

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Shemini Atzeret/Yizkor  
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Certain holidays have relatively straightforward explanations. Pesach. Shavuot. Rosh HaShanah. Yom Kippur. Hanukkah. Purim. Sukkot, even. But Shemini Atzeret? As Jerry Seinfeld might say, “What’s the deal with Shemini Atzeret?”

The Torah is relatively opaque on this day. It says simply in Leviticus 23:36, “On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, there shall be the Feast of Booths, to the Lord, seven days. The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. Seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to the Lord. On the eighth day, you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering of fire to the Lord; it is a solemn gathering, *atzeret*: you shall not work at your occupations.”

In the next paragraph, it says, you shall observe the festival seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day.

So, we know that the eighth day we shouldn’t do work, but we don’t really know why.

In Numbers Chapter 29, where the Torah lists the sacrifices for each day, we are told about the many, many sacrifices of each day of Sukkot, 70 bulls all together on the first seven days. Then, only one bull on the eighth day, where again we’re told there should be a solemn gathering, *atzeret*, and “that you shall not work at your occupations” (Numbers 29:35).

No work, many fewer sacrifices than Sukkot. So what is this day about?

Let me offer an off-the-wall explanation. Imagine a king who invited his children for a feast for a certain number of days, and when the time came for them to leave, he said, “My children, I beg of you, remain with me one more day; your leaving is difficult for me.” This is Rashi’s comment on the word *atzeret* in Leviticus—it’s a parable, a midrash. If the High Holidays and Sukkot are God inviting us to be close to God, then Shemini Atzeret is God saying I’m not quite ready for you to leave yet—stay a little bit longer with me, one more day.

It’s a nice story, but there are two details in the text of the Torah that actually support it. First, remember, it says celebrate seven days, and then on the eighth day gather, and don’t work. It could have said the first and eighth days are to be holidays; why say seven days, and then the eighth day? It’s as if it was not expected, as if it was unplanned. God didn’t think God it would be necessary, but then it was.

The other detail is a little more fanciful. But if you imagine a feast, a party, you expect to have lots of people there. But then, when it’s winding down, and you ask just the people who are really important to stay for the last while, or for the after party, you need much less food. Maybe that’s why there was only one bulls sacrificed on Shemini Atzeret—not as many people to feed!

So let’s consider this idea, that God wants us to stay a little bit longer. It’s attractive, because, we love the idea of God thinking that way about us. We all want to be desired, to be loved, for someone to want our company. And maybe the feeling is mutual. Maybe we like the this holy time too. While we may appreciate a return to “normal” life without holidays, I miss the sweetness of the honey on the challah, the sounds and smells and buzz of the holidays when they’re gone. Once we’re so close to the end, when we can almost see Marcheshvan,

“bitter Cheshvan,” the new Hebrew month that’s called bitter because it has no holidays in it, we start to long for the sweetness of Tishrei.

It’s hard to really appreciate something, or someone, until we can, or have to, envision life without it, without them. And what I’ve heard people say so many times once someone is gone, is, “If I could have one more day with my father, my mother, my husband, my wife, my son, my daughter, my brother, my sister.” Just one more day.

We can relate perfectly well to God wanting one more day with us, because we know exactly what it’s like to want just one more day, one more conversation, one more hug. One more chance to say, “I’m sorry,” one more chance to say, “I love you.”

I want to go back to one more detail of the midrash, of Rashi’s explanation. God says, literally, “Your separation is difficult for me.” Isn’t the parting mutual—we’re leaving, and God’s leaving, in a sense too, becoming less present than God is during the holiday season. It should have said, “Our separation,” “our parting.” Why it is “your separation?”

On holidays, we all get along, we are together more, in shul, as a community. But then, we return to the hustle and bustle of life and work, we’re more separate, and that’s what God doesn’t want to see. God wants to see us together a little longer. So make sure you appreciate the simple company of the people here right now.

But the chasidic Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, whose explanation this is, goes even further. Remember the story where the non-Jew goes to Hillel and asks him to teach him the entire Torah *al regel achat*, on one foot? Hillel says, famously, what is hateful to you don’t do to others. Now go and study—the rest is commentary. Rabbi Israel expands on this story.

Any guesses what holiday is called a *regel bifnei atzmo*, a holiday on its own? Shemini Atzeret, of course. (Holidays are called *regalim*, legs, because they involved pilgrimages, usually by foot, to the Temple.) This non-Jew had studied the holidays, and knew that each holiday had an explanation, except Shemini Atzeret. So he says, teach me the whole Torah—all the laws and explanations—*al regel achat*, of the “lone holiday,” meaning, Shemini Atzeret.

Thus, Hillel said, in the spirit of Shemini Ateret, and community, and unity, “what’s hateful to you don’t do to your neighbor,” seeking to preserve peace, and harmony among the community, among people.

In a moment, we will begin Yizkor, when remember those who have left this earth, those with whom we cannot spend another day, as much as we may yearn for it. A lesson, I think, of Shemini Atzeret, and of the losses we have endured of people we have loved, is to do our best to have that extra day now with those we still have in our lives, and to strive to live in peace, without undo strife, with the people we care about.

May the memories of our loved ones inspire us to savor those moments, those “one more days” we had, and make sure we create those “one more days” not tomorrow, but today.