



Shemini Atzeret: A Moment of Pause

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When you ask a classroom full of students to think of all of the sevens in Judaism that they can think of, you get a slew of hands shooting up into the air. The list of associations with seven is a familiar one: Creation, Shabbat, Matriarchs and Patriarchs, circling seven times at a wedding and so on. We could expect a similar response for other numbers: 1, 3, 4, 10 and 40. When you ask for all of the eights in Judaism, mostly I expect confused looks for a few minutes, and then to have one student think about the eight nights of Hanukkah. Usually, that ends the list.

One of the most enigmatic eights in Judaism is Shemini Atzeret, which means the Eighth Day of Assembly. The rabbis debate if Shemini Atzeret is a separate festival of its own or if it is the conclusion of Sukkot. The answer is both! This eighth day, which concludes Sukkot, is also its own festival.

Shemini Atzeret is usually an overlooked day on the Jewish calendar. It is not filled with unique and exciting ritual, like dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah. Since it is officially after Sukkot, we no longer use the sukkah beyond reciting Kiddush in the sukkah on Shemini Atzeret evening. In synagogues, Hallel, a series of Psalms that praise God for taking us out of Egypt, and Yizkor, the memorial service, mark the day. The other major liturgical moment is when the Hazzan chants Geshem, the prayer for a year of good rain. Geshem is chanted at this time of year because in Israel, they are about to begin the rainy season, and Israel depends heavily on rainfall for its water supply.

Looking at Shemini Atzeret as the conclusion to Sukkot, however, can give us some insight into the meaning of the festival. On each day of Sukkot, a large number of animal, grain and wine offerings were made in the Beit Mikdash in Jerusalem. On the first day of Sukkot, thirteen bulls are offered. On the second day, twelve bulls, and so on. On the final day of Sukkot, seven bulls are offered. Overall, seventy bulls were offered. For the rabbis, the number seventy refers to the nations of the world. Sukkot becomes a day when all seventy nations would come to the Beit Mikdash to make an offering to God. To what could we compare this? To having a week of non-stop guests for Sukkot. It is busy. There is constant cooking and serving of huge festival meals. By the end of the week, people are worn out from constantly hosting people.

Shemini Atzeret is different. The word Atzeret comes from the same root as the word 'stop.' It is one bull only. For one people: B'nai Yisrael. In the Talmud, we find the following midrash: "On the eighth day you shall have a holy assembly." This is like a king who said to his servants: "Make me a great feast." On the eighth day, he said to one he loved, "Make me a small meal so I may enjoy your company." (Sukkot 55b) Shemini Atzeret is a day of intimacy between God and Israel. Just the two of us. No guests. Nothing fancy. Just basking in the joy of the festival now behind us. Like a family who just had a week's worth of houseguests taking the time to come back together as a family. This day is a transition from the intensity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the festive nature of Sukkot back into the normal schedule of our lives. It is a good time to ask for

rain. It is also a good time to rejoice with the greatest gift that exists between God and us: the Torah.

Hag Sameach!
Rabbi Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

- Take time to look back over the Festival season. Think about the internal work you did over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Talk about the placement of Sukkot so close to those intense days.
- Make Shabbat into a mini-festival each week. Take some of the intensity of the High Holidays and Sukkot and put it into taking your Shabbat observance up a notch. Make meals more festive. Have guests over. Have a third meal on Saturday afternoon with friends over.
- Go to a synagogue for Simchat Torah. Pick up a Torah scroll. Dance. Dance with your kids.

EVEN THOUGH THIS DVAR TORAH IS FOCUSED ON SHEMINI ATZERET, THE TORAH PORTION THIS WEEK IS BREISHEET. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [BREISHEET](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. God made two great lights. What were they and what did they do?
2. On a certain number of days, God reviewed the work of Creation and said, "It was good." On how many days did God say this?
3. On one day, God said something different. Which day was that and what did God say and why?
4. What was God's first commandment to the fish, creeping creatures, and fowl created?
5. What was God's first commandment to humans?
6. God said that humans could eat from every tree in the garden, except for one. Which one and why?
7. A river flowed out of Eden and then parted and became four rivers. Name three of the rivers.
8. What did God tell Adam and Eve their punishment would be if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge? What did Eve tell the serpent God had said?
9. After eating of the fruit what was the serpent's punishment? What was Eve's? What was Adam's?
10. Having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, what did God fear humans would do next?
11. What did Cain and Abel do for a living?
12. Who were Noah's three sons?