

Simchas Torah / Vezos Habracha – Yisrael & Bereishis – Rabbi M Taubman

כ-ג תשרי תשע"ו – שבת חוה"מ סוכות / שמיני עצרת / שמחת תורה

The last word written in the Torah is Yisroel (Israel). The first word written in the Torah is Bereishis (In the beginning). If we examine the words **ישראל** and **בראשית** in detail (as noted by the Sefas Emes), they both contain the word **אשרי**. The root of the word Ashrei [אשר] according to Rav S.R. Hirsch means “to make progress” we tend to translate this word as “Happiness”, probably due to the fact that there is no one word in English to denote the concept that the word “Ashrei” actually conveys .

The cognate roots may shed some light on what type of “progress” is conveyed by the word **אשרי**–Ashrei and similar words. For example; if we exchange the Aleph for an Ayin we arrive at the root **עשר**. We are more familiar with this root as meaning “wealth” (often used when discussing monetary wealth.) Another example to aid our understanding is that if we exchange the Shin for a Tzaddi we arrive at the root **אצר**. This word describes a store-house or treasure house where one stores ones possessions. Finally, if we change both letters we arrive at the root **עצר**, which produces the idea of “coming to a halt/storing up” and which we are more familiar with in its form of Atzeres **עצרת** referring to both Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret.

Taking all this into account we arrive at a translation for **אשרי** which would therefore mean something like a “progressing in life through a storehouse of (moral) wealth” there can be nothing more happy than understanding that the Torah is at its very heart a storehouse of spiritual/moral happiness. Therefore, the entire Torah is bracketed between two words **בראשית** and **ישראל** that contain the word **אשרי**–to indicate to us that the Torah itself, by following its laws and ways, will bring to the Jewish people (and perhaps the whole world) to progress in life due to the Torah being a storehouse of spiritual wealth.

The end of Massechet Yuma (which deals with laws of Yom Kippur) it states; Rabbi Akiva said.” You should be happy (“Ashreichem”) Oh Israel. In front of whom do you purify yourselves and who purifies you? Your father in heaven. As it says, "I will throw pure waters on you and you will be purified." (Ezekiel 36:25) And it says: "Hashem is the mikvah-bath of Israel." (Jeremiah 17:13) Like a Mikvah purifies the impure, the Holy One Blessed Be He purifies Israel”.

Rabbi Akivah prefaces this beautiful idea with the phrase “Ashreichem”, showing that we should know that our lives are suffused with the idea of “spiritual progress” because Hashem is able to provide Taharah for us on Yom Kippur. This idea of being in a constant state of “Ashrei” is not confined to Yom Kippur. One finds the words “Ashrei” or “Ashreichem” also on Simchas Torah as well as throughout our daily Tefillot.

Sukkkot and Shemini Atzeret (Simchat Torah) provide us with an intense burst of Simcha. At the same time we should be aware that we have an opportunity today and the whole year to experience constant “אשר–Osher”.

This implies that the Torah is telling us that true happiness is the knowledge that we are in a position to make progress throughout our lives through the Torah and our closeness to G-d. The Torah provides us with a dynamic process by which we can make constant progress. May this be true for all of us in the coming year.