or oral) was in anyway altered but rather the discussions surrounding it in transmission added subjective oral Torah (see, e.g., R. M. Yitzhar, ad loc., s.v. *v’ha’torah*).

truths, is made alive through the intellectual innovations – all of which are celebrated on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret.

In a similar vein, the Sefat Emet (Devarim, Sukkot, 5434) writes that whereas Shavuot is the holiday of the given Torah, Simhat Torah on Shemini Atzeret is the holiday of the oral Torah in which we rejoice in the innovations that the sages of Israel brought about through their intellectual efforts.

In sum, the holiday of Shemini Atzeret is the celebration of the intellectual gesture – of applying reason (*binah*) – represented by the well!

Sukkot

Finally, Sukkot is quite literally the holiday of the Clouds of Glory, as the Gemara teaches that the sukkot in the desert were, in fact, Clouds of Glory (Suk. 11b, acc. to R. Eliezer). And, as mentioned, the Clouds of Glory are the all-enveloping experience of God. Accordingly, the holiday of Sukkot is about connecting to God experientially, through the aesthetic. Perhaps that is why the pinnacle of the holiday is the experiential Simchat Beit Hashoeva, as the Mishna teaches: “One who has not seen the joy of the water drawing has not seen joy in his life” (Suk. 51a). The seeing is, of course, experiential, purely aesthetic.

These Holidays

The three gifts, granted by God through the three leaders of Israel, represent the three gestures through which human beings express themselves in the world, each one so important that it is celebrated on its own special day in the Jewish calendar:

Leader	Desert Gift	Gesture	Holiday
Moses	Manna	Ethical	Shavuot
Miriam	Well	Intellectual	Shemini Atzeret
Aaron	Clouds of Glory	Aesthetic	Sukkot

But why these three holidays and not the standard three pilgrimage holidays (*shalosh regalim*) – Pesah, Shavuot, Sukkot? To begin, the Torah groups Shavuot, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret together by denoting them with the term “simcha,” while Pesah has no such mention.⁹ Many reasons are offered to explain this distinction,¹⁰ but perhaps it can be explained as contrasting national values versus universal values. That is, whereas Pesah celebrates the birth of the nation of Israel and is thus a holiday exclusively of and for the Jewish people, Shavuot, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret entail a universal aspect.

- Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah from Heaven to the Jewish people, but it is a Torah that is to be taught to the world. This is most evident in the command to write the Torah in seventy languages, so that all the nations learn from it (Deut. 27; Sotah 32a; Rashi, Sotah 35b, s.v. *hey'ach*; Mechilta DeRebbi Yishmael, Yitro; HaAmeck Davar, Deut. 27:5).
- Shemini Atzeret celebrates bringing the Torah to life through the Oral Torah. And as explained, the Torah from Heaven is fundamentally inapplicable without the Oral Torah. Accordingly, while there is debate over which aspects of the Oral Torah are to be taught to the world, it is clear that the oral Torah is part and parcel of the ideas to be taught to the world (See R. Bleich, “Teaching Torah to Non-Jews,” *Contemporary Halachic Problems*, Vol. II, esp. p. 339). Thus, Shemini Atzeret, while a holiday specific to the Jewish people (Suk. 55b; Rashi, Lev. 23:36), also contains an aspect of universality.
- Sukkot is quite literally the universal celebration in that the special sacrifices of the holiday are brought in the name of the seventy archetypal nations (Suk. 55b; Rashi ad loc., s.v. *shivim*). Furthermore, the end of days prophecies relate that it will be on Sukkot that all the nations of the world will come to celebrate in the Temple in Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16).

⁹ Shavuot: Deut. 16:11; Sukkot: Deut. 16:14, Deut. 16:15, Lev. 23:40. The simcha of Shemini Atzeret is understood to be implicit in the word “ach” in Deut. 16:15 (Pes. 71a, see Torah Tem. Deut. 16, n.68). In contradistinction, the call to rejoice (simcha) on Pesah is learned hermeneutically (e.g. Tos. Hag. 8a, s.v. *v'samachta*; Yeraim 127).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Yalkut Shimon Emor #654; Tzror HaMor, Re'ah, s.v., *b'pesah*; R.S.R. Hirsch (Deut. 16:15).

Conclusion

Returning to the three gifts (manna, well, clouds), they represent the three gestures (ethical, intellectual, aesthetic) that, together, signify what it means to be human, as only human beings can perform them. Accordingly, all humans have had them at their disposal ever since they were created. They are gifts, then, in the sense that they were made known – made known to the people in the desert, made known to the people being formed to serve as exemplar to the world, to be a “light to the nations.” We celebrate them with great simcha because only when the whole world realizes their potential – intellectually, ethically and aesthetically – will there be true simcha. Only then will God’s “salvation ... reach to the ends of the earth.”