

# Shmini Azteres: A Nuanced and Contemplative Time<sup>2</sup>

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## Introduction

Shmini Azteres is perhaps the most complex and confusing holiday of the year on the Jewish calendar. What is the nature of the day? Are we supposed to view Shmini Azteres as the last day of Sukkos, or as a separate holiday with its own theme, juxtaposed immediately after another holiday?

Every holiday has a symbol or action associated with it. On Pesach we have the matza, on Shavuos we stay up all night learning Torah and have the custom to eat dairy, on Rosh Hashana we blow the shofar, and of course Sukkos has the sukkah and *arba minim* – but what action or symbol do we associate with Shmini Azteres?

A usual place to investigate the essence of a holiday is to examine the text of the liturgy. However, even Chazal seem to have difficulty defining the day – is it “שמיני חג העצרת”, “שמיני עצרת”, or “שמיני עצרת ההג” – again accenting the confusion over designating the precise theme of the day<sup>3</sup>.

Another good place to begin understanding what a holiday is all about is the Torah reading on that day. However, even this simple exercise is shrouded with uncertainty. When one reads the entire Torah reading<sup>4</sup> backwards and forwards something peculiar appears, or perhaps does not

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the ideas presented hereto should be attributed to *mori verabi* Rabbi Michael Rosensweig Shlita, some of which were presented during the course of his daily shiurim on *Maseches Sukka* in 1997-1998.

<sup>3</sup> For some additional conflicting sources related to Shmini Atzeres, see Talmud *Arachin* (10a) – “שמונת ימי החג” which indicates a continuum of one single yom tov. By contrast, we say *Tefillas Geshem* (the prayer for rain) on Shmini Azteres, which presumably is not a blessing during the days in which we sit in the sukkah. Also, there is a debate between the *Shaarei Teshuva* and the *Chachmas Shlomo* (glosses to Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 668) regarding someone who inserted “חג הסוכות” during Shmone Esrei of Shmini Azteres and whether there is a need to repeat it or not. According to the *Chachmas Shlomo*, there is no need to repeat and he cites the following fascinating proof – “נ”ל כעת ראיה דיצא מן התורה דבפרשת ראה מונה כל הרגלים וזכר חג הסוכות תעשה לך ולמה לא זכר שמיני עשרת – “נ”ל כעת ראיה דיצא מן התורה דבפרשת ראה מונה כל הרגלים וזכר חג הסוכות תעשה לך ולמה לא זכר שמיני עשרת – that the Torah itself seems to incorporate the holiday of Shimini Azteres within Sukkos. See also *Harirei Kedem* (1:169) for an explanation of this debate.

<sup>4</sup> Devarim 14:22 – 16:17.

appear – there is no mention of the holiday of Shmini Azteres! Why didn't Chazal choose the Torah reading from either *Parshas Emor* or *Pinchas* in which the holiday is indeed mentioned? Furthermore, the usual practice on the second day of Yom Tov is to begin the selection in *Parshas Reeh* from “כל הבכור” when the holiday falls out on a weekday, yet we read the portion from עשר תעשר which deals with *tzedakkah* (charity) and canceling loans during the *shmittah* year. What is the connection between this Torah reading and Shmini Azteres?

There is one final question that must be answered. Although the institution of Simchat Torah came thousands of years after the Jews traveled in the desert, it still requires an explanation as to why the Geonim chose to append it to Shmini Azteres. What is the possible connection between these two seemingly distinct holidays and celebrations?

## The Nature of the Day

The Talmud teaches that Shmini Azteres is a separate holiday and we therefore say the bracha of *Shehechyanu*:

*We have learned in a Beraita in support to R. Nachman:  
The eighth day is a holy day by itself, has lots cast for itself,  
the benediction of time for itself, offerings for itself, a  
separate song for itself, and also a blessing for itself.*

**Talmud Bavli Sukka 47b-48a**

תניא כוותיה דרב נחמן: שמיני רגל בפני  
עצמו לענין פז"ר קש"ב: פייס בפני עצמו,  
זמן בפני עצמו, רגל בפני עצמו, קרבן בפני  
עצמו, שירה בפני עצמו, ברכה בפני עצמו  
מסכת סוכה דף מז: - דף מה.

An added complication that we, especially those of us in *galut* face, is that although Shmini Azteres is a separate holiday, it is also still considered somewhat of a *yom tov sheini* (second day observed in the Diaspora) for the last day of Sukkos. This too is quite unusual since the last day of Sukkos is *chol hamoed* and not a typical *yom tov*!! The endless number of customs related to our orientation and use of the *sukkah* on Shmini Azteres also lends to our overall confusion about the holiday. It is also striking that unlike all other holidays, the Rambam does not have a section or chapter dedicated to the laws of Shmini Azteres.<sup>5</sup>

## Comparing to other Holidays

The annual holiday cycle commences with Pesach and ends with Shmini Azteres. We begin, as our nation did, by celebrating our exodus from Egypt on Pesach and our receiving the Torah on Shavuot. This is followed by Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkos and finally Shmini Azteres. When we examine the month of Tishrei we encounter a mixture of emotions and themes.<sup>6</sup> The first half of the month are the *yemei hadin* filled with fear and trepidation. This is in stark contrast to the days of sukkos which the Rambam<sup>7</sup> describes as days filled with *simcha yeseira*, exceptional joy. These holidays represent the extremes in terms of our approach in *avodas Hashem* (service of G-d). We find both expressions in Sefer Tehillim.

<sup>5</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch*, however, does have two *simanim* (*Orach Chaim* 668-9) dedicated to the laws of Shmini Azteres.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller presentation of this idea please see, Rabbi Michoel Rosensweig's shlita article in *Sukkos-To-Go* 5770.

<sup>7</sup> *Hilchos Lulav* 8:12.

Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with quaking.

**Psalms 2:11**

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת ה' בְּיִרְאָה וּגְיִילוֹ בְּרַעְדָּה:  
תהלים ב:יא

Serve the Lord with joy, come before Him with praise

**Psalms 100:2**

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת ה' בְּשִׂמְחָה בָּאוּ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנְנָה:  
תהלים ק:ב

In addition to the feelings that are accompanied with each of these holidays, we have many objects and actions that represent and symbolize the essence of the day. The solemn blowing of the *shofar* instills within us the seriousness of the day of judgment. On Sukkos we encounter the sight of joyfully waving the *arba minim* while chanting the *Hallel* or dancing at a *simchas beis hashoeiva*.

All of this can be contrasted with Shmini Azteres. Shmini Azteres is absent of any *maase mitzvos*, no physical object to attach meaning to, and no apparent salient theme or motif. So what are we celebrating on Shmini Azteres?

Let us return to the first time that the holiday is mentioned in the Torah and attempt to define the word *atzeres*.

[For] a seven day period, you shall bring a fire offering to the Lord. On the eighth day, it shall be a holy occasion for you, and you shall bring a fire offering to the Lord. It is a [day of] detention. You shall not perform any work of labor

**Vayikra 23:36**

שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּקְרְבוּ אֹשֶׁה לַה' בַּיּוֹם  
הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרַב קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם  
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֹשֶׁה לַה' עֲצֵרַת הוּא כָּל  
מְלָאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:  
ויקרא כג:לו

Seven days you shall bring sacrifices before the Lord, the eighth day shall be a holy day for you and you shall bring a sacrifice before the Lord, **a gathering**, all work shall not be performed.

**Onkelos Vayikra 23:36**

שבעא יומין תקרבון קורבנא קדם יי  
ביומא תמינאה מערע קדיש יהי לכון  
ותקרבון קורבנא קדם יי כנישין תהון  
כל עבידת פולחן לא תעבדון:  
אונקלוס ויקרא כג:לו

Some explain *atzeres* to mean a **congregation**

**Ibn Ezra Vayikra 23:36**

עצרת היא י"א שטעמו קהלה.  
אבן עזרא ויקרא כג:לו

Targum Onkelos and the Ibn Ezra define *atzeres* as a day to “gather in”. But what are we gathering in? I would like to offer two approaches.

## Approach #1: Gathering a Unified Nation:

After spending seven days with our *arba minim* and performing the requisite *eged*, or binding of the species together, representative of the different facets of our people,<sup>8</sup> we bind ourselves together as one people with *Hashem*. Unlike the other holidays in which the *kedushat hayom* is focused on 'לה or קודש<sup>9</sup> the pasuk simply says “עצרת תהיה לכם”, it is a day of detention.”<sup>10</sup> As such, the theme of Shmini Azteres is *achdut*, and we therefore gather together an extra day for the simple purpose of spending an additional day together. We can now explain the protracted reading beginning with

<sup>8</sup> Midrash Raba Vayikra 30:12.

<sup>9</sup> Vayikra 23: 5,24,34,39 and Bamidbar 28:16, 26 and 29:1, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Bamidbar 29:35.

“עשר תעשר” even on a weekday, because the focus of these earlier *pesukim* are on the needy and less fortunate and our collective responsibility to care for them as our own:

*And the Levite because he has no portion or inheritance with you and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are in your cities, will come and eat and be satisfied; so that the Lord, your God, will bless you in all the work of your hand that you will do.*

**Devarim 14:29**

וְבָא הַלְוִי כִּי אֵין לוֹ חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה  
עִמָּךְ וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוֹם וְהָאֵלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר  
בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְאָכְלוּ וְשָׂבְעוּ לְמַעַן יְבָרְכֶךָ  
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר  
תַּעֲשֶׂה  
**דברים יד:כט**

This approach also clarifies the absence of *maase mitzvos* on Shmini Azteres. Since the essence of the holiday is to focus on our basic relationships with our fellow Jews and we do not need the excitement and fanfare provided by external objects or ceremonies. Therefore, even though the actual holiday of Shmini Azteres does not appear in this Torah portion, its main theme of unity and oneness are reflected both at the beginning and end. Our true expression of *simcha* is not when we dance with the *lulav* but when we rejoice with the convert, orphan and widow.

*You shall make yourself the Festival of Sukkoth for seven days, when you gather in [the produce] from your threshing floor and your vat. And you shall rejoice in your Festival-you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are within your cities.*

**Devarim 16:13-14**

חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים  
בְּאֶסְפָּךְ מִגֵּרְנֶךָ וּמִקְבֶּךָ: וְשִׂמְחֶתָּ  
בְּחֻגְךָ אִתָּהּ וּבְנֶה וּבְתֶךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ  
וְאִמָּתְךָ וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוֹם  
וְהָאֵלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ<sup>11</sup>:  
**דברים פרק טז פסוק יג- יד**

After a full month of Elul preparing for Rosh Hashana, and after enduring through the days of awe of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and after rejoicing in the mitzvos of sukka and lulav, all of the previous barriers which may have separated us from our fellow Jews have come tumbling down. We have hopefully elevated ourselves spiritually above the mundane matters or pithy arguments. As such, Shmini Azteres is a day to rededicate ourselves to mending our interpersonal relationships with one another and taking a more inclusive approach to our community.

With this backdrop of our unity we can understand why it is precisely now after Sukkos that Hashem requests that we dedicate a holiday for the sole purpose of being secluded alone with Him.

*“I have detained you [to remain] with Me.” This is analogous to a king who invited his sons to feast with him for a certain number of days, and when the time came for them to leave, he said: “My sons! Please, stay with me just one more day, [for] it is difficult for me to*

עצרת הוא - עצרתי אתכם אצלי  
כמלך שזימן את בניו לסעודה  
לכך וכך ימים, כיון שהגיע זמן  
להפטר אמר בני בבקשה מכם,  
עכבו עמי עוד יום אחד, קשה

<sup>11</sup> The *Beis Yisrael* (as cited in *Kuntres Beinyanei ChagHasukkos Vesimchas Torah* p.76) also explains the special reading of the Torah that we have on Simchas Torah and its connection to the theme of unity. One of the *pesukim* that we read is *ישראל עם יחד שבטי ישראל*, and there was a king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together." One can homiletically break up the *passuk* as follows: *יחד שבטי* – refers to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, *עם* – refers to Sukkos, and finally *ישראל* – refers to Shmini Azteres.

part with you!"

**Rashi Vayikra 23:36**

עלי פרידתכם.<sup>12</sup>  
רש"י ויקרא כג:לו

As a nation, we are summoned to “stay another day” in the presence of the *Shechinah*. After completing a more universal approach through our prayers on Rosh Hashana and our many sacrificial offerings on Sukkos, we are now ready to focus on our unique relationship with Hashem. On Shmini Azteres we offer a single *korban*!<sup>13</sup> This again underscores a sense of unity and closeness with Hashem as His nation. This is the “קהלה” of the Ibn Ezra and the “כנישין” of Onkelos. Only after solidifying our relationships with one another does Hashem require us to stay an extra day alone with him.<sup>14</sup>

We can now piece together our understanding of Shmini Azteres to the celebration of Simchas Torah. The Torah is the conduit for our unity. Our feeble conception of Hashem can only be understood through the prism of the Torah.<sup>15</sup> The Zohar teaches us “קוב”ה אורייתא וישראל חד”הוה”, Hashem, His Torah, and the Jewish people are one. Only when we as a nation exemplify *achdus* are we worthy to accept the Torah and have a relationship with Hashem. The *Orach Chaim Hakadosh*<sup>16</sup> views our unity as a prerequisite for our receiving the Torah, as the *passuk* says “ויחן שם ישראל כנגד ההר” and Rashi explains the reason why the Torah describes the Jewish people’s encampment in the singular form is to express that they encamped “כאיש אחד בלב אחד”.

However, it should be noted, that our connection with the Torah is not only communal but also on the individual level as well. All of the vessels fashioned for the Mishkan are listed as being fashioned by individuals except for the Aron which housed the Luchos for which the Torah says<sup>17</sup> “ועשו ארון עצי שיטים” and they make the Aron out of Shitim wood.” The Medrash expounds the following on this change from singular to plural:

Why is it that all by all the other vessels is it written “and you

מפני מה בכל הכלים האלה כתיב

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<sup>12</sup> The *Imrei Emes* is quoted as making the following sharp comment to show the hidden meaning behind this concept of “קשה עלי פרידתכם.” He says that not only is Hashem upset about the fact that it is time for everyone to return home after all of the holidays, so that “*pereida*” means that we are separating ourselves from Him, but also that Hashem is telling us that “it is hard for Me when there is a separation between the Jewish people themselves and that we do not get along with each other.”

<sup>13</sup> Bamidbar 29:36.

<sup>14</sup> But how does spending another day help relieve the feeling of עלי פרידתכם? Perhaps we can picture in our minds a parent sending off a child to study in Israel for a year. Sure, they spent many hours together the week before and hugged at home, but our instincts tell us that before boarding the plane a parent desires one last hug, to “hold them over” until their return. Similarly, Rav Karlenstein (*Kuntres Beinyanei Chag Hasukkos Vesimchas Torah* p.70) notes that since the objective of Shmini Azteres is to internalize all the messages of the holidays from the entire year and “tie them with a *keshet shel kayma*,” that in of itself prepares us for our time away from the direct closeness to the *Shechinah* and *Beit Hamikdash*.

<sup>15</sup> See Ramchal in *Derech Hashem* (4:2). A somewhat similar idea is found in the commentary of the Seforno (Vayikra 23:36) where he defines the cessation of work on Shmini Azteres as a time for “אזהרת עמידה איזה זמן” במקומות הקדש לעבד במקומות ההם את האל יתברך בתורה או בתפילה או בעבודה... שיעצרו במקומות הקדש ותהיה שמחתו שמחה של תורה ומעשים טובים”.

<sup>16</sup> Shemos 19:2.

<sup>17</sup> Shemos 25:10.

make” but by the ark it states “and they make”, Says R. Yehuda son of Shalom, so says G-d, “everyone should participate in the making of the ark in order for all to merit the Torah”

#### Midrash Shemot Rabba 34

ועשית ובארון כתיב ועשו ארון, א"ר יהודה ב"ר שלום א"ל הקב"ה יבאו הכל ויעסקו בארון כדי שיזכו כולם לתורה

שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשה לד

On Simchas Torah we all get a chance to dance with the Torah, we all get an *aliyah*, and we all are able to singularly and collectively express our connection to “ותן חלקינו בתורתך”, our unique portion in the Torah.<sup>1819</sup>

Both Shavuot and Shmini Azteres incorporate the theme of *Kabbalas HaTorah*, albeit, on Shavuot we accepted the Torah under duress and accompanied with thunder and lighting, whereas on Shmini Azteres, at the culmination of the festival punctuated with joy and happiness, we rededicate ourselves to the values of the Torah through *simcha*.

## Approach #2: A Time to Reflect:

Another approach to our “gathering” on Shmini Azteres is found in the writings of Rav S. R. Hirsch.<sup>20</sup>

*“We accordingly think we are not wrong if we take azteres to designate a day which is not fixed to bring new lessons and new truths for us all to accept and assimilate, but which has the mission to keep us still before the Presence of God – with this the idea of עציירה ממלאכה would certainly apply – to strengthen and solidify the impressions and knowledge we have already gained, so that they remain with us permanently, and do not become lost in the hurly-burly of life... The purpose of azteres is accomplished by our realizing once again all that we have gained by the festival, and by the firm resolution not to allow ourselves to be robbed in the turmoil and struggle and work our lives of what we have won... Shmini Atzeres would come to tell us, once again to **summarize and gather to ourselves all the thoughts and messages and resolutions which the moadim of the whole year have brought to us** and to resolve to persevere and hold fast to them before God, To impress them so deeply in our hearts that they become an unassailable part*

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<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Hershel Schachter Shlita similarly explains “Shemini Atzeres does not come to commemorate any particular historical event, but rather to emphasize *bechiras Yisrael*, the uniqueness of *Am Yisrael*. From all the nations of the world, the Jews alone were chosen to be designated as “*bonim lamakom*”, as “*bni bechori Yisroel*”. The entire uniqueness of the Jewish people lies in the fact that the *malach* (angel) teaches every baby the entire Torah before he or she is born. The *simcha* of the completion of the entire Torah is not something separate from the *simcha* of the *yom tov*. The whole essence of the *yom tov* of *Shemini Atzeres* is interconnected with Torah study. Only through Torah study did we become the *Am Hanivchar*, and hence our *minhag* of celebrating the *simcha* of completing the learning of the entire Torah not only does not compete with the *simcha* of the *yom tov* of *Shemini Atzeres*, it rather complements it and enhances it.” ([http://torahweb.org/torah/2002/moadim/rsch\\_sukkos.html](http://torahweb.org/torah/2002/moadim/rsch_sukkos.html))

<sup>19</sup> The Midrash Tanuchuma, Pinchas no. 15, takes this parallel a step further. The Torah refers to Shavuot as the holiday of “*azteres*”. The Midrash says that all things being equal, Shmini Azteres should be celebrated 50 days after Sukkos, just as Shavuot is celebrated 50 days after Pesach if not for the fact that it would be difficult for the people to travel to Yerushalayim in the winter.

<sup>20</sup> Commentary on the Torah Vayikra 23:36.

*of ourselves which cannot become lost in the course of the ordinary run of our yearly life on which we are now entering.*"<sup>21</sup>

Shmini Azteres is the culmination of the holiday season. Therefore, all the lessons that we have gained, starting with Pesach and ending with Sukkos are to be contemplated and internalized during Shmini Azteres.<sup>22</sup> It is for this reason that the holiday is not accompanied with any mitzvah items that may detract or distract us from this process. Shmini Azteres is a time to reflect upon and somehow integrate into ourselves the sometimes opposite themes of *yirah vafachad*, fear and trepidation, associated with the *yemei hadin* and at the same time the *simcha yeseira* of Sukkos.<sup>23</sup> This final holiday, without the fanfare or excitement often generated by other festivals, with a Torah reading that does not even mention its name, charges us with the duty to incorporate all the ideas we have studied, sermons we have heard, and emotions we have felt, into our daily lives as we return to the "hurly-burly of life." The word for a stop sign in Hebrew is "aztor", because it engages us to stop before continuing on our way. Shmini Azteres is a time to stop and reflect and to uplift our mundane lives with the spirituality it deserves.

The best way to ensure that our lives will be infused with spirituality and meaning is through our dedication to Talmud Torah. For example, by studying the *Shulchan Aruch*, we become aware of the myriad laws that we encounter on a daily basis in our work place and with our dealings with others. Additionally, the ultimate expression of synthesis of the opposing themes of "yirah" and "simcha" is portrayed through our daily commitment to the study of Torah.

*The orders of the Lord are upright, causing the heart to rejoice;*

**Psalms 19:9**

פְּקוּדֵי ה' יִשְׁרִים מְשֻׁמְחֵי לֵב  
תְּהִלִּים פֶּרַק יֵט פִּסּוּק ט

On the one hand, we must approach the study of Torah with fear and trepidation, on the other hand, engaging in serious Torah study provides us the greatest enjoyment!<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps these are two themes that we should reflect upon while dancing with the Torah celebrating the culmination of the holiday cycle on Shmini Azteres and Simchat Torah.

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<sup>21</sup> See also Commentary on the Torah, Devarim 16:8 – "The seventh day brings us the task of now **gathering** together all the thoughts, feelings, and resolutions which the *yetziat Mitzrayim* days should have awakened afresh in us, a summing up before God which we are to take out with us into our daily active life as a "permanent" possession." Also see *Collected Writings of Rav S. R. Hirsch* Vol. 2 p. 154-9,181 for his explanation of the transition from the month of Tishrei which is filled with festivals to that of Cheshvan; the test of whether we were uplifted and inspired to change after experiencing Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, is how we act when we return to our every day routine lives and schedules.

<sup>22</sup> See *Sefas Emes* (Sukkos p. 97) who cites the verse from the Torah of "והיית אך שמחה" and notices that the numerical value of "אך" is 21, which corresponds to the 21 days from Rosh Hashana through Shmini Azteres. As such, Shmini Azteres is the time to "take in" all the lessons learned during those 21 days. See also *Kuntres Beinyanei Chag Hasukkos Vesimchas Torah* p.7, where he cites from his father Rav Dovid Karelstein that "אך" also correlates to the 21 days of Yom Tov in which we are obligated in the mitzvah of *simcha* (including Yom Tov Sheini: 2 days of Rosh Hashana, 9 days of Sukkos, 8 days of Pesach, 2 days of Shavuot) and therefore the joy which one should feel on Shmini Azteres should be inclusive and beyond all of these holidays.

<sup>23</sup> See Rambam *Pirush Hamishna Rosh Hashana* 4:7.

<sup>24</sup> See *Perush* of Rav Avraham Min Hahar *Nedarim* 48a and introduction to the *Eglei Tal*.