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Shmini Atzeret
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It's almost over.

In Israel there is a saying, "Acheri Hachaggim", after the holidays. From around July till Rosh Hashana, all big projects seem to be put on hold till "acharei hachaggim". But here we are, it is Shmini Atzeret, tomorrow is Simchat Torah, and Wednesday, we will be "acharei hachaggim". The next holiday that we will celebrate is Chanukah, which is over two month from now.

I was reading a pasage from the Netivot Shalom, a book by the Slonimer Rebbe, and it reminded me that this really is the "last" holiday of the year. Even though Rosh Hashana, the New Year, was a few weeks ago, the first holiday is Pesach, way back in six month ago, in Nisan.

We can look back to what we have gone through as a Jewish people. We left Egypt at Pesach. We received the Torah at Shavuot. We mourned the destruction of the Temple and the great losses of the Jewish people on Tisha B'Av. We started to reflect on our lives and repent in Elul. Which brings us back to only four weeks ago to Rosh Hashana, where we should before the King of Kings in judgement. Followed by confessing our sins and leaving with a clean slate on Yom Kippur. And all too quickly, we were out in our Sukkah eating and enjoying. And finally, we find ourselves here, at Shmini Atzeret, the very last chag.

There is a part of me that is happy with this. The chagim are an intense time. There is a lot of time is spent praying. I had many speeches to write. I had lots of planning to do, where I was eating, what I was cooking, who was coming to my house. So, in some ways it will be nice to go "back to normal". Where there is just shabbat at the end of the week.

But at the same time, it is a bit sad and perhaps, a bit scary. There is something special that happens over the holiday period, that in some ways just stops abruptly. There is a different feeling in the air during the chagim, even though it might feel a bit crazy at times. The community is together more often than they are during the rest of the year. Having a holiday that lasts about two days, every week for a month gets people into shul more often than they normally would.

The year is really starting. It is happening. The book of life has been signed and sealed. What is this day then? Shmini Atzeret is a really weird holiday. In Devarim it is just known as the "assembly of the eighth day". There are no special mitzvot that are connected to it. It is connected to Sukkot, as it is called "the eighth day", but it is also it's own holiday.

The Maharal of Prague, explains how special the eighth is. "Eight is above all other aspects and natural things, for the number seven encompasses all natural things. For all matters of natural things are included in seven days of construction, and eight is above nature and the world. Eight includes all matters that are above nature." Our master R. Avraham teaches that "On the eighth day" means that we completely awaken from all matters of this world. It is a hint of future redemption when there will be the final repair of the world, in the world to come, as it is written "Then your L-rd will rejoice about you like a groom rejoices about his bride."

According to Rav Bick, a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel,

In light of the meaning of Sukkot, its inner nature is clear. On Shemini Azeret, we return to our homes. The desert too was meant to be a temporary existence. Living out directly in God's hands, without the mediacy and the challenge of making our own worlds, is a rarefied experience. It represents the highest joy, the most sublime celebration - but it is meant as a preliminary to the more prosaic but essential task of living properly, of celebrating our daily work and approach to God, from below, as one works the Land of Israel and serves God on one's own land. This is the necessary conclusion to Sukkot - you come back to this world, to your own man-made world, and remain, somehow, before God, in joy. It is, indeed, only fitting that on this day we also begin again a cycle of Torah reading, starting again another year.

Shmini Atzeret could also be seen as the “sukkot after party”, that God just wants one more day to party with us. Rashi on Vayikra 23:36, cites the parable of a king who invites his sons to dine with him for a number of days, but when the time comes for them to leave, he asks them to stay for another day, since it is difficult for him to part from them

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th-century German rabbi, infers the meaning of the holiday from the word atzeret, which he renders as “to gather” or “to store up.” Accordingly, on this eighth day of Sukkot, the final day of celebration, we must store up the sentiments of gratitude and devotion acquired throughout the entire fall holiday season.

Similarly, Rabbi Asher Lopatin, the former president of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah teachers:

“It’s the intimate holiday,” “‘Atzeret’ means detaining... We’re ending this period of holidays and pulling everything together. It fosters the intimate relationship between God and the Jewish people.”...“The term, ‘atzeret,’ means stop and come in. As busy as God is with the whole world, God is also interested in what I’m doing. There are no special customs. No special foods. No crying. No shofar. The message is, ‘Just sit there and be there.’”

So what is Shmini Atzeret? It is a day for us to think about everything that we just went through over the past month. It is a way for us to stop and appreciate the holiday, and take in all that we can. It is an opportunity to appreciate the extra time that we have with God. It is a chance to appreciate the extra time have with our friends and family. It is a time appreciate the lack of routine in our lives. It is a way for us to stop and mentally prepare ourselves for what will be coming next - for what “acharei hachagim” will be.



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