

Shmini Atzeret: Themes & Connection to Sukkot

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Regel Bifnei Atzmo (a festival unto itself)

The Gemara (Rosh HaShanah 4b) tells us that the nature of Shmini Atzeres is that it is in certain respects a continuation of Sukkot¹ but in other respects² it is its own holiday. When one looks carefully at the different ways in which Shmini Atzeres stands apart, a theme seems to emerge. Much of the difference is in the specific sacrifices and accompanying songs in the temple. For example, we find that the total of 70 bulls sacrificed on Sukkot are supposed to parallel the 70 nations, while the one bull sacrificed on Shmini Atzeret parallels the Jewish people (Gemara Sukka 55b).

This seems to echo a larger theme that there is a generic and worldly quality about Sukkot which seems to change when we get to Shmini Atzeret. When the Mishna and Gemara uses the generic term of “*chag*” without specifying which holiday, we are told that it is always a reference to Sukkot. Sukkot also has the comparatively generic title of ‘*zman simchatenu*’, time of our joy, as opposed to the more specific titles of the other holidays. Shmini Atzeret turns towards a more insular and unparalleled relationship which the Jewish people have with Hashem. The Gemara (Sukka 55b) gives an oft quoted parable to demonstrate this transition. The parable is of a king who after having a large feast with all his employees, asks one friend to remain and have a smaller more intimate feast with him. This is the transition from the days of Sukkot, which relate to the entire world, to Shmini Atzeret, which focuses specifically on the Jewish people.

Matnos Aniim (gifts for the poor)

One of the highlighted differences which is listed in the Gemara is that of שיר (song). This is agreed to be a reference to the songs which were sung in connection with the sacrifices which were brought. Rashi (Yoma 3a) explains further that the difference between Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret in terms of these songs was a thematic difference. The focus of the songs which

¹ This seems to be the reading of the majority of Rishonim. The Ramban (Sukka 48a), however, suggests a different reading of the Gemara. He wishes to read the Gemara that Shmini Atzeret is in fact its own holiday completely and this can be seen in the 5 ways mentioned by the acronym. He admits that the fact that regel (holiday) is mentioned in the acronym is problematic according to this reading.

² These aspects are related with the acronym פז"ר קש"ב which stands for a) lottery b) zman (i.e. the bracha of shehechianu) c) Regel d) Korban (the nature of the sacrifice in the Beit HaMikdash) e) Shir (a reference to the song sung in the Beit HaMikdash when the sacrifices were brought) f) Bracha. There is debate as to exactly what is referred to by some of these terms.

were sung during Sukkot was the gifts which were to be given to the poor from the harvest³. This concept is taken up by the Rambam (Hil. Yom Tov 6:18) in a broader sense with his comment that the joy we are to have on festivals in general is that of sharing our bounty with others. If we simply enjoy the food ourselves on our holidays then it is only the a selfish “joy of our stomach.” The idea of helping our fellow is a theme of Sukkot and encapsulated in the accompanying songs of the festival.

Shmini Atzeret switches from this theme and focus, but I submit that it builds upon the theme rather than negating it. Shmini Atzeret is focused less on how we relate to our fellow and more on our relationship with Hashem. However, the placement of such a day only after the seven days of Sukkot is very much by design.

The idea of a special relationship with Hashem seems to come only after we build up the theme of treating our fellows in the correct way. We can't have a relationship with Hashem until we have worked on our relationship with our fellow man. This is a concept we see in many areas including the fact that the Ariz"l would encourage people to focus on the concept of loving your fellow as yourself before they would engage in Tefilla . The way to strengthen our relationship with Hashem is to have a solid foundation in *bein Adam l'Chaveiro*.

One Rosh Yeshiva aptly explained that trying to connect to Hashem without paying proper attention to our fellow Jew is very much like the person who is so deeply engrossed in putting on his Tallit properly with the right movements and kavanah that he whips his neighbor in the face with the tzitzit strings. Most men who are in shul early enough have had this experience more than once! It is not possible to cement a strong relationship to Hashem if our sensitivity to our fellow is not first honed.

Tefilla & Kriah

The paradigm of the relationship with our fellow serving as the foundation for a relationship with Hashem is reflected in the kriah of Shmini Atzeret as well. On Shmini Atzeret we read *Aser Ta'Aser*⁴, which speaks about the tithes which must be given to the poor. Although Sukkot has passed we still find that we have not forgotten the theme of sensitivity to the less fortunate. Although the focus has shifted to *bein Adam l'Makom* (our relationship with Hashem), we are being reminded not to forget the foundation it is built on.

We also find a reminder of this idea in the very name of the chag. The title we use to describe this holiday reminds us of the fact that it is built upon Sukkot but that it extends beyond

³ Sukkot as the festival at the time of the harvest being a very appropriate time to stress these halachot

⁴ Although the same kriah is also for the eighth day of Pesach and the second day of Shavout, they usually begin with the later portion of *Kol HaBechor*. They only begin with *Aser T'Aser* when these days fall on Shabbat and more aliyot are needed. When it comes to Shmini Atzeret the kriah always begins with the earlier section demonstrating the focus of the gifts to the poor which is particular to Shmini Atzeret.

Sukkot. It is on one hand “*Shemini*” – the eighth day which builds upon the seven which precede it. On the other hand it is “*Atzeret*” a day where we hold back and achieve an intimate relationship with Hashem. This too is brought home every time we bench or say Shmoneh Esreh over Shmini Atzeret and mention the name of the chag in *ya’aleh v’yavo*⁵.

Conclusion

It is clear that Shmini Atzeret is a shift in focus from Sukkot. We shift from an external focus to an internal intimate focus; from *bein Adam l’chaveiro* which is directed outward to *bein Adam l’Makom* which is far more personal. However, as noted, Shmini Atzeret can only come after Sukkot. We can only truly create a relationship with Hashem when we build upon a strong foundation of proper relationships with others.

⁵ The Rishonim debate if this is referenced by the word ‘*bracha*’ or the word ‘*regel*’ in the Gemara’s acronym