

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Shemini Atzeret 20 “Bittersweet”

Shabbat shalom. Chag sameach. We are saddened to inform the Mekor Habracha community of the passing of Dov Laufer, uncle of Mekor member Talya Laufer. May his memory be a blessing.

The name of today's holiday raises some intriguing questions. *Shemini*, of course, literally means 8th as in *the 8th day*, which refers to the fact that this brand-new holiday follows the 7th and last day of Sukkot. *Atzeret* means *stop*, and Rashi explains that word refers to the commandment that you stop doing melacha on the holiday. But melacha is prohibited on all holidays, so why does the torah label this particular day *Atzeret*?

I think we can find an answer based on a comparison with Shavuot, which is the holiday that the Sages dub *Atzeret*. In using that description, I think the Sages are giving more than a hint of a connection between Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret.

Both holidays revolve especially around the Torah. On Shavuot, we study the Torah all night. And about 1000 years ago, the custom became widespread to enhance Shemini Atzeret by adding to the holiday the unique practices we celebrate with the Torah on Simchat Torah. But as some commentators explain, Shemini Atzeret and Shavuot are the only two holidays that don't have a dedicated mitzvah, like the shofar on Rosh Hashana, the 5 prohibitions of Yom Kippur, the sukkah and the lulav on Sukkot and matza on Pesach. Both Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret are holidays simply called Atzeret, during which the only unique thing we do is treat it like a holiday on which we do not do melacha.

On Shemini Atzeret, at least in Israel, we are not permitted to shake the lulav or sit in the Sukkah, since Shemini Atzeret is not really part of Sukkot, and one may not add to the holiday of Sukkot. (Although we do sit in the sukkah on Shmini Atzeret in Chutz LaAretz for technical reasons). Nonetheless, in certain respects, we do think of Shemini Atzeret as comparable to the 8th and final day of Sukkot. And similarly, as we mentioned last night, the Maharal MiPrague likens Shavuot to the last day of Pesach, although it falls 50 days later. That event was the culmination of our liberation from Egypt, which is commemorated on Pesach.

The midrash says that Shemini Atzeret has no specific mitzvot because it's intended to be a transition from Sukkot to daily life. As we explained last night, when this day ends, it is time for us to go and live our lives as we always do. In the beit hamikdash during Sukkot, we sacrificed 70 cows, a massive number of sacrifices that correspond to the 70 nations. On Shemini Atzeret we only sacrificed one cow, a change that is, as the torat kohanim teaches us, analogous to having one last intimate dinner with God that is reserved only with the Jewish people, to show we are special.

Like Rosh Hashana and Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret falls out on Shabbat this year. And as we explained on those holidays, this timing gives us yet another opportunity to appreciate that we have this special time every week with God.

I think that's why we read Kohelet on Shemini Atzeret this year. Typically, we read it on Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot, but there was no such day this year. Since we associate Kohelet with Sukkot, it may seem odd to read it on Shemini Atzeret. But perhaps it is fitting, because after all, Kohelet warns us about the transience of this world, something we think about on Shemini atzeret, this day of transition to the transitory world.

This year, perhaps the message of Shemini atzeret is that inevitably, negative things will happen during the year, but we can get through the hardships by remembering our intimate connection with God.

That could be also be why we pray for rain on Shemini Atzeret. After all, rain can be a blessing or a curse – it helps us grow crops, but it can also cause floods and destruction. We cannot know which way it will go. Shemini Atzeret is the day we remember that no matter how things turn out, we will always have this intimate connection to God that will get us through all times, good and bad.

That could also be why we recite Yizkor on Shmini Atzeret. We contemplate the legacy of our loved ones and understand that they are in a better place, but at the same time, Yizkor evokes a bittersweet feeling, because we miss them. Similarly, on Shemini Atzeret, we experience the bittersweet sensation of saying goodbye to God even as we realize He has given us the gift of one extra day.

As we celebrate each holiday, we cannot help but think of all the hardships that Covid has brought to our community and the world at large. But Shemini Atzeret can help guide us through all the ups and downs of the coming year, if we heed the message that God willing, we'll see His love shine through all the difficulties, and we will emerge with a positive outlook about what's to come. Shabbat shalom. Chag sameach.