

## D'var Torah – Shemini Atzeres

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One need not be a professional psychologist to recognize that the holiday of Shemini Atzeres exhibits certain signs of an "identity complex". In many ways, Shemini Atzeres appears to be a continuation of the seven days of Sukkos that immediately come before it, and yet, simultaneously, it has several features that clearly distinguish it from its predecessor. In this forum, we hope to explore some of the related sources, and try to determine whether in fact Shemini Atzeres is an independent entity, or, as we often refer to it in casual conversation, simply "The Last Day of Sukkos".

At the outset, we should note that the inquiry into the precise nature of Shemini Atzeres is further complicated by two post-Biblical manifestations. First and foremost, there is the question of Shemini Atzeres as experienced in the Diaspora with the additional consideration of *sefeka de-yoma*. Since we regard each day of a festival as potentially being the previous day (because, at least when the months were determined based on sighting of the new moon and not on a fixed calendar, there was some uncertainty in this regard), what we call "The Eighth Day" - Shemini Atzeres - may really be the Seventh Day of Sukkos. Hence, we have the famous dictate of the Talmud (Sukka 47a), "*meisav yasvinan, berukhei la mevarkhinan*" – on Shemini Atzeres we sit in the sukka but we do not say a blessing. This ruling, in turn, gave rise to a wide range of customs as to the exact parameters of eating in the sukka on Shemini Atzeres, especially in climates where Sukkos is no longer "outdoors weather". Moreover, while Shemini Atzeres may, out of doubt, be treated as a "second day" of the Seventh, it also, according to Nusach Sefard, became somewhat of a "first day" to the Simchas Torah that follows, with observance of Hakafof on the night of Shemini Atzeres. However, even in its original Biblical form - without the influence of *sefek-Shevii* from one side and a preview of Simchas Torah from the other, Shemini Atzeres still displays a duality which is our focus herein.

The Torah, in the two instances where it clearly refers to this festival - Emor and Pinchas - uses not the expected absolute date ("the twenty-second of the Seventh Month"), but rather the relativistic term "Shemini" - "The Eighth" - thereby defining Shemini Atzeres in terms of its antecedent Sukkos. More surprising, however, is the blatant omission of Shemini Atzeres in the Torah's other accounts of the holidays especially in Mishpatim, Ki Sisa, and Re'eh where all three of the *Shalosh Regalim* are included. Ramban already was sensitive to this problem, and wrote in his commentary to Re'eh, "but Shemini Atzeres need not be mentioned because presumably when a person ascends [to Jerusalem and the Beis Hamikdash] for the Festival of Sukkos, [his presence on] the Eighth is already included." As reasonable as is Ramban's suggestion, the irony remains that, as per the Gemara in Megilla (31a), on Shemini Atzeres we still read from Parashas Re'eh, even though it makes no mention whatsoever of Shemini Atzeres, while Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkos are each prominently featured. In sum, the pattern that emerges from the Torah is that Shemini Atzeres is only an appendage to Sukkos, to the point that in some contexts, Shemini Atzeres isn't granted any mention at all. This perspective seems to be echoed by the opening Mishna of Tractate Taanis which sites a dispute as to when we commence mentioning *gevuros geshamim* (saying *mashiv ha-ru'ach u-morid ha-geshem* in the *Amida*), with the latter opinion preferring to identify the date as the "The Last Day of Sukkos" as opposed to the obvious alternative "Shemini Atzeres".

Conversely, the Talmud (Sukka 47b-48a) asserts that Shemini Atzeres is indeed a *regel bifnei atzmo*, an entity differentiated from the adjacent Sukkos holiday, in six respects abbreviated by the mnemonic *PZ"R KS"B*: According to the interpretation of Rashi (see Tosafos and the other commentators for alternative understandings), these distinguishing characteristics are:

- (1) *Payis* - on Shemini Atzeres, the lottery that determined which Kohanim would bring the Musaf sacrifices was re-initialized, after a single integrated system throughout the entire Sukkos.
- (2) *Zeman* - Shemini Atezres - unlike the last days of Pesach - warrants its own *Shehechyanu*, apart from the one already said on the first day.
- (3) *Regel* - on Shemini Atzeres, the observance of the preceding festival - namely, sitting in the sukka - no longer applies.
- (4) *Korban* - on Shemini Atzeres, the Musaf-offering is a single bull, as compared to the previous seven days when there was a decreasing sequence beginning with thirteen bulls on the First Day and culminating with seven on the Seventh Day.
- (5) *Shira* - there was a special "Psalm of the Day" sung by the Levi'im in the Beis Hamikdash on Shemini Atzeres.
- (6) *Berakha* - in the blessings (e.g. prayers, kiddush, etc.) of the day, we refer to the holiday as Shemini Atzeres rather than as Sukkos.

Despite the impressive list of credentials that the Talmud identifies in Shemini Atzeres, upon closer examination, one observes that three of the six items - *payis*, *korban*, and *shira* - apply only in the Beis Hamikdash, and even there, only to a select sub-group of the Kohanim and Levi'im (although we do mirror these items in our liturgy); *regel* is not so much a feature as it is the absence of certain mitzvos that applied during Sukkos; and *zeman* and *berakha* are seemingly only minor variations in *tefilla* compared to what is otherwise said on any Yom Tov. As such, even with these nuances particular to Shemini Atzeres, their impact on the overall experience of Shemini Atzeres as it is known to the majority of Klal Yisrael is relatively minimal.

Paradoxically, perhaps the uniqueness of Shemini Atzeres is precisely its lack of uniqueness. Each of the bona fide *Shalosh Regalim* - the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkos - has its respective observances that contribute substantively to its character. On Pesach, there is the injunction to refrain from all forms of Chametz, and also, according to some authorities, a positive fulfillment achieved by eating matza throughout the duration of the holiday. On Shavuot, there is the obligation to bring the *bikkurim* - the first fruits - a mitzva that applied to the masses involved in agriculture, as well as the later customs of learning Torah throughout the night, eating dairy, and decorating the synagogues with greenery. And, on Sukkos, there is the pair of commandments to dwell in the Sukka and take the Lulav and Esrog. A similar argument can easily be advanced for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Hakippurim. Shemini Atzeres, by contrast, has no distinct mitzva of its own (except perhaps blessing the king, referred to by Rashi as part of *berakha* - but certainly not something we can do today). Shemini Atzeres then is "absolute Yom Tov," defined not in terms of its own individual mitzvos, but rather re-focusing the attention to the concepts that apply to all of the holidays such as "Shabbason" and "Mikra Kodesh," those more directly associated with spirituality and holiness.

It has been said that the Jewish month that follows Tishrei - Marcheshvan - is really named "Cheshvan," but absent any holidays, it became "mar" - bitter. While this explanation is most likely a folk-etymology - and the "mar" is part and parcel of the name and not a qualifying prefix, the fact remains that we quickly go from Elul and Tishrei - the most religiously intensive period of the year - to Marcheshvan, a month with precious little in terms of its own laws and customs. As we put behind us all of the tangible mitzvos that applied at different points throughout this period, Shemini Atzeres provides us the opportunity to harness whatever spiritual advances we have hopefully made and incorporate them into our lifestyles, without the dependency on the concrete media through which they were achieved. May this Shemini Atzeres indeed be an "Atzeres," a time to capture and retain the sanctity of the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos, and carry it forward to Marcheshvan and the rest of the year.