

This Is The Blessing
Shemini Atzeret / Simchat Torah 5771
Rabbi Laura Geller

My eighty-eight-year-old mother came out from Boston for Yom Kippur this year. Usually she comes for Rosh Hashanah and stays through part of Sukkot, but this year we are going through a remodel and the house wasn't quite ready by Rosh Hashanah. Thankfully she's a good sport and was able, with her cane, to maneuver past the boxes and the stacks of paintings cluttering up the hallway. I really wanted her to see the new bedroom and the guest bathroom that will be her rooms whenever she visits, even though they were not quite finished by the time she came out.

It was a great visit. I love to watch her in services watching me. I know that after every sermon, whether it was great or just okay, she'll always say "Your father would have been so proud." I love that she gets to spend time with my daughter who looks so much like her. I love that she gets to celebrate part of Sukkot with us, a holiday that we never observed when I was growing up. This year, as I was showing her how to *bench lulav*, she smelled the *etrog*, and said "That smell reminds me of my grandfather." Then she told me a story I had never heard before – how when she was a little girl her mother would take her to shul on Sukkot and he would let her hold the *etrog*. It led to a conversation about this great-grandfather that I had never meant, and some more insight into my mother.

Many of you know that one of the traditions of Sukkot is called *uzspizin*, which means "inviting." Each night you invite a mythic ancestor into the sukkah. The first night it is Abraham, the second Isaac, the third Jacob. More recently the custom has evolved to invite women ancestors as well – Sarah, Esther, Hulda, Abigail, Devorah. In our sukkah we have added a dimension to the tradition. Each night we invite our guests to invite someone important to them, living or dead, into the sukkah, and to tell us why they would want them to join us. Often people invite family members who live far away. But more often, people invite their ancestors, people they knew or hadn't known, but wished they had. One guest talked about his great-grandfather, an immigrant from the old country, who was always there when he was a child. He shared that he wished that he had been curious enough to ask him about his life when this grandfather could have shared his stories, but by the time our guest was mature enough to want to ask, it was already too late. The sukkah becomes full as our guests share their stories, full of the memories of people whose lives made their lives possible. My mother invited my dad into the sukkah, and as she talked about him she said; "He would have been so proud to be sitting here."

Mom left on the second day of Sukkot. I wished she could have stayed longer. I want her to see the house finished. When I took her to the airport to go back to Boston, I had to stop myself from saying "Mom, don't go yet. Stay a little longer."

Today is Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah – the day after the last day of Sukkot. The Torah tells us "On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn *atzeret*, a

gathering; you shall not work at your occupation.” (Numbers 29:35) The rabbis interpret the word *atzeret* from the root “to hold back”; they read the verse as: “On the eighth day you should hold back a little, tarry a bit longer, don’t rush away. All of you who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, stay one more day.” God is, at it were, saying to all of us “Stay with Me one more day...”

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah – the day of holding on, wanting those extra minutes with the ones we love. We try to hold on a little more, stay in the intense spirituality of the High Holy Days one more day, stay in the joy and spaciousness of Sukkot. We don’t want to leave, or be left. “Mom, don’t go. Stay a little longer.”

Today is the day we read *V’zot habracha*, the story of Moses’ death, the final portion of Torah. Our Torah portion is called "*V’zot habracha*, And this is the Blessing." This story of Moses’ death is not only the shortest portion of the Torah, but it is also the only portion, of all the fifty-four, that is never read on Shabbat. In other words, we never end the story with Moses’ death. The story continues in two ways: first, with the haftarah we read this morning, the story of the next generation, as Joshua becomes the leader. And second, with the tradition of immediately reading the beginning of Torah, the story of creation.

Interestingly, it didn’t used be that way. The Talmud explicitly tells us that the haftarah for *V’zot habracha* is the story from the Book of Kings that describes Solomon blessing the people following the celebration of Sukkot. But by the Middle Ages, we find scholars bemoaning the fact that Jewish communities had chosen another haftarah, the story of Joshua. Around the same time, at least by the fourteenth century, a new custom had also evolved – to start reading Torah again from the beginning immediately after reading the end.

What do we learn from this? We learn that in all endings there is beginning. We never stay focused on Moses’ death, but instead on what he taught us about how to live our lives, and how to begin again.

Yes, we want to stay a little longer in the memory that fills our sukkot. “Mom, don’t go yet. Dad, don’t go yet.” We are never quite ready to let those memories go. But we do take down our sukkot and go back to our homes, even if our parents don’t get to see them completed. We continue on the journeys of our lives, taking the memory of those we love with us. Just as we don’t dwell on the death of Moses, we don’t focus on our loved ones’ deaths, but rather on what they taught us about how to live our lives. And how to begin again.

We end our reading of Deuteronomy: *Chazak, Chazak v’nitchazek* (from strength to strength, may we strengthen each other). *V’zot habracha* (and this is the blessing): we finish Torah and start again. We link the final word of Torah “*Yisrael*” to the first word “*Bereshit*.” *Yisrael* ends with the letter *lamed*; *Bereshit* begins with the letter *bet*; *lamed/bet* spells *lev*, heart.

V'zot habracha... this is the blessing: there are no endings without beginnings. Some of us have children who look like our parents. The smell of an *etrog* evokes a memory of joy. We can invite the memories of those we loved into the sukkot of our lives, and make room for those memories in the homes we build. The pain of the loss of those we loved is transformed into the blessing of memory. They are now in our hearts, forever a part of who we are.

We continue with *Yizkor*.