

The History of Shmini Atzeret

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The festival of Sukkot isn't anchored to a particular historical period, or geographical location. It doesn't commemorate a particular event which occurred on a specific day in history. Sitting under the sky in sheltered huts symbolizes G-d's compassion and care for his creation in general, and for Man in particular. He safeguards us even in dangerous or hazardous conditions- such as the Jewish journey through the desert. Exiting our homes and sitting under makeshift and "improvised" huts, highlights our reliance upon Divine care rather than upon human structures.

As this holiday isn't tethered to a particular historical event, its range extends beyond that of other Jewish holidays. Sukkot celebrates G-d's care for all humanity – Jew and non-Jew alike. Highlighting this international scope of Sukkot, the Temple ceremonies of this holiday were calibrated to address an international audience. Over the course of the seven-day celebration of "Divine Providence", seventy sacrifices were tendered - correlating to the seventy nations of classic antiquity.

Sukkot reminds a Jew of a universalist mission: to represent G-d and true monotheism in this world while challenging humanity to higher standards of morality. The holiday is pivoted upon the Temple, drawing foreign monarchs and dignitaries from across the globe. Though legal entry into the Temple was barred to non-Jews, all visitors would still direct their tributes and devotions to this international house of prayer.

Toward the conclusion of this holiday the international celebration transitioned into a one-day private rendezvous between G-d and his chosen nation- Shmini Atzeret (Eighth day of repose). The nation G-d

selected to represent Him was personally beckoned to sojourn an extra day “alone” in His house. After the fanfare has subsided, and before we embarked home from Jerusalem, our stay was extended for an additional day of quiet seclusion with G-d in our Temple. This two-part holiday of Sukkot- including the one-day extension distills our distinctive historical mission as well as G-d’s unique affection for His people.

This grand Jewish mission be put to the test. For two thousand years, Jews would wander this planet bereft of common culture, deprived of national homeland, all the while longing for their extinct Temple – the icon of this international mission. During this period, part of our historical handicap was the absence of a judiciary body or Sanhedrin to properly and accurately adjust the calendar. Absent of this ability, Jews observed two days of Shmini Atzeret, hoping one day to return to land and Temple, reestablish autonomy, and restore authority of calendar regulation. Two days of Shmini Atzeret (and for that matter every other holiday) became a conspicuous symbol of life in Exile.

About a thousand years ago, the second day of Shmini Atzeret accrued new meaning and morphed into Simchat Torah. Given the fact that the yearly Torah reading cycle concludes on the second day of Shmini Atzeret, Jews began initiating festivities and celebration rituals surrounding the Torah on this second day of Shmini Atzeret. Ultimately, these customs became enshrined as Jewish law and the day transformed into an autonomous day of Simchat Torah.

This process of transforming the second day of Shmini Atzeret into Simchat Torah is a direct outcome of Exile. The existence of an extra day of Shmini Atzeret, and the termination of the Torah reading cycle,

invited a separate holiday. The extra day of Shmini Atzeret in Exile was critical to the emergence of Simchat Torah.

While the holiday evolved under conditions of Exile, it also frames the Jewish response to the enormous challenges of exile. How did the Jews survive against such unspeakable odds? How did a nation, scattered across the globe, stripped of common national identity, despised and persecuted not just survive, but thrive, and not just thrive but constantly advance civilization and reshape the human imagination? Though we lacked a Temple we always possessed, a different pivot of national identity and a different rallying point to encounter G-d. The directly revealed word of G-d, his Torah, served as a geographically independent reinforcement of Jewish identity and, of course, a conduit for religious encounter. Our steadfast commitment to studying and applying His word has been, and will always be, the secret of Jewish survival. Transforming the second day of Shmini Atzeret into a Torah celebration signifies the triumph of the Jewish spirit throughout this long journey of exile. Without Torah, we would have barely survived, and the 'spare' day of Shmini Atzeret was designated to mark this monumental achievement.

If the first day of Shmini Atzeret comprised G-d's special invitation to his people, the "transformed" second day of Simchat Torah represented our gift to Him, and the testament of our faith. During the Temple era, on Shmini Atzeret, G-d invited us 'back' because our hurried departure would be too difficult to bear; on the day of Simchat Torah, as we clutch Torah scrolls, we respond to G-d "indeed it has been difficult but we aren't going anywhere". You delivered Your word to us and for over two millennia it has protected our faith and preserved our relationship, even without our private rendezvous in the Temple. Ultimately, the two components of Shmini Atzeret complement each other- the first day represents our selection and our mission while

the second day signifies the manner in which this mission triumphed against all odds.