

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah
October 7 & 8, 2023 *** Tishrei 22 & 23, 5784

[Shmini Atzeret / Simchat Torah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/357073/jewish/In-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Immediately following the seven-day festival of Sukkot comes the two-day festival of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. (In the Land of Israel, the festival is "compacted" in a single day).

Shemini Atzeret means "the eighth [day] of retention"; the chassidic masters explain that the primary purpose of the festival is to retain and "conceive" the spiritual revelations and powers that we are granted during the festivals of the month of Tishrei, so that we could subsequently apply them to our lives throughout the year.

The "Four Kinds" are not taken on Shemini Atzeret. We still eat in the sukkah (according to the custom of most communities), but without making the special blessing on the sukkah. On the second day of Shemini Atzeret (i.e., the ninth day from the beginning of Sukkot)--and in the Land of Israel—we go back to eating in the home.

The second day of Shemini Atzeret is called Simchat Torah ("Rejoicing of the Torah"). On this day we conclude, and begin anew, the annual Torah reading cycle. The event is marked with great rejoicing, especially during the "hakafot" procession, in which we march, sing and dance with the Torah scrolls around the reading table in the synagogue. "On Simchat Torah," goes the chassidic saying, "we rejoice in the Torah, and the Torah rejoices in us; the Torah, too, wants to dance, so we become the Torah's dancing feet." Other festival observances include the special prayer for rain included in the musaf prayer of Shemini Atzeret, and the custom that all are called up to the Torah on Simchat Torah. *(All nutshells are borrowed from chabad.org)*

[Shemini Atzeret Torah Reading in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/768640/jewish/Torah-Reading-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/768640/jewish/Torah-Reading-in-a-Nutshell.htm

A tenth of all produce is to be eaten in Jerusalem, or else exchanged for money with which food is purchased and eaten there. On certain years this tithe is given to the poor instead. Firstborn cattle and sheep are to be offered in the Temple and their meat eaten by the Kohen (priest).

The mitzvah of charity obligates a Jew to aid a needy fellow with a gift or loan. On the Sabbatical year (occurring every seventh year) all loans are to be forgiven. All indentured servants are to be set free after six years of service.

The portion then mentions the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals — Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot — when all should go to "see and be seen" before G-d in the Holy Temple.

G-d declares that the eighth day will be the festival of Shemini Atzeret, one bullock is offered, together with a ram and seven lambs. With each of the animals is brought the

prescribed meal, wine and oil supplements: three tenths of an ephah of fine flour, and half a hin each of wine and oil, per bullock; two tenths of flour and a third of a hin of each of the liquids for each ram; and one tenth and one quarter respectively for each lamb.

[Shemini Atzeret Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Kings 8:54-66](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/768642/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/768642/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The setting for the haftarah for the holiday of Shemini Atzeret is the dedication of the first Holy Temple by King Solomon. The dedication was a seven-day festive affair, which was immediately followed by the seven festive days of the holiday of Sukkot. And then, as we read in this haftarah, on the "eighth day" (i.e., Shemini Atzeret), Solomon sent the people off to their homes.

The reading opens immediately after King Solomon concludes a lengthy public prayer to G-d. He then blesses the assembled Jewish people and encourages them to follow G-d's will and observe the commandments—it is this blessing that occupies the bulk of the reading.

The King then inaugurates the Holy Temple by bringing various offerings: peace offerings, burnt offerings, and meal and fat offerings. And then, "on the eighth day he dismissed the people, and they blessed the King and went to their homes, rejoicing and delighted of heart for all the goodness that G-d had wrought for David His servant and for Israel His people."

[V'Zot Haberachah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3152/jewish/Parshah-in-a-Nutshell-VZot-HaBerachah.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3152/jewish/Parshah-in-a-Nutshell-VZot-HaBerachah.htm

The name of the Parshah, "V'Zot HaBerachah," means "And this is the blessing," and it is found in [Deuteronomy 33:1](#).

The Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret Torah readings are from Leviticus 22-23, Numbers 29, and Deuteronomy 14-16. These readings detail the laws of the moadim or "appointed times" on the Jewish calendar for festive celebration of our bond with G-d; including the mitzvot of dwelling in the sukkah (branch-covered hut) and taking the "Four Kinds" on the festival of Sukkot; the offerings brought in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on Sukkot, and the obligation to journey to the Holy Temple to "to see and be seen before the face of G-d" on the three annual pilgrimage festivals — Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.

On Simchat Torah ("Rejoicing of the Torah") we conclude, and begin anew, the annual Torah-reading cycle. First we read the Torah section of Vezot Haberachah, which recounts the blessings that Moses gave to each of the twelve tribes of Israel before his death. Echoing Jacob's blessings to his twelve sons five generations earlier, Moses assigns and empowers each tribe with its individual role within the community of Israel.

Vezot Haberachah then relates how Moses ascended Mount Nebo from whose

summit he saw the Promised Land. "And Moses the servant of G-d died there in the Land of Moab by the mouth of G-d... and no man knows his burial place to this day." The Torah concludes by attesting that "There arose not a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom G-d knew face to face... and in all the mighty hand and the great awesome things which Moses did before the eyes of all Israel." Immediately after concluding the Torah, we begin it anew by reading the first chapter of Genesis (the beginning of next Shabbat's Torah reading) describing G-d's creation of the world in six days and His ceasing work on the seventh—which He sanctified and blessed as a day of rest.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Joshua 1:1-18](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/572744/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/572744/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's Haftarah describes Joshua's succession of his master Moses, whose passing is discussed in the Torah reading.

G-d reveals Himself to Joshua, and appoints him as Moses' successor. G-d encouraged Joshua to lead the Israelites in to the Holy Land. "Every place on which the soles of your feet will tread I have given to you, as I have spoken to Moses. From this desert and Lebanon to the great river, the Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the great sea westward shall be your boundary." G-d assures Joshua that He will be with him just as He was with Moses and encourages him to be strong and brave, to study the Torah constantly and keep it close, so that he may succeed in all his endeavors.

Joshua orders his officers to prepare the Jewish people to cross the Jordan River. He then tells the members of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh, who had chosen to settle on the eastern bank of the Jordan, to go and assist their brethren in the conquest of the Canaanite mainland, after which they would return to their plot of land. The Jewish people pledge their allegiance to Joshua: "Just as we obeyed Moses in everything, so shall we obey you. Only that the L-rd your G-d be with you as He was with Moses."

[Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shemini-atzeret-simchat-torah-family-edition/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shemini-atzeret-simchat-torah-family-edition/>

SHEMINI ATZERET is a strange day in the Jewish calendar. It is described as the eighth day, and thus part of Succot, but it is also designated by a name of its own, Atzeret. Is it, or is it not, a separate festival in its own right? It seems to be both. How are we to understand this?

What guided the Sages was the detail that whereas on the seven days of Succot seventy young bulls were offered in the Temple, on Atzeret, the eighth day, there was only one. Connecting this to Zechariah's prophecy that in the Messianic time all nations would celebrate Succot, they concluded that the seventy sacrifices of

Succot represented the seventy nations of the world as described in Chapter 10 of Bereishit. Even though Zechariah's vision had not yet been realised, it was as if all humanity were in some sense present in Jerusalem on the festival, and sacrifices were made on their behalf. On the eighth day, as they were leaving, God was inviting the Jewish people to a small private reception. The word *Atzeret* itself was interpreted to mean, "Stop, stay a while." Shemini Atzeret was private time between God and His people. It was a day of particularity (between God and His people) after the universality of the seven days of Succot (a festival for all the nations, at least in Messianic times).

In February 1997, then-President of the State of Israel, Ezer Weizman, paid the first, and thus far the only, state visit to Britain as the guest of Her Majesty the Queen. The custom is that on the first night of such a visit the Queen hosts a state banquet at Buckingham Palace. It was, for the Jews present, a unique and moving moment to hear *Hatikvah* played in the banquet hall of the Palace, and to hear the Queen propose a toast to the President with the word *lechayim*.

There is a protocol for such visits. Present are many representative figures, ambassadors, members of the Government and other members of the Royal Family. At the end of the evening, after most of the guests have taken their leave, there is a small and intimate gathering of just a few individuals – on that occasion the Queen, Prince Philip, the Queen Mother, the Prime Minister and a few others – for a more relaxed and personal conversation with the guest of honour. It was this kind of occasion, with its Royal protocol, that best illustrates how the Sages understood Shemini Atzeret.

SIMCHAT TORAH (celebrated the day after Shemini Atzeret in the Diaspora, and combined into one day in Israel as there is only one day of Yom Tov) is unique among festivals. It is not mentioned in the Torah, nor in the Talmud. Unlike Purim and Chanukah, it was not formalised by any decision on the part of the religious authorities, nor does it commemorate any historical deliverance. It grew from the grassroots, slowly developing over time.

It was born in Babylon, probably at the end of the period of the *Amora'im*, the Rabbis of the Talmud, in the fifth or sixth century. The Babylonian custom – now universal – was to divide the Torah into fifty-four portions to be read in the course of a year (in Israel there was a three or three-and-a-half-year cycle). On the second day of Shemini Atzeret in Babylon (there was no second day in Israel), the custom was to read the last portion of the Torah, in which Moshe blessed the nation at the end of his life.

It had long been the custom to make a celebration on completing a section of study, a Talmudic tractate, or an order of the Mishnah ([Shabbat 118b](#)). Thus, the custom evolved to make a celebration at the completion of the Mosaic books, and it was considered a great honour to be called to the Torah for this last portion. The celebration became known as Simchat Torah.

[What Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah Teaches Us Today by Rabbi Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shemini-atzeret-simchat-torah-family-edition/)
<https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shemini-atzeret-simchat-torah-family-edition/>

Shemini Atzeret- Succot represents more clearly than any other festival the dualities of Judaism. The Four Species (lulav, etrog, hadassim and aravot) are a symbol of the land of Israel, while the succah reminds us of exile. The Four Species are a ritual of rain, while eating in the succah depends on the absence of rain. Above all, though, there is the tension between the universality of nature and the particularity of history. There is an aspect of Succot – rainfall, harvest, climate – to which everyone can relate, but there is another – the long journey through the wilderness – that speaks to the unique experience of the Jewish people. This tension between the universal and the particular is unique to Judaism. The God of Israel is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humanity. It is conspicuous that while the other two Abrahamic monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, borrowed much from Judaism, they did not borrow this. They became universalist faiths, believing that everyone ought to embrace the one true religion, their own, and that those who do not are denied the blessings of eternity.

Judaism disagrees. For this it was derided for many centuries, and to some degree it still is today. Why, if it represents religious truth, is it not to be shared with everyone? If there is only one God, why is there not only one way to salvation? There is no doubt that if Judaism had become an evangelising, conversion-driven religion – as it would have had to, had it believed in universalism – there would be many more Jews than there are today. A recent study (the Pew Report, undertaken in 2015) found that there are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and only 14 million Jews. The disparity is vast.

Judaism is the road less travelled, because it represents a complex truth that could not be expressed in any other way. The Torah tells a simple story. God gave humans the gift of freedom, which they then used not to enhance creation but to endanger it. Adam and Chavah broke the first prohibition. Cain, the first human child, became the first murderer. Within a remarkably short space of time, all flesh had corrupted its way on earth, the world was filled with violence, and only one man, Noach, found favour in

God's eyes. After the Flood, God made a covenant with Noach, and through him with all humanity, but after the hubris of the builders of the Tower of Babel, God chose another way. Having established a basic threshold in the form of the Noachide Laws, He then chose one man, one family, and eventually one nation, to become a living example of what it is to exist closely and continuously in the presence of God. There are, in the affairs of humankind, universal laws and specific examples. The Noachide covenant constitutes the universal laws. The way

of life of Avraham and his descendants is the example.

What this means in Judaism is that the righteous of all the nations have a share in the World to Come ([Sanhedrin 105a](#)). In contemporary terms it means that our common humanity precedes our religious differences. It also means that by creating all humans in His image, God set us the challenge of seeing His image in one who is not in our image: whose colour, culture, class and creed are different from our own. The ultimate spiritual challenge is to see the trace of God in the face of a stranger.

Zechariah, in the vision we read as the Haftarah for the first day of Succot, puts this precisely. He says that in the End of Days, “The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One” ([Zechariah 14:9](#)), meaning that all the nations will recognise the sovereignty of a single transcendent God. Yet at the same time, Zechariah envisages the nations participating only in Succot, the most universal of the festivals, and the one in which they have the greatest interest since they all need rain. He does not envisage them becoming Jews, accepting the “yoke of the commands”, all 613 of them. He does not speak of their conversion. The practical outcome of this dual theology – the universality of God and the particularity of Torah – is that we are commanded to be true to our faith, and a blessing to others, regardless of their faith. That is the Jewish way. Shemini Atzeret reminds us of the intimacy Jews have always felt in the presence of God. The cathedrals of Europe convey a sense of the vastness of God and the smallness of humankind. The small shuls of Tzfat, where the Arizal and Rabbi Yosef Caro prayed, convey a sense of the closeness of God and the greatness of humankind. Jews, except when they sought to imitate other nations, did not build cathedrals. Even the Temple reached its greatest architectural grandeur under Herod, a man better known for his political ruthlessness than his spiritual sensibilities.

So, when all the universality of Judaism has been expressed, there remains something that cannot be universalised: that sense of intimacy with, and closeness to, God that we feel on Shemini Atzeret, when all the other guests have left.

Shemini Atzeret is chamber music, not a symphony. It is quiet time with God. We are reluctant to leave, and we dare to think that He is reluctant to see us go.

Justice is universal, love is particular. There are some things we share because we are human. But there are other things, constitutive of our identity, that are uniquely ours – most importantly our relationships to those who form our family. On Succot we are among strangers and friends. On Shemini Atzeret we are with family.

[Simchat Torah](#) - The emergence of Simchat Torah signals something remarkable.

You may have noticed that Succot and Shemini Atzeret are both described as zeman simchateinu, the season of our joy. The nature of that joy was clear and signalled in different ways both by the succah and by the Four Species. The succah reminded the people how blessed they were to be living in Israel when they

recalled how their ancestors had to live for forty years without a land or a permanent home. The lulav, etrog, hadassim, and aravot were a vivid demonstration of the fruitfulness of the land under the divine blessing of rain. The joy of Succot was the joy of living in the Promised Land.

But by the time Simchat Torah had spread throughout the Jewish world, Jews had lost virtually everything: their land, their home, their freedom and independence, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial order – all that had once been their source of joy. A single devastating sentence in one of the piyutim of Ne'ilah (at the close of Yom Kippur), summed up their situation: Ein shiur rak haTorah hazot, "Nothing remains but this Torah." All that remained was a book.

Sa'adia Gaon, writing in the tenth century, asked a simple question. In virtue of what was the Jewish people still a nation? It had none of the normal preconditions of a nation. Jews were scattered throughout the world. They did not live in the same territory. They were not part of a single economic or political order. They did not share the same culture. They did not speak the same language. Rashi spoke French, Rambam Arabic. Yet they were, and were seen to be, one nation, bound by a bond of collective destiny and responsibility. Hence Sa'adia concluded: Our people is a people only in virtue of our Torah (Beliefs and Opinions, 3). In the lovely rabbinic phrase about the Ark which contained the tablets, "It carried those who carried it" ([Sotah 35a](#)). More than the Jewish people preserved the Torah, the Torah preserved the Jewish people.

It was, as we say in our prayers, "our life and the length of our days". It was the legacy of their past and the promise of their future. It was their marriage contract with God, the record of the covenant that bound them unbreakably together. They had lost their world but they still had God's word, and it was enough.

More than enough. On Simchat Torah, without being commanded by any verse in the Torah or any decree of the Rabbis, Jews throughout the world sang and danced and recited poems in honour of the Torah, exactly as if they were dancing in the courtyard of the Temple at the Simchat Beit HaSho'evah, or as if they were King David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. They were determined to show God, and the world, that they could still be ach same'ach, as the Torah said about Succot: wholly, totally, given over to joy. It would be hard to find a parallel in the entire history of the human spirit of a people capable of such joy at a time when they were being massacred in the name of the God of love and compassion.

A people that can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still rejoice is a people that cannot be defeated by any force or any fear. Rambam writes (Laws of Shofar 8:15) that to experience joy in the fulfillment of a mitzvah out of the love of God is to touch the spiritual heights. Whoever stands on their dignity and regards such things as beneath them is, he says, a sinner and a fool, and whoever abandons their dignity for the sake of joy is thereby elevated "because there is no greatness or honor higher than celebrating before God."

Simchat Torah was born when Jews had lost everything else, but they never lost their capacity to rejoice. Nechemiah was right when he said to the people weeping as they listened to the Torah, realising how far they had drifted from it: “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nechemiah 8:10). A people whose capacity for joy cannot be destroyed is itself indestructible.

The Inheritance That Belongs to All by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vezot-habracha/the-inheritance-that-belongs-to-all/>

Commenting on a key verse from *Parshat Vezot Haberacha*, a Midrash tells a pointed story:

Once R. Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. R. Yannai said to him, “Will the master be my guest?” He replied, “As you please.”

Yannai then took him home and questioned him on Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to say Grace. The man, however, replied, “Let Yannai say grace in his house.”

Yannai then said to him, “Can you repeat what I tell you?” The man answered, “Yes.” R. Yannai then said: “Say, ‘A dog has eaten Yannai’s bread.’”

The guest then rose up and seized R. Yannai, demanding, “Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?”

“What inheritance of yours do I have?”

He replied, “The children recite, ‘Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob’ (Deut. 33:4). It is not written, ‘congregation of Yannai,’ but ‘congregation of Jacob.’” *Leviticus Rabbah*

It is a powerful story. R. Yannai sees an elegantly dressed stranger and assumes that he must be well educated. He takes him home and discovers the man has had no Jewish education whatsoever. He knows nothing of the rabbinic literature. He cannot even say Grace after Meals.

R. Yannai, a Torah scholar, looks down at the guest with contempt. But the stranger, with great dignity, says to him in effect: “The Torah is my inheritance as well as yours. Since you have much, and I have none, share a little of what you have with me. Instead of dismissing me, teach me.”

Few ideas in the history of Judaism have greater power than this: the idea that Torah knowledge belongs to everyone; that everyone should have the chance to learn; that education should be universal; that everyone should be, if possible, literate in the laws, the history, and the faith of Judaism; that education is the highest form of dignity and should be accessible to all.

This idea goes so far back and so deep in Judaism that we can easily forget how radical it is. Knowledge – in the phrase commonly attributed to Sir Francis Bacon –

is power. Those who have it are usually reluctant to share it with others. Most societies have had literate elites who controlled the administration of government. To this day, many professions use a technical vocabulary intelligible only to insiders, so that their knowledge is impenetrable to outsiders. (See Amos Funkenstein and Adin Steinsaltz, *The Sociology of Ignorance* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1988).)

Judaism was different, profoundly so. I have speculated that this is connected with the fact that the birth of Judaism happened at roughly the same time as the birth of the Proto-Semitic alphabet, appearing in the age of the patriarchs, and whose earliest traces have been discovered in the Sinai desert in areas where slaves worked. The alphabet, with its mere twenty-two symbols, for the first time opened up the possibility of a society of universal literacy. Judaism, as we saw earlier, bears the mark of this throughout. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher:

“For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord.” [Gen. 18:19](#)

Moses repeatedly speaks about education:

“Teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise.”

[Deut. 11:19](#)

Above all is the personal example of Moses himself. At a critical moment, when Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp and Joshua felt that Moses' authority was being challenged, Moses replied: “Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!” ([Num. 11:29](#)). Moses wished that everyone shared his access to the Divine.

The distinctive character of the covenant-making ceremony at Mount Sinai lay in the fact that it was, uniquely in the religious history of humankind, a revelation of God not to a prophet or an elite but to *the entire people*, a point the Torah stresses repeatedly:

“The people all responded together.” [Ex. 19:8](#)

“Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.” [Ex. 24:7](#)

The septennial covenant renewal ceremony, *hak'hel*, was to include everyone:

“Assemble the people – men, women, and children, and the strangers living in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law” ([Deut. 31:12](#)). It was not that everyone *may* have knowledge of the laws and traditions of the people; it was that they *must*. This was a path-breaking form of egalitarianism: not equality of power or wealth but equality of access to education.

The speeches that constitute the book of Deuteronomy were in themselves the record of a pioneering adult education experience in which the master-prophet took the entire people as his disciples, teaching them both the law – the

commands, statutes, and judgements – and no less importantly, the history that lay behind the law. Hence the prologue to the “song” of *Haazinu*:

“Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel.” [Deut. 31:30](#)

Hence, likewise, the prologue to Moses’ blessing in *Vezot Habracha*: “This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death... Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” ([Deut. 33:1, 4](#)). This is the verse quoted by R. Yannai’s guest as proof that Torah belongs to everyone. It is the possession not of the learned, the elect, the specially gifted, not of a class or caste. It is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Jacob.

The impact of this radical democratisation of knowledge can be seen in a remarkable detail in the book of Judges. The context is this: Gideon (c. 1169 BCE) had been waging war against the Midianites. He asks the people of the town of Succot to give his troops food. They are famished and exhausted. The people refuse. First, they say, win the war, and then we will give you food. Gideon is angry, but he goes on to win the war. On his return, we read: “He caught a young man of Succot and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven officials of Succot, the elders of the town” ([Judges 8:14](#)). The rest of the story does not concern us here. What is extraordinary is that, more than three thousand years ago, an Israelite leader took it for granted that a young man, chosen at random, could read and write! What is more impressive is that this is an incidental detail rather than something to which the narrator wishes to draw attention.

Nor was the lesson forgotten. In the fifth century BCE, seeking to restore coherence to a nation that had suffered defeat and exile by the Babylonians, Ezra convened the people in Jerusalem, giving them what in essence was an adult education seminar in Jewish literacy:

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the Priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. [Neh. 8:2–3](#)

He and Nehemiah had positioned Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to everyone what was being said and what it meant ([Neh. 8:8](#)). This went on for many days. Ezra became, as was Moses, an exemplar of a new kind of leadership, born in biblical Israel: *the teacher as hero*. Eventually this became the basis of the Judaism that survived the cultural challenge of Greece, and the military might of Rome: not the Judaism of kings, priests, palaces, and Temple but the Judaism of the school, the synagogue, and the house of study. By the first

century, a complete system of universal, compulsory education was in place, an achievement the Talmud attributes to Yehoshua b. Gamla ([Bava Batra 21a](#)), the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

Not until modern times did this idea of universal education spread beyond Judaism. It did not exist even in England, then the premier world power, until the Education Act of 1870. It has taken the internet revolution – Google and the rest – to make it a reality throughout the world. Even today, some fifty million children are still deprived of education, in countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Haiti, Comoros, and Ethiopia.

That education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all is one of the most profound ideas in all of history. It was born in those powerful words of *Vezot Habracha*:

“Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.”

YAHRTZEITS

Mel Zwillenberg remembers Susan’s mother Trudy Altman on Tues. Oct. 10.