

The Power of Intimacy: Our Connection with God

Shemini Atzeret 5777

David B. Helfand- Congregation Har Shalom- Potomac, MD

What are you doing here today? What am I doing here today? Don't the festivities start tonight and continue tomorrow with Simchat Torah? Yes, today is Yizkor and some of you join us today for that. Now you might be thinking a similar sentiment to me. You might say to yourself, "Self, I am a bit *shuled* out. I am ready for these holidays to be over." Perhaps those of us who haven't had a regular five day work week in the past month are even more anxious for the conclusion of these holy days. However, with all of this being said, I want to let you all in on a secret. Today is THE DAY to be here! *Shemini Atzeret* is the ultimate day to be in shul.

Today we celebrate *Shemini Atzeret*, The 8th day. The Torah, in *Sefer Vayikra*¹ instructs us "seven days you shall bring gifts to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion, and bring a gift to the Lord; it is a solemn gathering, *atzeret*, and you shall not work your occupations" What is this *Atzeret* that the Torah speaks of? *Shemini Atzeret* is really an independent holiday celebrated on the 22nd day of *Tishrei*. Outside the Land of Israel, the holiday is celebrated for two days like all the other Jewish festivals. The second day of *Shemini Atzeret* is commonly referred to as *Simchat Torah*.

Rashi², the Medieval commentator, explains that the holiday is called *Atzeret* which means "holding back." This is because God says to us, "I have held you back from leaving [Jerusalem] after Sukkot to be with me." Rashi continues to say that it is similar to a king who invited his children to a feast for a certain number of days. When the time came for the children to depart, the king said, "My children! I beg of you, stay with me for one more day, for it is difficult to depart from you."

I can recall many trips back to Kansas City where upon my return to college, back to the DMV or elsewhere my mother would not let go of me when saying goodbye and she would see if there was any other way that I could stay.

¹ Leviticus 23:36- Humash Etz Hayim

² Rashi on Leviticus 23:36

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

It is a [day of] detention: [i.e., God says to Israel,] "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 part with you!" [Similarly, after the seven days of Succoth, God "detains" Israel for one extra holy day.]

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes³ in the Introduction to the new Koren Sukkot Machzor that the holiday of *Shemini Atzeret* is a strange and even unique day in the Jewish calendar. He continues to say that

“On the eighth day, as they were leaving [Jerusalem], it was as if God were inviting the Jewish people to a small private reception. The word *Atzeret*, as we learned from Rashi, was interpreted to mean, ‘Stop, stay a while.’ *Shmenin Atzeret* was private time between God and his people. It was a day of particularity after the universality of the seven days of Sukkot.”

The past seven days of Sukkot we have been joining together in the *sukkot* of our family and friends. We have been surrounded by community for the past three weeks and giving our love and attention to God, and God perhaps knows that come the end of this week, we push our focus back to the mundane, to the regular commitments of our daily life. God knows that we won't be joining together for a festive occasion for virtually half a year, when we join together *zecher yitzat mitrayim*, to remember the Exodus from Egypt. God is trying to keep us together. God is attempting to hold us together, with God for as long as God can. It is a matter of the intimate relationship that God hopes and prays for with all of God's creations.

Shemini Atzeret is holiday of intimacy. It reminds us of the intimacy Jews have always felt in the presence of God. When the days of *Sukkot* pass and everyone has left their Sukkahs and Jerusalem, there is a sense of intimacy and closeness to God that is felt. Rabbi Sacks describes *Shmini Atzeret* as chamber music not a symphony. It is a time of peace and quiet with God. We are hesitant to leave and we think that God would be reluctant to let us go. Rabbi Sacks explains that “justice is universal, love is particular. There are some things we share because we are human. . But there are other things, essential of our identity; they are uniquely ours- most importantly our relationships to those who form our family. On *Sukkot* we are among strangers and friends. On *Shminin Atzeret* we are with family.

As we close the festival of Sukkot and begin *Shemini Atzeret* and prepare for *Simchat Torah*, we also finish with our *Arbat HaMinim*, our four species that we have been using all week for *Sukkot*. In his anthology of conversations, former Chief Rabbi of Ofaqim in Israel, Rabbi Shimon Pinkus, asks the question, “why don't we have some mitzvah object to shake or sound on *Shemini Atzeret*?”

³ Koren Sacks Sukkot Machzor pg lxxv

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Rabbi Pinkus writes,

“There is a great difference between all the festivals and *Shemini Atzeret*. On the other festivals we use ‘objects’ in order to achieve an inspiration and influence of holiness. Eating matzah on Passover [reminds us of the Exodus from Egypt]... The shofar is capable of shocking and breaking the heart and inspires one to do *teshuvah*...’The Finding of God’ during the Ten Days of Repentance engenders a closeness when God comes near us... The completeness of Yom Kippur comes from God being the mikvah for the Jewish people...Especially on Sukkot the closeness and connection to God is strengthened by waving the Four Species and by living in a Sukkah in the company of ‘holy guests’”

Rabbi Pinkus beautiful illustrates that interwoven into each of the holidays is a unique mitzvah or object. However, what is special about *Shemini Atzeret*? Rabbi Pinkus continues to explain that based on the verse in Deuteronomy⁴, “*ve’hayita ach samech!*”, “and you will be completely joyous!” This verse teaches that we celebrate the festival of *Shemini Atzeret* without a *lulav* and *sukkah*, a festival of joy without the “objects” and external influences. “Completely Joyous” refers to this last night and day of *Shemini Atzeret*. The spiritual work of *Shemini Atzeret*, as Rabbi Pinkus concludes, is to come close to God and connect with God without performing specific *mitzvot*.

So why are we here today? We are here to love. We are here to celebrate together. We are here because we love God and God loves us. *Shemini Atzeret* is our reminder that we don’t need a specific sign or object to love God. Enjoy these last few minutes of the holidays. May we continue to take this love and connection with God with us through good times and bad. And if nothing else, do a Stephen Stills tells us, “Love the one you're with!”⁵

Chag Sameach

⁴ Devarim 16:15

שְׁבַע יָמִים תַּחֲגֵל לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה כִּי יִבְרַכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל תְּבוּאָתְךָ וּבְכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהָיְתָ אִךְ שְׂמֵחַ
You shall hold a festival for the LORD your God seven days, in the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD
your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.

⁵ “Love the One You’re With” by Stephen Stills