

The Missing Holiday - A Novel Look at Shemini Atzeret

Rabbi Avie Schreiber

I. The Missing Holiday

There seems to be a glaring omission in the שלוש רגלים. Each of the רגלים commemorates a key historical event or time period in the development of Am Yisrael. Pesach commemorates our formation as a nation. Shavuot reminds us of Matan Torah where we were charged with our mission as a nation, and Sukkot teaches us about the intimate relationship we enjoyed with הקב"ה and the protection He lovingly provided for us during the *Midbar* era.

There is one historical event of great significance that is strikingly absent in the cycle of our Chagim - entering the Land of Israel - כניסה לארץ! Why isn't there a Chag to commemorate this ever-so-important moment in our history? Wasn't this moment the culmination and realization of everything that preceded it? Shouldn't it warrant its own Chag?

II. A Novel View of שמיני עצרת

Perhaps, the answer is that indeed, there is such a holiday. Which holiday is it? By considering the meaning and symbolism of Sukkot vis-a- vis שמיני עצרת, we will arrive at the answer.

As we dwell in our Sukkot during the holiday of Sukkot, we remember the experience of the מדבר - the desert. We acknowledge the love, protection, and close relationship provided by הקב"ה during this time. At the close of Sukkot, on שמיני עצרת we leave our Sukkot and enter our homes. Symbolically, we leave the מדבר and enter into where? It is logical that when we leave the Sukkah - the מדבר - we are symbolically re-entering the Land of Israel.

As we leave our ארעי - our temporary residence and enter our קבע - our permanent residence, we are reminded of the transition from *galut*, a temporary national residence, to the Land of Israel, our permanent national residence. The movement from the Sukkah to the home is reminiscent of the move from the desert to ארץ ישראל. And so, שמיני עצרת is the holiday that commemorates the dramatic moment of כניסה לארץ¹. From the perspective of the chronological cycle of the Chagim, this idea flows naturally. On Pesach we became free and we became a nation. Soon after, on Shavuot, we received the Torah. For the next forty years we wandered in the desert protected by the Sukkot. What comes immediately after? Entering the land of Israel. שמיני עצרת, following immediately in the footsteps of Sukkot, caps off our journey that began forty years earlier in the Land of Egypt.

(Subsequent to this article being written, it was pointed out to me² that the א"ר essentially expressed this idea. The א"ר on 'פסוק ד' שיר השירים פסוק ד' referring to the first four Pesukim of the Sefer writes:

וד' פסוקים אלו הם נגד ד' זמנים שהיו לישראל. ראשון נגד יציאת מצרים - שבאותו הלילה שרו שירה כמו שכתוב השיר יהיה לכם כליל התקדש חג. ופסוק ב' נגד מתן תורה כנ"ל. ופסוק ג' הוא נגד בנין המשכן שהקריבו ע' פרים נגד העובדי כוכבים ומזלות כנ"ל. ופסוק ד' הוא נגד ביאת הארץ שאז נשלם הכל. וגם הם נגד ד' רגלים. הא' נגד פסח שאמרו שירה. והב' נגד שבעות שהוא מתן נורה. והג' הוא נגד סוכות שהוא זכר להיקף ענני כבוד שהיה תלוי בבנין משכן כדוע... והד' משכני אחר כך הוא נגד שמיני עצרת שהוא לישראל לבדו.)

1. After developing this idea, I heard Rav Yaakov Meidan of Yeshivat Har Etzion express a very similar view.
2. Thank you to Rafi Abraham for pointing this out to me.

But this idea goes further. What is the message of שמיני עצרת as the Chag is typically understood? One message is that as we enter our homes after living in the Sukkot for seven days, we learn an important lesson. Just as eating, drinking, and sleeping are acts of mitzvot and holiness in the Sukkah, in our homes as well, we can transform these seemingly mundane necessities into mitzvot. By harnessing them for עבודת ה', we infuse them with significance and meaning. This message precisely captures the unique quality of the Land of Israel. Daily routines, activities, and actions take on heightened significance in ארץ ישראל. When we left the מדבר and entered Israel, we learned that planting, harvesting, and building are not excluded from the domain of mitzvah and holiness. Mitzvot surround and suffuse these activities with meaning. שמיני עצרת and ארץ ישראל share a common quality and therefore it follows that the former is a celebration of the latter.

III. תפלת גשם and שמיני עצרת

We can now understand the nature of the ambivalent connection between Chag HaSukkot and water. The Mishna in Masechet Taanit presents an argument between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer regarding the appropriate time to begin adding הגשם ומוריד הרוח.

מאימתי מזכירין גבורות גשמים?
רבי אליעזר אומר: מיום טוב הראשון של חג.
רבי יהושע אומר: מיום טוב האחרון של חג.

From when do we begin to mention the "might of the rain?"

Rabbi Eliezer says: From the first day of Sukkot.

Rabbi Yehoshua says: From the last day of Sukkot (שמיני עצרת).

Rabbi Eliezer believes that on the first day of Sukkot we should begin saying הגשם ומוריד הרוח, but Rabbi Yehoshua feels that we should wait to say it until the "last Yom Tov" of the holiday, i.e. שמיני עצרת. Rabbi Eliezer's view is based on the fact that Sukkot is a holiday that is thematically linked to water³. This link between Sukkot and water is expressed in many different ways. Firstly, the Mishna in Rosh HaShanna states that during the Holiday of Sukkot, הקב"ה judges the world regarding water. Will water be plentiful, scarce, or destructive? Also, every day during the holiday of Sukkot the Kohanim performed the Mitzvah of נסוך המים - the water libation - which led to the exuberant celebration of the שמחת בית השואבה. It follows logically that at the beginning of Sukkot, we should praise Hashem for providing us with water through the medium of rain. But Rabbi Yehoshua responds -

אמר לו רבי יהושע: הואיל ואין הגשמים אלא סימן קללה בחג, למה הוא מזכיר?

Rabbi Yehoshua believes that it is inappropriate to mention rain during Sukkot proper because rainfall during Sukkot is a bad omen as it prevents us from fulfilling the Mitzvah of ישיבה בסוכה. He therefore states that we should wait until the very end of Sukkot - on שמיני עצרת - to begin saying הגשם ומוריד הרוח. Practically speaking, we follow the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua and begin saying הגשם ומוריד הרוח on שמיני עצרת. As a result, we say Tefilat Geshem on this day as well.

There is an irony that results from our practice. Sukkot, a holiday with a central theme of water, is inherently "anti-rain!" We depend on a lack of rain in order to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot properly.

In light of the suggested link between שמיני עצרת and ארץ ישראל, we can resolve this apparent

3. בית הבחירה למאירי מסכת תענית דף ב עמוד א.

"... שר' אליעזר סובר מאחר שנסוך המים בחג ונטילת לולב לרצות על המים שאנו נדונים בה בחג הם באים ... ראוי לנו לשבח באותו דבר שאנו עתידים לשאול ולהזכיר אותו בתפלת החג אע"פ שאין אנו שואלים בחג."

inconsistency. While Sukkot is closely connected to water, it does not directly relate to any specific “delivery method” of the water. We petition Hashem to supply us with water, but we do not address the issue of rain. On שמיני עצרת, however, rain moves to center stage. Why? Sukkot commemorates the desert experience. In the desert, one of the chief concerns of *klal yisrael* was water. They did not ask for, expect, or receive rain, but they wanted water in any form possible. Once *klal yisrael* entered the Land of Israel, where the main source of water is rain, rain now becomes a primary need. The prayer for rain, *Tefilat Geshem*, is indeed, perfectly placed in the liturgy of שמיני עצרת. On this holiday, which commemorates כניסה לארץ, we pray for הקב"ה to bless His land with abundant rainfall.

IV. שמיני עצרת and Simchat Torah

With this idea we can explain a well known question raised regarding the relationship between Simchat Torah and שמיני עצרת. Why is שמיני עצרת the most apropos time to celebrate Simchat Torah? How does the theme of Talmud Torah pertain to שמיני עצרת more than to any other holiday? In fact, it would seem eminently more fitting to celebrate Simchat Torah on Shavuot which clearly celebrates Talmud Torah?

We can suggest that while Shavuot celebrates the Torah in its potential form, שמיני עצרת (and therefore Simchat Torah) we celebrate the Torah in its actualized form. On Shavuot we celebrate the gift of the Torah, though the content of the Torah was not yet fully known by *klal yisrael*. The power inherent in the Torah excited, elevated, and sanctified the Jewish people on the holiday of Shavuot - but its potential was not yet realized. In fact, in the *midbar*, removed from civilization, the Torah cannot be completely fulfilled. In addition to the inability to perform the mitzvot contingent on the land, the ideal and grand vision of the Torah is muted as well. Only in the Land of Israel can we achieve the goal of the Torah in all of its nuances and grandeur.⁴

Since on שמיני עצרת we reconnect to ארץ ישראל and to our national encounter with it, we can celebrate the Torah in its fullest form. Upon entering Israel, aspects of the Torah that had lain dormant while the Jewish people were in the desert, took root and flourished. The joy erupts and overflows from within us as the Torah unites with its land, finally achieving its full potential. With this in mind, an enigmatic statement in the gemara is demystified: "גדול יום הגשמים יותר מיום שניתנה בו תורה"⁵ - The day of the rain (שמיני עצרת) is greater than the day the Torah was given (Shavuot)!

May we be זוכה to heed the message of שמיני עצרת and celebrate the חג, together with all of *klal yisrael*, in ארץ ישראל.

4. It is interesting to note, that when comparing how we celebrate the holidays in *chutz l'aretz* to how we celebrate them in Israel, the one holiday with the greatest difference is שמיני עצרת. This is in two respects. 1) On the first day of שמיני עצרת we eat in the Sukkah (without a bracha) whereas in Israel we do not. 2) We do not celebrate Simchat Torah on the Biblical day of שמיני עצרת, whereas in Israel we do. Both of these practices in *chutz l'aretz* can be viewed as diminishing the full impact of the day. Eating in the Sukkah is a declaration that שמיני עצרת shares the attention with Sukkot. Also, by not celebrating Simchat Torah we are forced to withhold a full and energetic expression of *simcha*. Perhaps the idea is that on a day which marks and celebrates our entrance into the Land of Israel, we cannot possibly fully experience the meaning of the day **outside** of Israel. We continue to eat in the sukkah - in the desert - even on שמיני עצרת as a reminder that we are still in *chutz l'aretz* and we have not yet achieved the goal that שמיני עצרת envisions for us. Simchat Torah is likewise not celebrated because we cannot live a Torah life to its fullest while we remain distant from the Land of Israel.

5. תענית ז' עמוד א'.