



Now that the holidays are over, what do I do?

• By DAVID GOLINKIN

We are about to observe Simhat Torah, the last of the High Holy Days. For some this may be a relief. For others, it may be sad to say goodbye to the holidays and go back to our mundane lives. My question is: What message can we take from the holiday season that will help shape our lives in the year to come?

I would like to answer the question with the help of Psalm 27, which Ashkenazi Jews recited every morning and evening for the 50 days from Rosh Hodesh Elul until Hoshana Raba.

This custom is not mentioned in the Talmud or in the standard codes of Jewish law such as Maimonides's *Mishne Torah* or the *Shulhan Aruch*. First mentioned by the Hazan Tzvi bar Hayyim of Furth in his *Likutei Tzvi* in 1638, it was gradually adopted by various prayer books and codes of Jewish law, such as the *Kitzur*

Shulhan Aruch and the *Mishna Berura*.

Why was this psalm chosen for this time of year? Rabbi Shabbetai Rashkov (d. 1745) gave an involved kabbalistic explanation, while Rabbi Ephraim Zalman Margaliot (d. 1828), among others, refers to a midrash found in *Midrash Tehillim*: "The Rabbis explain this chapter as referring to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: 'The Lord is my light' on Rosh Hashanah... 'And my salvation' on Yom Kippur... And afterwards [the psalm says]: 'He will shelter me in his sukkah.'"

Rabbi Hayyim Kieval and others added that the last verse of the psalm includes the word *lule*, which is also dotted in the Masoretic text. This provides a hint to recite this Psalm, since "lule" in reverse spells Elul!

Of course, according to simple logic, Psalm 27 was chosen to be recited at this time of year because it contains words of encouragement during the Days of Awe, when every Jew is fearful about his fate, and reflected in this supplication to God for salvation:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall

I fear?

"The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

"Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice.

"Do not hide Your face from me...

"Hope in the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage.

"Hope in the Lord."

But what is the central message of Psalm 27 and what is its relevance today?

According to Talmudic tradition, the Book of Psalms was written by King David (*Bava Batra* 14b), who devoted most of his life to war. In this psalm he requests that God grant him physical and spiritual refuge from his warfare. As the central verse states:

"One thing have I asked of the Lord, this I request,

That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,

To gaze at the graciousness of God and to visit in His sanctuary."



Therefore, this psalm was appropriate for King David in light of his turbulent life.

Is this psalm is appropriate for us? Do we really want to sit in the synagogue and the *beit midrash* (house of study) our entire lives to gaze at the sweetness of God and to visit His sanctuary, like many yeshiva students today? Or perhaps the best way to serve God is at home, at work or in the army – within society?

INDEED, THIS is an old dispute that appears in many places in rabbinic literature. There is tension in those sources between Torah study and a profession, or between Torah study and action.

Thus, for example, we learn in *Berakhot* 35b: “Rabbi Yishmael said that we must combine Torah study with a profession. But Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said if a person works as a farmer, he will have no time to study Torah.” Abaye, who lived 200 years later in Babylon, concludes the discussion as follows: “Many followed Rabbi Yishmael and succeeded; Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and did not.” In other words, Abaye ruled like Rabbi Yishmael that we must combine Torah study with earning a living, i.e. we must not dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives.

But if the verse “One thing I have asked of the Lord” is not the ideal, why did we recite for those 50 days leading up to Hoshana Raba?

I would like to reply with a homiletic explanation I heard from my late father, Rabbi Noah Golinkin, which I later found in the commentary to the Book of Psalms of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888). Rabbi Hirsch says the psalm does not mean that we should actually dwell in the house of God all the days of our lives. Even the *kohanim*, the priests, were not in the Temple permanently!

“This expression, therefore, comes to say that if we sanctify our lives, then every single place becomes a *beit Hashem*, a house of the Lord.... In every place where God’s Torah is observed with strength and purity, then our earthly life becomes a chariot for God’s presence, and God has a place to dwell on this earth.”

This is a beautiful idea, worth stressing during the High Holy Days and throughout the year: We must turn our homes, our workplaces, our communities and the State of Israel into *beit Hashem* – the house of the Lord – by sanctifying each of these places via the *mitzvot*.


We can turn our homes into *beit Hashem* by observ-

ing commandments such as *hamotzi* (the blessing for bread), *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals), studying Torah with our families, reciting kiddush on Shabbat and festivals, observing Shabbat with our families, and making *havdala* at the end of Shabbat.

We can turn our workplaces into *beit Hashem* by observing commandments such as *ona’a* (not overcharging), *eifat tzedek* (accurate weights and measures), *hassagat gvul* (not trespassing), and keeping far from falsehood.

We can turn our communities into *beit Hashem* by observing commandments such as *tzedaka* (charity), *bikur holim* (visiting the sick), *halvayat hamet* (attending funerals), *nihum aveilim* (comforting the mourners), and *gemilut hassadim* (deeds of loving-kindness).

And we can turn the State of Israel into *beit Hashem* by “loving our neighbor as ourselves”, by *ahavat yisrael* (loving our fellow Jews in Israel and the Diaspora), and by *ahavat hager* (loving the stranger and the convert).

Let us remember these crucial lessons as we transition from Simhat Torah to the rest of the year. 

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