

The Nature of Shemini Atzeret

By Rav Amnon Bazak

I. Introduction

Among the most fascinating phenomena in our oral tradition is the evolution of the various festivals over the generations. In previous articles, we analyzed the character of Rosh Ha-shana as presented in Tanakh and as understood by Chazal, and we noted how Sukkot underwent a similar process of development as Rosh Ha-shana. (These articles can be found on the VBM holiday webpages.) Here, we will examine the nature of Shemini Atzeret, the significance of Simchat Torah, and the conceptual link between them. (Recall that in Israel, Simchat Torah is celebrated on Shemini Atzeret, while in the rest of the world Simchat Torah is celebrated the next day, i.e. on Yom Tov Sheni shel Galuyot of Shemini Atzeret.)

II. "One Bull"

In order to identify the Biblical significance of Shemini Atzeret, we must carefully examine all references to this festival in the Torah. The Torah refers to it first in [Vayikra 23](#): "On the eighth day shall be a holy gathering to you... and you shall do no servile work" (verse 36); "On the first day [of Sukkot] should be a sabbath and on the eighth day should be a sabbath" (verse 39). These descriptions of Shemini Atzeret offer no information whatsoever regarding the unique quality of this holiday. All we are told is its status as a "mikra kodesh" (holy gathering), like the other festivals, and its title of "atzeret," which it shares with the seventh day of Pesach ([Devarim 16:8](#)).

An allusion to the character of the day may emerge, however, from the section of the Torah dealing with the mussaf sacrifice ([Bemidbar 29](#)). The mussaf sacrifice offered on Shemini Atzeret, we are told, consists of just one bull (verse 36), as does the mussaf sacrifice on Rosh Ha-shana (verse 2) and on Yom Kippur (verse 8). The mussaf on all other festivals features more than one bull. (Rosh Chodesh, Shavuot, and Pesach require two, and on Sukkot the number of bulls changes each day in descending order, from thirteen to seven.)

Apparently, there exists a fundamental connection between Shemini Atzeret, Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. It would seem that this relationship involves the significance of these festivals

as the culmination of one agricultural year and the beginning of another. In the aforementioned articles, we established that the Torah employs two simultaneous systems of counting years. The first "year," which applies only to Benei Yisrael, begins in Nissan - "This month [Nissan] shall be for you the first of the months, it is the first for you for all months of the year" ([Shemot 12:2](#)). But the Torah recognizes a second method of counting years, namely, the natural, agricultural year, which begins in the autumn (Tishrei) and comes to a close the following year.

According to this system, Sukkot is referred to as "the period of the year" ([Shemot 34:22](#)) and "the close of the year" ([Shemot 23:16](#)). Similarly, the Torah writes about the mitzva of hak'hel, which occurs during Sukkot after the Sabbatical year, "At the end of the seventh year... on the festival of Sukkot" ([Devarim 31:10](#)). The first of the month, Rosh Ha-shana, celebrates the beginning of this special month. Yom Kippur, too, constitutes the beginning of the year, as we see from the fact that the shofar-blowing on Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year signifies the beginning of the jubilee year.

It would seem, then, that Shemini Atzeret marks the end of the year. After the seven days of Sukkot, the festival of the harvest ([Shemot 23:16](#)), which, as we have seen, occurs "at the close of the year," we observe one day on which the agricultural year formally comes to a close. Therefore, although Shemini Atzeret is linked to Sukkot in one sense - "On the first day should be a sabbath and on the eighth day should be a sabbath" - it nevertheless retains its independent identity, as reflected in the fact that the mitzvot of lulav and sukka no longer apply. In this manner, Shemini Atzeret differs drastically from the seventh day of Pesach, on which the mitzvot of Pesach still apply ("You shall eat matza for seven days" - [Vayikra 23:6](#)), and whose mussaf sacrifice (two bulls, one ram, and seven sheep) is the same as the preceding days: "Like these you shall do for seven days" ([Bemidbar 28:24](#)).

Chazal ([Sukka 48a](#) and elsewhere) have already noted Shemini Atzeret's independence from Sukkot, and listed six halakhot regarding which this holiday stands separate from Sukkot.

1) "Payis:" A separate lottery was conducted on Shemini Atzeret to determine which Kohanim would offer the bulls of the mussaf sacrifice ([Sukka 55b](#)). The lottery conducted on Sukkot did not relate to the allocation of duties for Shemini Atzeret.

2) "Zeman:" The occasion of Shemini Atzeret requires the recitation of the berakha of "She-hechyanu," as opposed to the

seventh day of Pesach, which exists only as the last day of Pesach with no independent identity, and therefore warrants no new berakha.

3) "Regel:" Various interpretations have been suggested for this ambiguous expression. They include:

- a. there is no requirement to eat in the Sukka (Rashi, Sukka 58a);
- b. Shemini Atzeret does not receive the title "Chag Ha-sukkot" in our prayers (Rashi, Rosh Ha-shana 4b as explained by Meiri);
- c. it cancels a period of mourning (Rabbenu Chananel, Rif);
- d. one is required to stay overnight in Jerusalem following Shemini Atzeret (Tosafot); and
- e. it counts as an independent holiday for the three-festival time limit for an individual who vowed to bring a sacrifice to the Beit Ha-mikdash (Ramban).

4) "Korban:" As mentioned, the mussaf sacrifice of Shemini Atzeret stands separate from that of the rest of Sukkot, as only one bull is offered. (According to the descending progression of bulls for the sacrifice, six bulls should have been required on Shemini Atzeret.)

5) "Shir:" The Levites sang a special Psalm on Shemini Atzeret ([Tehillim 12](#)), rather than following the song pattern of the rest of Sukkot (see [Sukka 55a](#)).

6) "Berakha:" Rashi understands this as a reference to the blessing recited by the king on the festivals; Tosafot point to the requirement to mention the festival in Birkat Ha-mazon (by adding "Ya'aleh Ve-yavo").

Clearly, Chazal recognized the independent quality of Shemini Atzeret and traced this uniqueness throughout the halakhot of this festival.

III. The Significance of Shemini Atzeret in the Diaspora

After the destruction of the Beit Ha-mikdash and Benei Yisrael's dispersion throughout the world, our connection to agriculture was lost; as a result, many mitzvot lost their essential qualities, to one degree or another. The mitzva of Shemitta, the sabbatical year, serves as a classic example. When this mitzva applied in all its glory, it reflected the religious virtue of "the land should observe a 'Shabbat' to God," as well as the social ideal of "the poor will eat [of the produce during the sabbatical year]." However, with the advent of the Jewish people's exile, this mitzva has lost much of its significance, and, to this very day, these ideals are not manifest to anyone but the farmer.

The Jewish festivals faced the same danger of losing their meaning with the loss of the Beit Ha-mikdash. However, both the Torah itself as well as the Oral Tradition provided an additional component to the nature of the holidays. Two of the festivals received this additional element explicitly in the Torah. Pesach marks not only the festival of the spring, but commemorates, first and foremost, the Exodus from Egypt. Similarly, the significance of Sukkot involves not only the agricultural element but also, "In order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land Egypt" ([Vayikra 23:43](#)). (For a more elaborate analysis of the relationship between these two facets of the holidays, see Rav Mordechai Breuer's chapter in his book, *Pirkei Moadot*.)

No such historical reference appears in the Torah regarding Shavuot or Shemini Atzeret. As a result, these holidays ran the risk of having their unique qualities lost throughout the years of national homelessness. The Oral Law, however, proceeded to elucidate an additional aspect latent in these festivals. As opposed to the "Biblical Jew," for whom agriculture stood at the center of existence, the "post-Temple Jew" concentrates his religious life in the proverbial "four cubits of Halakha." Therefore, the agricultural calendar was replaced by the "Torah calendar." In this system, the festival of the first harvest (Shavuot), which commemorated the first opportunity to benefit from one's produce, was transformed into the holiday of Matan Torah, the first step in the nation's acceptance of the Torah. Shemini Atzeret, which, for the agrarian society, was celebrated as the end of the year, evolved into the celebration of the completion of the Torah reading, Simchat Torah.

IV. Celebrating the Completion of the Torah

This dimension of Shemini Atzeret as the celebration of the Torah was not fully accepted so quickly. It finds its source in *Kohelet Rabba* (chapter 1), in the context of the dedication ceremony of the Beit Ha-mikdash during the time of King Solomon:

"The people of Jerusalem came to stand before God, and [the king] offered burnt and peace offerings and made a feast for all his servants' - Rabbi Yitzchak said: This shows that one makes a feast when completing the Torah."

However, we know that two different traditions existed with regard to the Torah-reading cycle. The communities of Babylonia completed the reading annually, as we do today. The communities in Israel, by contrast, finished the cycle every three years (*Megilla 29b*). We would expect, then, that the celebration of Simchat Torah would be observed differently in the different locations, as not all communities completed the Torah at the same time.

Indeed, we find such a discrepancy in tradition in the work, "Chiluf Minhagim Bein Benei Eretz Yisrael U-vein Benei Bavel":

The communities of Babylonia observe Simchat Torah each year on Sukkot, and ... the communities of Israel celebrate Simchat Torah only once every three-and-a-half years.

A particularly interesting account appears in the writings of the famous traveler, Binyamin of Tudela (thirteenth century):

There [in Cairo] were two synagogues, one for those from Israel and one for those from Babylonia... They observed different customs with regard to the reading of the portions in the Torah. The communities from Babylonia read a portion each week, as they do in Spain, thus completing the Torah each year. But the communities of Israel do not follow this practice. Rather, they divide each portion into three sections and finish the Torah every three years. There is among them a custom to join all together and pray on the day of Simchat Torah and on the day of Matan Torah.

The Rambam (Hilkhot Tefilla 13:1) records the prevalent practice of completing the reading each year and adds, "There are those who complete the Torah every three years, but this is not the widespread practice."

5. The Torah Reading and the Haftara

The changes which have overcome this holiday express themselves also in the Torah reading for Shemini Atzeret, as well as its haftara. The mishna (*Megilla 30b*) mentions no special reading for Simchat Torah, but rather states generically, "On the rest of the days of Sukkot, the reading is from the portions dealing with the sacrifices of Sukkot." The Gemara (31a) adds:

On the last day [of Sukkot], we read "Kol ha-bekhor..." [the section dealing with the festivals and its surrounding portions in Devarim 14-5], and for the haftara we read, "Vayehi ke-khalot Shelomo" [the account of the dedication of the Beit Ha-mikdash]. On the following day, we read "Ve-zot Ha-berakha"

[the final portion of the Torah] and for the haftara we read, "Va-ya'amod Shelomo" [also related to the dedication of the Mikdash].

The Torah reading of the eighth day, and both haftarot, relate to Shemini Atzeret as one of the three regalim and as the day on which the Beit Ha-mikdash was dedicated. The Torah reading of the next day, however, seems to be contingent upon the individual customs of Simchat Torah. It is understandable why the Babylonian communities would read the final portion of the Torah on Simchat Torah, since Simchat Torah marks the completion of the Torah-reading cycle. But in the writings of the Geonim we find an additional reason for this reading, one which is relevant even according to the custom of the communities of Israel: "In order to juxtapose the blessing of the king [Shelomo] to the blessing of Moshe" (Machzor Vitri).

Our custom, of reading the opening chapter of Yehoshua as the haftara on Simchat Torah, appears for the first time in the writings of Ritz Gi'at (R. Yitzchak ibn Gi'at). The reason is well understood, as this chapter immediately follows the end of the Torah, which is read on this day. Once the Babylonian custom of completing the cycle each year was accepted by communities throughout the world, and, consequently, "Ve-zot Ha-berakha" is read on Simchat Torah even in Israel, the opening chapter of Yehoshua has evolved as the standard haftara for Simchat Torah. This phenomenon reflects in strictly halakhic terms this conceptual transition of the day, from Shemini Atzeret to Simchat Torah.

We conclude with a citation from Ritz Gi'at:

It is customary on this day, the day on which we complete the reading of the Torah ... to sing all types of praises of the Torah and to rejoice in all types of celebration, and this day was called, "The Day of Simchat Torah."

This is the first source of which we know which refers to the holiday of Shemini Atzeret by the name Simchat Torah.

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