

חג העצרת The Atzeres Festival

SOURCES:

גָּדוֹל יוֹם הַגְּשָׁמִים בְּיוֹם שְׁנֵי־תְנָהּ בּוֹ תוֹרָה. (תענית ז.)

Great is the day of rains, like the day on which the Torah was given. (*Ta'anis* 7a)

בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצַרְתָּ תְהִיָּה לָכֶם. (במדבר כ"ט ל"ה)

On the eighth day, there shall be to you a convocation. (*Bamidbar* 29:35)

בְּאַרְבָּעָה פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֲצַרְתָּ עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשִׁי הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו... וּבְחַג גְּדוּגִין עַל הַמַּיִם. (ראש השנה א' ב')

During four periods (of the year) is the world judged: on Pesach (the world is judged) for (the allotment of) produce; on Shavuos, for fruits of the tree; on Rosh Hashanah, all the world's inhabitants pass before Him (in judgment)... and on the (Sukkos) festival, there is judgment for water. (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 1:2)

בְּיוֹם חַתֻּנְתּוֹ - זֶה מִתֵּן תוֹרָה. (תענית כ"ז)

"In the day of His wedding" (*Shir Hashirim* 3:11): this refers to the giving of the Torah. (*Ta'anis* 26b).

וְאֹתֵי יוֹם יוֹם יִדְרְשׁוּנִי. (ישעיהו נ"ח ב')

And they shall seek Me out every day. (Yeshayahu 58:2)

קב"ה אור"תא וישראל בול"הו חד. (זוהר)

Hashem, the Torah, and Yisroel are all one. (Zohar)

אָנָּה ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּה ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא. (תהלים קי"ח ב"ה)

Please, Hashem, grant salvation now! Please, Hashem, grant success now! (Tehillim 118:25)

Closing Times

Many people react with disappointment when rain begins to fall. Although a common experience, such an attitude does display a certain lack of gratitude and recognition of the importance of this event. After all, as any thinking person can realize, rain is absolutely essential for existence.

It should come as little surprise, then, that *Chazal* describe the incidence of rain in most laudatory terms. What may be somewhat extraordinary, however, is the nature of their characterization. As the Gemara states, גדול יום הגשמים כיום שניתנה בו תורה — *A day of raining is as great as the day on which the Torah was given* (*Ta'anis 7a*).

Such a description may seem difficult to understand. Granted, rain is important, even necessary for life. But how, exactly, is it comparable to the Revelation at Sinai? And what, in any event, is the meaning of *yom hageshamim*, a term that literally translates into a “day of rains”?

The *Avodas Yisroel* understands that *yom hageshamim* actually refers to a specific calendar date — a Yom Tov, to be exact. *Chazal* here are alluding to the Yom Tov of Shemini Atzeres, on which we begin to pray for rain and begin to recite משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם (*He causes the wind to blow and brings down the rain*). In equating the *yom hageshamim* to the day of *Mattan Torah*, *Chazal* were drawing a parallel between two Yamim Tovim, Shemini Atzeres and Shavuos.

An Unlikely Pair

But this comparison itself calls for explanation. There are certain Yamim Tovim that do seem to share a commonality or function together as a unit. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for example, are both times of judgment; the festivals of Pesach, Shavuos, and Sukkos together comprise the *Shalosh Regalim* (three pilgrimage festivals). But Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres? While important days, they don't appear, at first glance, to bear any tangible relation.

Then again, a closer look reveals some startling similarities, beginning with their very name.

- These two Yamim Tovim share the same title; they are the only festivals known as *atzeres* (convocation). In the section of the Torah dealing with the festival offerings, Shemini Atzeres is referred to as such: ביום השמיני עצרת תהיה לכם — *On the eighth day, there shall be to you an atzeres* (Bamidbar 29:35). And whereas Shavuos, in that same section, is called by its familiar name, *b'Shavuoseichem* — “In your (festival of) weeks” (ibid. 28:26), note the manner whereby the *Targum* there renders the term, *B'atzraseichon* — “In your *atzeres*.” In listing the various matters judged on the different festivals, the Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:2) likewise refers to Shavuos in this way: בָּאַרְבָּעָה בְּיָמֵי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה נִדְּוֵן, בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הַמָּיִם — *During four periods (of the year) is the world judged: on Pesach (the world is judged) for (the allotment of) produce; on Atzeres (i.e., Shavuos), for fruits of the tree; on Rosh Hashanah, all the world's inhabitants pass before Him (in judgment); and on the (Sukkos) festival, there is judgment for water.*
- Both appear at the culmination of an extended period of special, sanctified days. Shemini Atzeres comes on the heels of the Yamim Nora'im and the Sukkos holiday; Shavuos follows the period of Pesach and the days of *sefiras ha'omer* (counting the Omer).

Furthermore, these “days of culmination” occur equally after a lead-up period consisting of exactly fifty days. The spiritual preparation for the Yamim Nora'im, of course, begins one month prior, on Rosh Chodesh Elul, for this month is dedicated for readying ourselves for the Days of Awe. Yom Kippur is followed soon after by Sukkos, and the fifty-first day of such spiritual intensity and elevation is Shemini Atzeres. The same is true regarding Shavuos. Although the counting of *Sefirah* takes place over a course of forty-nine days, beginning with the second day of Pesach, the period itself is ushered in with the first day of Pesach. As the *sefarim hakedoshim* state, it is for this reason that the Torah places an emphasis on fifty (*Tispera chamishim yom* — “Count fifty days” [Vayikra 23:16]), despite

the fact that only forty-nine days are counted. Thus, following this fifty-day period that starts with the beginning of Pesach, comes Shavuos — on day fifty-one, as is the case with Shemini Atzeres.

- In stark contrast with the days that precede them, both of these Yamim Tovim essentially lack any specific acts of service. Shemini Atzeres is observed as a Yom Tov, of course, but there is no activity similar to that of shofar-blowing, taking a *lulav* and *esrog*, or sitting in a sukkah. Shavuos, as well, has no such precepts as eating matzah or disposing of *chametz*.
- Both of these Yamim Tovim feature a celebration associated with Torah. Shavuos, of course, is *Zman Mattan Toraseinu*, marking the revelation at Har Sinai. And on Shemini Atzeres, the annual cycle of Torah readings is completed, occasioning the celebration of Simchas Torah (a fact brought out especially in Eretz Yisroel, where only one day of Yom Tov is observed).

As curious as they are, these similarities likewise demand elucidation. It hardly seems likely that the above list represents a collection of uncanny commonalities. In fact, these items point to a greater theme shared by both Yamim Tovim, as the Nesivos Sholom proceeds to elucidate.

The Pinnacle

There is a *passuk* that both alludes to these special days and sums up the underlying principle uniting them. The *Navi* states, וְאֹתֵי יוֹם יוֹם יִדְרְשׁוּן — *And they shall seek Me out every day* (Yeshayahu 58:2). R' Shmelke of Nikolsburg *zt"l* offered a homiletic interpretation to this verse, understanding the double usage of the word *yom* as a reference to two specific days upon which it is customary to deliver a public discourse. These are Shabbos Hagadol, which precedes Pesach, and Shabbos Shuvah, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On both of these Shabbosos, the community assembles to attend a *drashah* (discourse); hence, "On a day (Shabbos Hagadol) and a day (Shabbos Shuvah), they shall expound (*yidroshun*)."



Following the precedent set by R' Shmelke, the Nesivos Sholom likewise interprets the *passuk* as alluding to two specific days, but he understands that the reference is to Shemini Atzeres and Shavuos. Furthermore, he adopts the more conventional meaning of *yidroshan* (referring to seeking) in his explanation and places special emphasis on the word *Osi* (Me). Thus, the verse contains the *yesod* (foundation) of these exalted days: they are times of heightened focus on Hashem, when we seek to draw close to *Osi*.

In this sense, then, these two Yamim Tovim are of the most elevated times of the year, for they reflect the especial relationship that Yisroel enjoys with Hashem, cleaving to Him in supreme intimacy. This notion is manifest in Shemini Atzeres, which *Chazal* interpret as relating to the root עָצַר (stoppage). They explain that on this day, following on the heels of the Sukkos festival, Hashem delivers a message to Yisroel, imploring them to “refrain” from departing and to rejoice together in seclusion for yet one more day (cf. *Rashi, Vayikra* 23:36; *Sukkah* 55b; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 21:24).

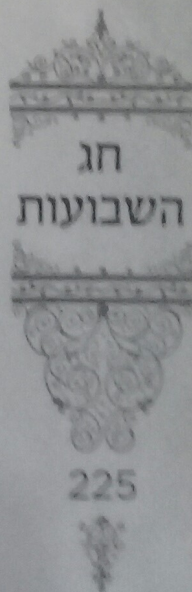
Shavuos, the culmination of the period ushered in by Pesach, likewise shares this quality. The Beis Avraham asserts that Pesach functions as *eirusin* — the first step of the marriage process — between Hashem and Yisroel. Throughout the days of Sefirah, their relationship resembles that of the groom and bride, awaiting their wedding day. And that day arrives on Shavuos, at which time the actual *nissu'in* takes place. As *Chazal* expound the *passuk*: בְּיוֹם הַתְּנִיחַ — “In the day of His wedding” (*Shir Hashirim* 3:11); *this refers to the giving of the Torah (Ta'anis* 26b).

This theme also informs the role played by these Yamim Tovim as the climax of an extended period. As mentioned previously, both Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres occur as the fifty-first day at the tail end of a fifty-day exercise of preparation and *avodah*. The Rebbe of Kobrin *zt"l* highlights the various facets of service that lead up to these events, even extending the preparatory period further back. He asserts that we actually start gearing up for Shemini Atzeres from the fast day of Shivah Asar B'Tammuz, which ushers in the period known as *Bein Hametzarim*. From this time, then, we undergo

a steady succession of intense *avodah*; fasting and mourning for the *Churban* (Temple destruction) during *Bein Hametzarim*; shofar blowing throughout the month of Elul (and Rosh Hashanah, of course); *teshuvah* efforts throughout this time, intensifying with the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* and Yom Kippur; the mitzvos of sukkah, *lulav*, *esrog*, etc. — all leading up to and culminating in Shemini Atzeres. Similarly, he explains, the preparations for Shavuos actually begin around Purim, as we eradicate Amalek and the vestiges of evil. They continue through Pesach with its attendant *avodah* and throughout the seven weeks of *sefiras ha'omer*, climaxing in Shavuos.

What, exactly, is all of this preparation *for*? In what way do the respective *Atzeres* festivals serve as the zenith for months of *avodah*? In light of the above, we can readily understand why these particular events are accorded such august status. They are the culmination of intensive efforts to achieve closeness to Hashem, an endeavor that bears fruit and reaches its apex on these days. Respectively, Shemini Atzeres and Shavuos reflect the attainment of the ultimate *d'veikus* to Hashem — manifestations of the *yichud Ila'ah* (supreme attachment) between Hashem and His people.

This notion provides insight, as well, into the other curious observation noted above. After an extended period marked by various mitzvah acts (*shofar*, *lulav*, *matzah*, etc.), what form does the *avodah* take on these climactic days? In stark contrast to the lead-up period, there are no real formal acts of service on Shavuos or Shemini Atzeres. The *Nesivos Sholom* explains that this itself reflects the elevated nature of these particular festivals. He draws a comparison to a teaching of the *Noam Elimelech*, who discussed the *kedushah* of a *sefer Torah*. Every part of the scroll, of course, is imbued with a special holiness, but in one respect, the empty spaces between the letters of the scroll actually contain more sanctity than the letters themselves. This is because, by default, the *kedushah* of a given letter is inherently limited; it contains only the sanctity of that letter itself. But the unmarked space between the letters — unrestricted to a given, defined letter — thus encapsulates the sanctity of *all the letters combined*. In a similar way, by design, Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres were left devoid of particular mitzvah acts, encompassing, instead,



the *kedushah* that applies to all the other "active" festivals combined. These two festivals operate on a higher, more elevated plane — to the extent that, in effect, they exist above a level governed by physical action.

All of this is a function, as explained, of the grand achievement of *d'veikus baHashem*, the intimate relationship that comes to the fore on these Yamim Tovim. It is for this reason that both of these days are marked by a celebration involving the Torah, for Torah is the ultimate vehicle for attaining this *d'veikus*. The focus of these events is connecting with Hashem: אֹתֵי יוֹם יוֹם יְדַרְשׁוּן. The great love between Hashem and Yisroel is palpable at this time. Shemini Atzeres represents the King's desire to enjoy the company of His people exclusively. On Shavuos, at *Mattan Torah*, the love burned so strongly within the people that their souls actually exited their bodies as a result of the most intense experience of *d'veikus*, as the *passuk* states (*Shir Hashirim* 8:6), כִּי עֲזָה כַּמָּוֶת אֶהְבֶּה — *For love is strong as death* (cf. *Shemos Rabbah* 29:4).

How appropriate, then, is the rejoicing in the Torah that takes place at these times! For it is through the Torah that the *yichud Ila'ah* is achieved, as it bridges the gap and brings all the parties together. As summed up by the *Zohar*: קוֹדֵשׁ בְּרִיךְ הוּא אֹרְיִתָא וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל כּוֹלְהוּ חֵד — *The Holy One blessed be He, the Torah, and Yisroel are all one.*

Ana Hashem Hoshi'ah Na! Ana Hashem Hatzlichah Na!: Similarities and Differences

The *Kedushas Levi* provides even deeper insight into the nature of *Atzeres* with an explanation based on the somewhat mystical concept of *hashpa'ah* (flow of benevolence), through which Hashem dispatches a spiritual "showering" of inspiration to His creatures below. On the various Yamim Tovim, Hashem provides an intensified and special manner of *hashpa'ah*, unique to that given festival.

Focusing on the Sukkos period, the *Kedushas Levi* explains that Hashem sends forth *hashpa'os* by way of the seven Divine attributes over the course of the seven-day festival. Then, a shift takes place

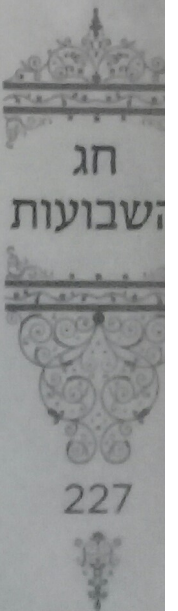
on Shemini Atzeres, the eighth day. Whereas the *hashpa'os* delivered on the first seven days corresponded to the *Mashpi'a* (Hashem, the One sending forth the *hashpa'os*), on Shemini Atzeres, the focus switches to the *mekabel* (the receiver — i.e., the *Yidden*). In other words, Shemini "Atzeres" is designated for the *mekabel* to "gather" and retain these exalted *hashpa'os*.

The *Atzeres* of Shavuos, explains the *Nesivos Sholom*, is patterned in the same way, only in weeks instead of days. That is, there is a seven-week period during which the *Mashpi'a* sends forth His *hashpa'os*. This is followed by an "eighth," which is Shavuos (occurring at the culmination of the seven weeks), on which a Yid can absorb the special Divine *hashpa'os* of the period.

Based on the teaching of the *Avodas Yisroel*, the *Nesivos Sholom* finds an allusion to this function of *Atzeres* as enabling the *mekabel* to absorb the *hashpa'os*. A high point of the Hallel recitation on *Yamim Tovim* is the heartfelt plea of אָנָּא ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּא ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא — *Please, Hashem, grant salvation now! Please, Hashem, grant success now!* (*Tehillim* 118:25). The numerical equivalent of נָּא is 51 (*nun* is 50, *aleph* is 1). As such, the *passuk* reflects the importance of the entity that is the fifty-first — that is, the day of culmination following a fifty-day period of *avodah*. The double phrase thus signifies two such days, Shemini Atzeres and Shavuos, which are designated for the *mekabel's* absorption of the period's *hashpa'os*.

At the same time, there is an apparent difference, as one of the days is associated with *yeshuah* (salvation) and the other with *hatzlachah*. What accounts for this distinction?

The shift in terminology reveals just how all-encompassing this aspect of *Atzeres* is. Here are reflected the major components — both positive and negative — of *avodas Hashem*, as encapsulated in the *passuk*, סוּר מִרַע וַעֲשֵׂה-טוֹב — *Turn from evil and do good* (*Tehillim* 34:15). It is principally regarding the occasion of Shemini Atzeres that we issue the plea for salvation, אָנָּא ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא. In this instance, the focus of the preceding period was one of *din* (judgment) and repentance from sin. Thus, a Yid is in need then of a *yeshuah*, to be spared in judgment and treated with leniency. The focus of Shavuos,



however, is more on the positive side, as it follows the period of great *ahavah* (love) that was initiated by Pesach. The emphasis, then, is on *hatzlachah*, which intimates the purveyance of good.

What emerges, then, is that each of the festivals of *Atzeres* corresponds to the major aspects of our *avodah*. And so, on Shemini Atzeres we declare, אָנָּא ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא. In so doing, we are effectively asking Hashem to allow us to gather and retain on this fifty-first day all of the *hashpa'os* — supplied throughout the previous fifty days — that are connected with the endeavor of *sur meira* (turn from evil). And on Shavuos, our principal prayer is אָנָּא ה' תְּצַלִּיחָה נָּא, for now the emphasis is on the facet of *aseh tov* (do good). Thus, we ask Hashem for assistance in collecting the positive-centered *hashpa'os* of the Pesach/Omer period.

Powering the Year

There is yet another noteworthy aspect of these two *Atzeres* festivals. Note their placement in the Jewish calendar, as their occurrence over the course of the year is roughly equidistant.

This is no accident. Based on the above, the Nesivos Sholom demonstrates that the establishment of these festivals is a matter of strategic placement. Not only are the *Atzeres* instrumental for collecting the *hashpa'os* of the previous period, but they also help illuminate our experience in the time ahead.

The Beis Avraham finds an allusion to this effect in a *passuk* referring to the Omer period: ...וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמָּחָרַת הַשַּׁבָּת... — *And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the festival's commencement...* (*Vayikra* 23:15). While this verse, in its literal sense, refers to the mitzvah of counting the Omer, the Beis Avraham understands it also as reflecting the aforementioned theme. Referring to the consecrated times of Shabbos and Yom Tov, the Torah here exhorts that the *sefirah* carry over to the "morrow." The term סְפִירָה can be understood as relating to a similar word, composed of the same letters but carrying a different meaning: סַפִּיר (*sapir*) or sapphire, a sparkling jewel. Thus, the *passuk's* intent is that the "illumination" of the holy times should be preserved to shine forth on the days following the event.

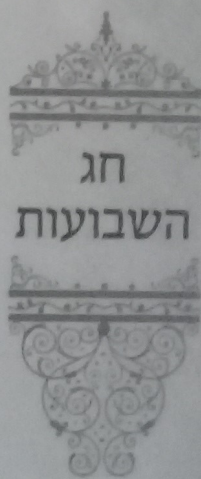
This, then, is the powerful effect that can be achieved through these important and "strategically placed" *Atzeres* festivals. We pray to Hashem not only to enable us to collect and retain the *hashpa'os* on the *Atzeres*, but to enable the illumination to continue even for the *macharas*, the aftermath of the festival. In this way, the *hashpa'os* of *sur meira*, received on Shemini *Atzeres*, can carry forth until Pesach, and the *hashpa'os* of *aseh tov*, supplied during the Omer months, could be retained on Shavuos and continue to yield their influence until the arrival of the Yamim Nora'im. Through the two *Atzeres* festivals, then, we are afforded especial Divine assistance and inspiration, which will accompany us throughout the entire year.

In Summary

There are two Yamim Tovim — Shemini *Atzeres* and Shavuos — that bear the same title: *Atzeres*. While they may seem, at first glance, to be disparate entities, in truth there is much that they have in common. As the Nesivos Sholom explains, it is principally this quality of *Atzeres* that binds them together.

Of particular note is the fact that both festivals occur at the culmination of a preceding period of *avodah* — each consisting of fifty days, to be exact. With Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, a Yid is involved in an extended period of intense *avodah*, replete with numerous mitzvos. From Rosh Chodesh Elul until the end of Sukkos is a total of fifty days, with Shemini *Atzeres* being the fifty-first. Similarly, Shavuos is preceded by a fifty-day period. As we know, Sefirah itself is counted for only forty-nine days (beginning on the second day of Pesach). Nevertheless, as the *sefarim* tell us, the first day of Pesach is also considered a part of this special period; on this day appears — in a special (and temporary) showering of Divine benevolence — all of the illumination that will be available over the entire Omer period. In any event, here as well we find a fifty-day period of preparation and elevation, which is followed by the *Atzeres* of Shavuos on the fifty-first day.

This arrangement points to the unique and exalted nature of these



two festivals. The extended preparatory periods that precede them are quite necessary, for they lead up to these days of supreme *d'veikus baHashem*. For such is the essence of these special days; Shemini Atzeres represents the exclusive celebration Hashem conducts with His people, and Shavuos — as the day of the giving of the Torah — is identified by *Chazal* as *yom chasunaso*. It is most apropos, then, that both days are associated with a celebration of Torah; this is so not only in the obvious instance of *Zman Mattan Toraseinu* but on Shemini Atzeres, which also functions (in Eretz Yisroel) as Simchas Torah. Since these days mark the time of attaining the *yichud Ila'ah* with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, we rejoice in the Torah, the vehicle that facilitates such supreme *d'veikus baHashem*.

The Nesivos Sholom clarifies, as well, the significance of the term *Atzeres*. This refers to the gathering and retention of the *hashpa'os* that Hashem rained down during the preceding fifty-day period. The fifty-first day — in the guise of Shavuos and Shemini Atzeres — is designated for the *mekabel* to absorb these *hashpa'os*, a fact reflected in the well-known plea: אָנָּא ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּא ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא. For the word אָנָּא, with its numerical value of fifty-one, alludes to these respective days of *Atzeres*.

But it is not simply to collect the preceding *hashpa'os* that *Atzeres* plays a role; these days are also instrumental in carrying the *hashpa'ah* and the light further, extending well beyond the festival. Thus, these days of *Atzeres* — occurring at roughly equidistant intervals over the course of the year — provide us with a remarkable opportunity. Through them, the especial illumination Hashem sends forth during these crucial periods can accompany us throughout our entire year.