

# Why did *Shemini Atzeret* Become *Simchat Torah*?

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The Torah describes Succot repeatedly as a seven-day holiday (Vayikra 23, Bemidbar 29, Devarim 16). Yet the *pesukim* add that the eighth day will be “*atzeret*,” literally “stopping” or “gathering,” to be celebrated as a festival. What is the nature of this eighth day? Why is Succot described as lasting seven days, if it seems to actually last eight? Why does Succot have an “extra” day, given that the parallel seven-day holiday of Pesach has no eighth? Indeed, Amoraim debate (Succah 47b) whether we say the *bracha* of *shehecheyanu* on *Shemini Atzeret* (as we do over lighting candles and *kiddush* of all festivals, except for the last day of Pesach). The Gemara concludes that we do say the blessing, because *Shemini Atzeret* is considered its own holiday in many different respects. This debate seems to be about the nature of *Shemini Atzeret* – is this holiday an addendum to Succot, making *shehecheyanu* unnecessary since no new *chag* is beginning, or does it have its own unique character, necessitating *shehecheyanu*? If it does have its own theme, what is that theme? And how did this enigmatic day become the joyous holiday of Simchat Torah, which is not Biblically mandated at all?

Three approaches toward the nature of *Shemini Atzeret* emerge from the Talmud and *Midrashim*. . In *Pesikta deRav Kahana* (28), Rav Alexandri says that by using extra letters in the *pesukim* regarding the sacrifices of each day<sup>51</sup> of Succot, Hashem hints to *Am Yisrael* to pray for rain. After Succot passes and we still have not taken the hint, Hashem gives us a whole day just to pray for rain. The special prayer for rain, *tefillat geshem*, is in fact recited on *Shemini Atzeret*. According to this view, *Shemini Atzeret* amplifies a theme that is latent during Succot, and that theme moves to center stage on the eighth day.

The Gemara (*Succah* 55b) provides a second perspective, based on the striking difference between the sacrifices brought throughout Succot and those offered on *Shemini Atzeret*. On each day of Succot, we offer bulls on the *mizbe'ach* -- thirteen on the first day, twelve on the second, eleven on the third, and so forth. But then the pattern breaks – we offer seven bulls on the

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<sup>51</sup>In Bemidbar 29:29, 33, there are three words that the midrash identifies as having extra letters: ונסכיהם, ונסכיה, ונסכיהם. Those extra letters are מ-י-מ, which spells *mayim*, water.

seventh day of Succot, but just one bull on *Shemini Atzeret*. Why? Rabbi Elazar explains that the seventy bulls offered over Succot correspond to the seventy nations of the world, with one bull offered on behalf of each nation; *Shemini Atzeret*'s sacrifice of one bull, on the other hand, symbolizes Hashem's asking His beloved nation for just a small meal to enjoy. The Midrash in *Bemidbar Rabbah* modifies this slightly: Hashem is like a king who invites all his subjects to a seven-day feast, and afterward says to his beloved, "Let us enjoy whatever you can find, a bit of meat, or fish, or vegetables." According to this idea, Succot is a universal holiday; indeed, Zechariah (14:16-19) prophesies that one day, all the nations will celebrate Succot. *Shemini Atzeret*, however, is only for the Jewish people, and it is a modest holiday just to celebrate Hashem's special relationship with His beloved people.

Rashi provides the third approach. In his commentary on the Torah (Vayikra 23:36, s.v. "*Atzeret Hi*"), he cites the following: "I have stopped you with Me, like a king who invited his sons to a meal for a certain number of days; when the time came to part, he asked his children, 'Please stay with me one more day; *'kashah alai preidatchem,*' your departure is difficulty for me." According to this understanding, all of Succot is a holiday for Hashem to enjoy with His children, the Jewish people. At the end, however, he adds *Shemini Atzeret* because it is so difficult for Him to see us go. *Shemini Atzeret* is neither an opportunity to emphasize a concept that was hidden during Succot nor a holiday with its own theme – it is simply a moving expression of Hashem's desire that we stay with Him, that we delay our departure.

Let us now return to the question debated by the Amoraim: Should we recite the blessing of *shehecheyanu* on *Shemini Atzeret* or not? Perhaps the answer depends on how one views this holiday. If its main theme is to pray for rain, which we should have been done on Succot, it is debatable whether it warrants its own *shehecheyanu*. One could argue that no new blessing is necessary, since rain is a theme that exists on Succot through the pouring of the water on the altar and the hints to pray for rain throughout those days; on the other hand, rain is emphasized more prominently on *Shemini Atzeret*. If, in line with our second approach, *Shemini Atzeret* is a "personal" holiday for the Jewish people after the universal holiday of Succot, one can well understand that it warrants its own *shehecheyanu*. If, however, as Rashi writes, *Shemini Atzeret* is an added day to Succot, just to stay a bit longer, it is hard to understand why that would be considered a new holiday – isn't it really exactly the same as the previous seven days? Staying one more day at the same house or on the same vacation wouldn't count in our minds as a new entity. According to this approach, why would there be a requirement to say *shehecheyanu* on *Shemini Atzeret*?

Perhaps the nature of *Shemini Atzeret* is exactly that – it celebrates our unique relationship with Hashem, that He loves us and does not want to see us go. It actually *is* a separate day – a day that celebrates our close bond with Hashem as His chosen, beloved people. "*Kasha alai preidatchem*" highlights a different quality to our relationship with Hashem, one not emphasized previously, and therefore it does not simply add a day to Succot, but creates a unique day, one that deserves its own *shehecheyanu*.

Perhaps this final approach answers another question as well: Why this day became *Simchat Torah*. The Rabbis could not leave the day an empty shell<sup>52</sup> – it was waiting to be filled with a celebration appropriate to its theme. Simchat Torah is a fitting celebration on this day, as we complete the public reading of the entire Torah, dance with the *Sifrei Torah* and celebrate our bond with Hashem. This is what we celebrate on Simchat Torah; it is not merely a *siyyum* of the Torah we have learned as a community each Shabbat throughout the year, but rather a celebration of Hashem's love for us, of the unique connection He has with us, and how much He wants us to remain close to Him.

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<sup>52</sup> It is an interesting question exactly when *Shemini Atzeret* evolved into *Simchat Torah*. The Gemara in *Megilla* 31a writes that we read *VeZot HaBerakhah* on *yom tov acharon*, which seems to indicate that we finish the Torah that day. The *Darkei Moshe* (OC 669) cites the Maharik, who quotes in the name of the Geonim that there was already at that time a *minhag* to dance on this day over the completion of the Torah.