

I don't know about all y'all, but by this time of year, I get pretty tired. It's not surprising that I crashed at services last week. For everyone who has attended services over the past three weeks, it's been a lot of socializing, a lot of holidays, a lot of liturgy. By the time we get to these final holidays of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, it does feel like the last miles of a marathon.

And I know this last holiday is particularly confusing: Shemini Atzeret. No one is particularly sure what it is: Is it just the end of Sukkot? Is it a distinct holiday in its own right? What (if anything) is it commemorating?

This holiday is mentioned briefly in two of the places in Torah that discuss the major holidays:

Leviticus 23:34-6 teaches: Say to the Israelite people: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be the Feast of Booths to Hashem, [to last] 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 Hashem. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to Hashem; it is an *Atzeret* gathering: you shall not work at your occupations.

After describing the specific animal sacrifices brought each day of Sukkot, Numbers 29:35 teaches:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצַרְתָּ תַהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations.

It then goes on to describe the animal sacrifices for that day.

So what we know about this day is that it is the eighth day from the beginning of Sukkot – yom haShemini – and that it is an Atzeret, literally a day of stopping. Hence the name, Shemini Atzeret.

What does it mean to do a day of stopping? In some sense, that is Shabbat, whose root also refers to ceasing from activity.

But Sforno points out: “The concept of *עצירה* is something apart from the concept of *שביתות*. The latter pertains to abstaining from ordinary secular activities, whereas the former entails spending a certain amount of time performing holy tasks, studying Torah, engaging in communal prayer, etc. . . It is in this sense that the Torah refers to the day following the seventh day of the Sukkot festival as Atzeret, an assembly for G’d, the pilgrims for the Sukkot festival to Jerusalem being detained there for an additional day.”

SO Atzeret isn’t just defined by *not* doing. It’s a stopping in order to gather, to connect, to celebrate.

Now, you might rightly point out that we have now been doing exactly that for several weeks already, and maybe we are a little bit tired and ready to get on with our lives. So I love this parable that several commentators bring to explain the emotional valence of Shemini Atzeret. In Rashi’s words:

“*עצרת הוא* — The word is derived from the root *עצר* “to hold back” and suggests: I keep you back with Me one day more. It is similar to the case of a king who invited his children to a banquet for a certain number of days. When the time arrived for them to take their departure he said, “Children, I beg of you, stay one day more with me; it is so hard for me to part with you!”

Chizkuni, writing a couple of generations later, explains that Sukkot is the only holiday followed by an Atzeret by extending this metaphor of the king. At the end of Pesach and the end of Shavuot, he writes, the king asks, “when will you visit me again? And the children answer, “oh, in just a couple of months.” But “when this story repeated itself a third time and on that occasion the children told him that they would not visit him again until after about seven months, the king begged them to delay their departure for at least one additional day. They agreed and did so. He gave them a special blessing for having spent the extra time with him. . . .The reason there is no pilgrimage festival during the winter is to save the people having to travel to Jerusalem during the inclement winter months.”

Now, I don't particularly relate to the king metaphor for God in general. But given how our liturgy uses the Avinu Malkeinu imagery to push us to feel small and insignificant, I really enjoy this counterpoint of using the same metaphor of the father/king to imagine an intimacy, a yearning for connection – a significance to our presence – as we finish this holiday season. I like the reminder that these holidays are about creating intimacy. If you don't connect with any of the God imagery, they are at least about creating intimacy in community with each other, as we bare our souls and bear our burdens together. And this parable reminds us that we shouldn't hurry away from that kind of intimacy.

In my family, my husband, who can be very efficient, likes to give me and my parents a hard time over how we linger over goodbyes – he calls it the Jewish way of saying goodbye without leaving. But as the commentaries on Shemini Atzeret suggest, sometimes we should let it linger.

Or as I like to say when talking to people who complain about having so many Jewish holidays: “What, you have too much holiness in your life? Too many opportunities for celebration? Too much mindfulness about how amazing this world is and how astounding that we are in it together?”

So – it will be another seven months before our next chag. By all means, feel some relief as we turn and return to our regular pursuits. But let's not rush away too quickly. Let's look into each other's eyes one more time, let's have one more festive meal. Let's honor this special eighth day of *Atzeret* as an opportunity to experience the sweetness, those of us who are still here, still doing the chag thing, of lingering together over sacred time.