

In the *Torah* reading for *Shemini Atzeret* the holiday itself does not even get mentioned until the *maftir* of our reading. There are very few requirements for what seems like an afterthought holiday. We are told that on the eighth day we have a solemn assembly (which is what *atzeret* means) during which we do not work. There is one main sacrifice, that of an ox and that is it. No waving of *lulav* and *etrog*, no walking around the chapel singing *hoshanot*, verses asking God to save us. If this holiday did not include a *Yizkor* service, most of us probably would not even be here.

Because it follows *Sukkot*, it's easy to think that *Shemini Atzeret* is a part of *Sukkot*.

But *Shemini Atzeret* is actually a holiday separate and apart. In fact like *Shavuot*, it is its own two day holiday. It was only after the 11<sup>th</sup> century that we began celebrating *Simhat Torah* on the second day of *Shemini Atzeret* because it was the time that we finished reading the *Torah* and began reading it again. In our *Amidah* prayers we call both days *HaShemini Hag HaAtzeret HaZeh*.

This is how the rabbis understood today's holiday.

A king once arranged a great feast and invited his beloved princes and princesses to his palace. Having spent several happy days together, the guests prepared to leave. But the king said to them: "Pray, stay one more day with me; it's hard for me to part with you!"

After such intense celebration, building, decorating and then living in a *sukkah* for a week; reciting *Hallel* seven times; celebrating the end of the *Sukkot* festival with *Hoshanah Rabbah* with its dancing seven times around the synagogue with *lulav* and *etrog*, we are left with a sadness and longing. To go from that to nothing was too much so we have this extra holiday, one in which we are intended to celebrate but to do so in a more serious way, in a way of connecting ourselves more deeply and profoundly to God.

Another midrash tells us about the seriousness and spiritual intention of this holiday.

There was once a king who made lavish banquets for all his servants several days in the year. But on the final day he told his most beloved and dedicated servant, "Make for me a small meal so that I can have pleasure from you." Like the king in this parable, God, the King of the Universe, tells His servants to prepare an 'international party' on *Sukkot* and to bring sacrifices on behalf of ourselves and the 70 nations of the world. But on the final day, *Shemini Atzeret*, He requests us to prepare a small meal for his beloved people of Israel.

There are 70 grandsons of *Noah* listed in *Genesis* 10. It is assumed that each of these grandsons created his own nation, therefore, the 70 nations of the world. In their honor, there are 70 oxen sacrificed during the seven days of *Sukkot* [*Sukkah* 55b]. These sacrifices called for a good harvest for all people. Even though it is our holiday, we share its blessings with all the other people in the world. But on this one day, on *Shemini Atzeret*, we have a very private party.

The *Bnei Yissaschar*, an *Hassidic* master of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century says that God wants only a small meal with Israel on this holiday because the meal is not what's important. What is important is taking time just to be with God. It is a day for contemplation and connection with God.

This is one of the reasons that we begin our Torah reading today not with the sacrifices of the day, the way we do on all the days of Sukkot but with the commands to treat the people in our community with righteousness: to give money to the poor, to release Jewish slaves at the end of the seventh year, the *shmita* year, to forgive the debts of those who were forced to borrow money. All of these laws maintain the economic balance in our communities,

After so much celebration, we are brought back to reality in a physical way of eating less food and returning to our regular homes but also in a spiritual way of sitting with God in a more solemn and holy way.

This holiday is a perfect segue from repenting on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, celebrating for us and for the 70 nations on *Sukkot* to then celebrating the ending and beginning of our Torah. This is the day that we stop, *atzor*, very close in spelling to *atzeret*, contemplate. We both stop and contemplate where we have been and look forward to where we are going.

Have a meaningful *Shemini Atzeret*.