



## Shmini Atzeret – Simchat Torah 5782

### A Duet between Hashem and Man

The chag of Sukkot isn't anchored to a particular historical period, or geographical location. It doesn't commemorate a miraculous event which occurred on a specific day in history. Sheltered huts positioned under the open sky, symbolize Hashem's compassion for creation, His care for humanity and His love of the Jewish people. Exiting our homes and sitting under makeshift and "improvised" huts, highlights our reliance upon Divine hashgacha rather than upon human structures or conventions.

#### A Private Invitation

As this chag isn't tethered to a particular historical event, its scope extends beyond that of other Jewish holidays. Sukkot celebrates Hashem's care for all humanity – Jew and non-Jew alike. Highlighting this international scope, the Mikdash ceremonies of Sukkot were synchronized to an international audience. During this seven-day celebration of "Divine providence," seventy sacrifices or korbanot were proffered – correlating to the seventy nations of classic antiquity.

Sukkot reminds a Jew of his universalist mission: to represent Hashem and true monotheism in this world while challenging humanity to higher standards of morality. The holiday of Sukkot is pivoted upon the Mikdash as an international destination, and during this week, Yerushalayim hosted foreign dignitaries from across the globe.

Toward the conclusion of this holiday, the international celebration transitioned into a one-day private rendezvous between Hashem and his chosen nation – Shmini Atzeret or the eighth day of repose. As the festival ebbed to a close, we were beckoned to layover an extra day, "alone" in His house. After the eight-day fanfare subsided, we enjoyed a quiet day of peaceful seclusion with Hashem. Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret comprise a multi-layered chag, distilling both our grand historical mission as well as our intimate relationship with Hashem.

#### Extending the "Extension"

Our historical Jewish mission would 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 Mikdash – the icon of our ageless mission. During this dark period of exile, our national experience was severely handicapped. We lacked a homeland, a government, a Mikdash and a judiciary body or Sanhedrin capable of properly and accurately adjusting our lunar calendar. Lacking "calendric precision" and living in foreign lands, Jews observed two days of Shmini Atzeret. Severed from Israel, Shmini Atzeret became doubled. Two days of Shmini Atzeret (and for that matter every other holiday) became a conspicuous symbol of life in gallut.

#### The Shift

About a thousand years ago, a shift occurred, as the second day of Shmini Atzeret morphed into Simchat Torah. Since the yearly Torah reading cycle concludes on the second day of Shmini Atzeret, Jewish communities initiated various festivities and rituals to celebrate Torah. Ultimately, these customs became enshrined as Jewish law, and the second day of Shmini Atzeret transformed into an autonomous day of Simchat Torah. Over time, the second day of Shmini Atzeret, which had always been a "tacked-on" day, transformed into a stand-alone celebration of Torah.

This transformation of the second day of Shmini Atzeret into Simchat Torah is a direct outcome of exile. The conclusion of the Torah reading coinciding with an "extra day" of Shmini Atzeret, invited a separately-themed holiday. The two-day expanded Shmini Atzeret of exile was critical to the emergence of Simchat Torah. It is fair to wonder if Simchat Torah would have evolved

without the extra “available” day of Shmini Atzeret.

Simchat Torah doesn't only emerge within gallut and because of a two-day Shmini Atzeret. Simchat Torah epitomizes the Jewish victory over 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 Mikdash we always possessed a different pivot of national identity and a different rallying point to encounter our Hashem. Torah, the directly revealed word of Hashem, provided a geographically-independent anchor of Jewish identity and, of course, a conduit for religious encounter. Our steadfast commitment to studying and applying Torah has been, and will always be, a 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 the revealed will of Hashem, we would have barely survived the harsh challenges of exile. The ‘spare’ day of Shmini Atzeret – now designated as Simchat Torah- marks our monumental historical achievement.

#### A Duet of Hashem and Man

This “couplet” of two days – Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah- embodies the mutual nature of our historical Covenant or brit with Hashem. Shmini Atzeret comprises Hashem's gift to the Jews- a special invitation for a private stay in the House of Hashem. Annually, we were summoned by Hashem ‘back’ to His house, because our hurried departure would be too difficult to bear. Signaling His great love for us, Hashem granted a cozy and intimate get-together. A Covenant, though is always bilateral. The “transformed” second day of Simchat Torah, became our gift to Hashem- a testament of our faith and commitment during the dark periods of Jewish history. Hoisting a sefer Torah to Heaven became a declaration to Heaven– we survived and the Torah You delivered to us, preserved us. As we clutch Torah scrolls, we proclaim to Hashem “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 Mikdash. A chag, originally mandated in Heaven became amplified on Earth. Divine gesture transformed into a human anthem of Jewish courage.

#### Two Have Become One

After a long walk home, we have now returned to our land and to our past prestige. Jews in Israel are privileged to once again celebrate one day of Shmini Atzeret. This one day now incorporates the two complementary gifts of our Covenant. We have, once again, been invited to Jerusalem. A Divine invitation has, once again been extended. Once again we feel selected for Divine interest. However, as we arrive home, we look back with pride at our extraordinary historical journey. We outlasted innumerable challenges and defeated history. Torah study is proliferating at a rate unseen in close to 2500 years. Hashem's gift to the Jews and our gift to Him are no longer split into two days. They are one and we are one !

