

Atzeret: A Day of Reflection

Yizkor Drashah
Acharon Shel Pesach, 5780

I.

In Sefer Devarim, when the Torah describes the final day of Pesach, it uses the term *atzeret*. Rabbinically, this term has many associations, including a gathering, but the simplest translation of the word is found in its root, ע.צ.ר, to stop. While the clause which immediately follows this description is a restriction against performing creative labor on the Yom Tov, the precise connotation of the term *atzeret* remains somewhat elusive.

Delving somewhat deeper into this description of the final day of the Yom Tov, the Torah actually employs two more words to qualify what the specific nature, or quality, of the day might be: **וביום השביעי עצרת לה' אלוֹקֵיךָ**. The *atzeret*, this day of ceasing, of pausing, is not inert nor directionless, but specifically directed towards 'Hashem, your God.'

Perhaps some light might be shed on the specific qualities of this *atzeret* by looking towards its counterpart, the *atzeret* which follows at the conclusion of Sukkot. Surely, there are clear differences between the two forms of *atzeret*, including the fact that on Sukkot, we are dealing with the eighth day, and on Pesach, were in not for the second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora, we would be marking *atzeret* strictly on the seventh day.

Moreover, Shemini Atzeret is considered to be, according to rabbinic tradition, *regel bifnei atzmo*, for purposes of certain halakhic areas, it is defined as its own holiday, while the final day of Pesach is, in every respect, an integrated part of the seven day Biblical holiday. After all, unlike Shemini Atzeret, it features precisely the same Korban Mussaf as the all of the days of Pesach which preceded it.

Despite these significant differences, it would appear that the contrast is illuminating. Shemini Atzeret forms a profound contrast with the seven days which precede it. At a biblical level, the mitzvot of both Sukkah and Lulav (in Mikdash) are no longer relevant. It is a day, as is so powerfully captured in the celebrated midrash, when Hashem simply asks us, the Jewish people, to stay in His presence one day longer, *kasheh alai pereidatchem*. On Shemini Atzeret, the emphasis is not on any specific actions we perform for Hashem, but on the relationship which underlies all of those actions, and on the experience of being in the presence of the Almighty.

It seems to me that the same is very much the case when it comes to the *atzeret* which concludes the holiday of Pesach. While all of the restrictions of Chametz remain in place, there is no obligation whatsoever to engage in any specific mitzvah, outward oriented action, on

behalf of Hashem. And, while it is true that many, most notably, the Gaon of Vilna, felt that eating matzah all of the days of Pesach, while not obligatory, was a fulfillment of a Torah level construct (kiyum d'oraita), one cannot escape the fact that the opening clause of the verse which describes the final day of Pesach as *atzeret* actually begins with the clause, **ששת ימים**, תאכל מצות, 'you shall eat matzah for six days'.¹ On the seventh day, in contrast, we do not focus on any outward action, but rather, direct ourselves towards reflecting on being in Hashem's presence itself, *atzeret la-Hashem elokecha*, and cleaving to Him².

II.

If, indeed, we find ourselves on a day of *atzeret*, of purposeful reflection, of focusing less on the outward manifestations of our obligations to the Almighty, but more on the experience of being in a relationship with Him altogether, it is inescapable that such thoughts lead us back to those whom we remember today, who shaped our character, and first enabled us to build our own relationship with Hashem.

The Jews, in their collective exultation at Yam Suf, exclaimed, 'this is my God, and I shall glorify Him; the God of my father, and I will exalt Him.' Classically, taking stock of one's own relationship with the Almighty, inexorably leads one back to one's father, one's mother, one's grandparents as well, and the sense that one's own sense of spirituality has been indelibly shaped and impacted by those on whose shoulders we stand. Indeed, everytime a Jew prays, he or she petitions, 'our God, the God of our forefathers.'

This theme, of rootedness and reflection on the previous generations, while relevant on all holidays, is most deeply resonant on Pesach. After all, the holiday opened with the ultimate halakhic challenge, to imagine ourselves transported back in time to the dawn of Jewish history, and to contemplate the existence of those who were in bondage in Egypt.

Small wonder, then, that the bracha which we recite at the conclusion of Maggid is a paean of thanksgiving to the Almighty for performing miracles on behalf of both our ancestors and ourselves, לפיכך אנחנו חייבים להודות...למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו את כל הנסים...

III.

This year, it seems to me that our collective reflection, on this final day of the holiday, takes on additional significance in light of the challenge of our present circumstances. Who amongst us has not, as we have dealt with unprecedented trials these last many weeks,

¹ This observation is particularly striking in light of the fact that this is the only place in the Torah when we are told to eat matzah for six days. By contrast, the Torah commands us to eat matzah for seven days no fewer than eight times.

² See the commentary of Netziv in HaEmek Davar to Devarim 15:8 who arrives, via a different mode of analysis, at a similar conclusion regarding the meaning of *atzeret*.

engaged in imaginary conversations with those whom we love so dearly, and whose physical presence we so sorely miss? Who amongst us has not wondered what wisdom, what counsel, what guidance they might have shared with us as we all live through this frightful and disorienting period?

And yet, it seems to me, that we can all imagine, to one degree or another, what they might have told us, how they might have comforted us. The ongoing ability of those whose physical absence is so deeply felt today to guide us is a core element of the Jewish understanding of the unbreakable bonds between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren.

May the memory of those who first held our hands, at whose seder tables we first sat, who guided us, time and again, through so many of life's stormiest waters, stand us in good stead during this most trying hour.

In so far as we take greater and renewed strength in their memory, may our gratitude and appreciation for the challenges that they endured be commensurately increased, as we have experienced, these last few weeks, a measure of the sacrifice and uncertainty which was the norm, and not the exception, for preceding generations.

And may we all, on this day of *atzeret*, be ever more grateful to He who gave us the privilege of those profound relationships which we reflect on today. In His presence, may we continue to sense theirs as well.