

Separate and Together: Shemini Atzeret and Human Interconnectedness

Are we separate? You and me? Are you and I distinct human beings? Or are you and I actually connected somehow? Are we even somehow all one, what Israeli songwriter Motti Hamer called רַקְמָה אֲנוּשִׁית אַחַת חַיָּה, one living human fabric?

Let me answer a question with a timely question. Is Shemini Atzeret separate from Sukkot? Is it its own distinct and unique holiday, and in fact there are four regalim in some way? Or is it somehow connected conceptually to, and a part of, Sukkot? Are they two separate holidays, or are they, so to speak, רַקְמָה חַגִּיגִית אַחַת חַיָּה, one living holiday fabric?

I hope the answer to this question can shed some light on whether we are distinct entities, and why that matters, and what it means for Yizkor – both the liturgy we are about to recite, and the entire project of remembering and connecting to loved ones who have left this world.

The Gemara seems clear in answering the question of whether Shemini Atzeret is part of Sukkot or not. It states unequivocally (*Talmud Bavli Sukkah 48a*) that Shemini Atzeret is רַגְלֵי בְּפָנֵי עֲצָמוֹ, is its own distinct regel, its own holiday. The Gemara adduces no fewer than 6 proofs to explain the total separateness of Shemini Atzeret from Sukkot.

Shemini Atzeret gets a Sheheheyanu berakhah. Think about it: we don't say Sheheheyanu on the last days of Pesah, because it is a continuation of the same holiday. But we do on Shemini Atzeret, indicating that it is not a continuation of Sukkot, but something new!

Shemini Atzeret has its own sacrificial framework. It doesn't continue the decreasing-by-one-bull-a-day mussaf offering at all, as it would have if it were the last day of Sukkot, but instead has a totally separate set of sacrifices.

And there are more.

So it seems obvious that Shemini Atzeret is separate from Sukkot. In a similar way to the way in which it seems obvious that you and I are separate. We can have things in common, but we are simply two different people.

But it gets more complicated. In *Harerei Kedem (Volume 1 #151)*, a collection of Rav Soloveitchik's short teachings on the hagim, he notes where this sharp distinction begins to break down.

According to some poskim (*cited in Shaarei Teshuvah 668:1*), if in your tefillah on Shemini Atzeret, you say את יום שמיני חג העצרת הזה (this Sukkot holiday) instead of את יום חג הסוכות הזה (this Shemini Atzeret holiday), you still fulfilled your obligation. How could that be if they are two separate holidays? You wouldn't have fulfilled your obligation if you said, את יום חג הפסח הזה (this Pesah holiday)! So why should Shemini Atzeret be any different?

The halakhah is also clear that (*Talmud Bavli Yoma 2b*) if you didn't bring your Sukkot sacrifices on Sukkot, you can still bring them on Shemini Atzeret. How can you bring one holiday's sacrifices on another holiday, especially one with a different sacrificial system? And yet Shemini Atzeret is a valid day for *tashlumin* (make-ups) for Sukkot.

And none of this should be surprising from the Torah's perspective, of course, from something as simple as Shemini Atzeret's name. Shemini of *what?* Sukkot! Why didn't the Torah say, 'on the 22nd day of the 7th month?' Once it calls today's holiday the 8th day, counting from the beginning of Sukkot, it seems like Shemini Atzeret really is a part of Sukkot in some way.

So if they are two distinct holidays, but they are somehow overlapping or connected, what accounts for that connection? What makes them somehow part of one holiday continuum?

It seems to me that the answer is simply this: *they touch*. Once they share a dividing line, once they are neighbors, separated only by the threshold of sunset from the end of Hoshana Rabbah to the beginning of Shemini Atzeret, they just inevitably become connected, and Sukkot spills over into Shemini Atzeret. They become intermingled.

~

This is true in human relationships, and the more we grow in science and technology, the more we come to see how profoundly it is true, even beyond the naked eye.

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in an essay about Yizkor in the Jewish Lights collection about Yizkor and Jewish memory, points this out with two examples.

Take a block of pure gold and a block of steel, and put them next to each other. And then take them apart again. No change, right? The gold is the same gold it was, and the steel is the same steel it was?

We now know that, just a little bit, molecules on the surface exchange. A little of the gold gets left on the steel. And a little of the steel gets left on the gold.

Because when they are next to each other, when they touch, no matter how tough, whole, or self-sufficient they may be, something gets exchanged. The brush of a connection leaves an imprint.

Professor Douglas Hofstadter, a professor of cognitive and computer science at Indiana University, argues that this is true with people, too. That once we connect, we are always connected. And that a little of you, physically, is inside of me. In our hearts, of course, *but physically – in our brains.*

Sasso paraphrases Hofstadter, saying, “... when the life of one person touches another, the hopes and dreams of one continue in the other... not only in a religious or poetic sense, but also in a pragmatic and tangible way, because that is how the brain works.” Synapses and neural connections, chemically, store memories. The voice, the touch, the images, the teachings, the legacies of our loved ones, physically reside inside our brain. “Our loved ones do not”, over time, turn “to dust... the parts that matter most are actually transportable to others.” (*“A Soul-ar Eclipse”, by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in “May God Remember: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism”, p. 206*)

Once we touch, we live, physically, inside each other. In our brains.

And I want to add one more example – a personal one. Science research has discovered that “during pregnancy, cells from the fetus cross the placenta and enter the mother's body, where they can become part of her tissues.” (*“Baby's Cells Can Manipulate Mom's Body for Decades”, Smithsonian.com, Sep. 2, 2015*) This means that once a life – a soul – has resided inside another, even for a short time, it leaves a physical remnant that is always there. Once they touch, they are forever connected.

This is a comfort for me this Shemini Atzeret, which arrives just a little bit past the second yearzeit of the pregnancy loss of our twin girls. It's a comfort to know that in addition to being in our hearts and family lives always, that they actually physically live on in our family. In Shira.

Once we touch, we are forever connected. Others can live on, after their bodies are physically gone, they live on – inside of our bodies.

~

And this is the season – in fact just a few minutes ago was the last time for this season, when we say the verse in Tanakh that I think perhaps more than any other reminds us that this notion is true for our relationship with God. *That God literally dwells inside of us.*

It's a verse that practically takes my breath away when I really read it and dwell on it, and yet it of course so often passes us by quickly in the busy-ness of tefillah and this season.

It's a verse from Psalm 27, לְדוֹד ה' אֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי, the Psalm that has accompanied us through the holiday season beginning about 7 weeks ago.

The verse says, לך אמר לבי בקשו פני (Ps. 27:8). About You, almost *for* You, My Lord, my heart said to me, "Seek My face". About You, My Lord, my heart said to me, "Seek My face".

Understand what's going on here: *God is speaking, in God's voice, inside of us!*

Our heart says, speaking in God's voice, speaking for God, "Seek My face"!

Once we realize God is in us and God is speaking to us from inside ourselves and we can hear that voice, then we can complete the verse – את פניך ה' אבקש – *I will seek Your face.*

And it's not just God. We have all those loved ones who have touched our lives and are no longer here – and all the loved ones who are still here – they speak inside of us, saying, "seek my face." They are in us.

Because once we met, once we touched, once we connected, they spilled over into us. And they are in us. In our brains. In our hearts. Connected to us.

~

Yesterday we said goodbye to a dear friend of our Bayit, Jeffrey Greenwald. Jeffrey loved this Bayit. He loved being here. He came regularly on Friday nights and Shabbat mornings from a group home on Fieldston Road because he felt welcome and at home here. He was in his mid-50s, but when we called up the children for Kiddush on Friday nights, there he was, smiling.

As we gently covered Jeffrey's aron with earth, James Lapin, Jeffrey's Rabbi James, who embraced him with caring, literally and figuratively, recalled that the last time we had been with Jeffrey was just on Yom Kippur. Jeffrey arrived at The Bayit, and then, as he so often did, after greeting us with a, "I'm so glad to see you", and "You really are my family", he went to the Atria to find Rabbi James and help make a minyan.

Jeffrey spent a couple of years in a nursing home in his thirties because he had been living with his mother after his father died when Jeffrey was young, and now Jeffrey's mother fell ill. He had no other place to go, and she had to go to a nursing home, so Jeffrey went, too. I believe it was there that he developed a deep caring and compassion for older people with health challenges, and that was part of what drew him to the Atria.

