

Shemini Atzeret: Your Separation is Hard For Me Dr. Susan Hornstein, Class of 2025

It's been a long Tishrei. Dozens of hours spent in prayer, eating, fasting, and socializing. Contemplation, repentance, joy, and perhaps more time thinking about God than all the rest of the year combined. And this last week, sitting in the *sukkah*, waving the *arba minim*; it's all been a bit of a marathon. In the days of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the ideal celebration of Sukkot involved pilgrimage to Jerusalem, for a very intense week of togetherness with God and the Jewish people. And then, tacked onto the end of it all is Shemini Atzeret, seeming almost like an afterthought. Today, we mostly focus on the aspect of Shemini Atzeret involving the completion and re-inauguration of the yearly cycle of Torah readings, and the celebrations that accompany that. But after all that Yom Tov, why do we really need one more day?

The command to observe an extra day after Sukkot is originally given in Vayikra 23:36:

שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּקְרְיבוּ אֶשָׁה לַה' בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָׁה לַה' עֶצְרַת
הוּא כֹל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

Seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to Hashem. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to Hashem; it is a solemn gathering: you shall not work at your occupations.

Rashi explains that the word *עֶצְרַת*, often translated as “solemn gathering,” is derived from the word for stopping or holding back. He compares God to a king whose children have visited for a week. The king, reluctant to let the children leave, begs them to stay an extra day, using the phrase “קִשָּׁה עָלַי פְּרִדְתְּכֶם” “your separation is hard for me.” This is a beautiful depiction of God, as eager to have the Jewish people in residence as the Jewish people are to be in God’s presence.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman, of the Israeli rabbinical organization Tzohar, explains the concept slightly differently. He points out that the word *פְּרִדְתְּכֶם* means “YOUR separation,” and that if it referred to the departure of the Jewish people from God it might have been rendered “OUR separation.” Rather, he suggests, it is the separation

of the Jewish people from one another, after a week of togetherness, that is bothering God. He cites the classic midrash (found in Yalkut Shimoni, Akedat Yitzchak, and Shabbalei Leket) about the *arba minim*, the four species of Sukkot. The midrash describes each type of vegetation as representing a different type of Jew, those who are learned and those who are not, those who are observant and those who are not. The species can only be waved when they are bundled together into אֶחָת אֶגְדָּה, a single unit. The dispersal of the Jewish people after the holiday, Rabbi Wasserman says, threatens this unity, as everyone goes back to their day-to-day, segregated existence. And this, he suggests, is the tragedy that God seeks to postpone by holding onto the unity for one extra day.

This phrase אֶחָת אֶגְדָּה, a single unit, appears repeatedly in the High Holy Day prayers. There it refers to all of God's creations, all full of awe, coronating God as our Ruler. It is only this unity, this single-hearted service of God, that can create the atmosphere in which, ultimately, we can experience וְשִׂשׂוֹן לְעִירָךְ וְשִׂמְחָה לְאֶרְצֶךָ, joy in Your land and rejoicing in Your city.

We began Tishrei with this lofty goal – to coronate God by recognizing that all God's creations are in this together, leading to a more joyful world. We wrap up the season with God's wistful recognition that the unity might not last. How might we continue in this year of 5784 with the goal of unifying different types of Jews, Jews and non-Jews, humans and God's non-human creations? Can we find ways to continue the unity that brings joy to God and to God's holy city? Our separation from one another is difficult for God. It threatens us, our society and our environment. We have the power to bring more unity into the world, for ourselves and for God.

Dr. Susan Hornstein is an educator and a lifelong student. She holds a BA from Brandeis University and a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Brown University. Susan completed a long career in User Experience, designing computer systems and websites so that their users would be able to understand them and has also spent many years as a Jewish educator.