



A Festival About Nothing

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In Israel, Shemini Atzeret-Simḥat Torah feels like the busiest day of the year.¹ So many prayers; so many different atmospheres. Year after year, juggling back and forth from the joy of celebrating the completion of the annual Torah cycle with singing, dancing, and endless Torah readings, to the more somber parts of the holiday—Yizkor; the prayer for rain—leaves me exhausted and a little dizzy, almost wishing for the peace and quiet of “*aḥarei ha-ḥagim* - after the holidays.”

Over the past three years, however, the joyful messiness of this celebration has become something else entirely. The horror unfolding before our eyes three years ago; the raw memory of that day a year later, when new *piyyutim* and prayers, and carefully planned *hakkafoṭ*, attempted to give expression to communal mourning and individual grief; and last year, the bittersweet joy that accompanied the return of the last hostages remaining alive, just

¹ In contemporary Israel—and unlike in the Diaspora—Shemini Atzeret and Simḥat Torah are celebrated on the same day.



a few hours before the beginning of the festival—all these have transformed the last of the Tishrei holidays into a symbolic, existential, and emotional uphill battle.

How can one day hold together so many conflicting meanings and moments? What does it mean for Shemini Atzeret to have become the time and the vessel for so many layers of meaning?

The Torah is actually completely silent as to the meaning of Shemini Atzeret. The eighth and last day of Sukkot is a holiday with special sacrifices and a prohibition on working. But its name—*atzeret* (עצרת)—is puzzling, seeming to describe what the day is like rather than its significance. Some modern scholars suggest that *atzeret* refers to either a solemn concluding assembly or a closing gathering.² Traditional commentators have given it various meanings: staying in place; a gathering of joy; the prohibition of work (*melakhah*); the requirement to spend more time in the sacred space worshipping God; or an invitation to spend one more day in intimacy with God.³

Shemini Atzeret's essentially neutral, blank name echoes its lack of content, whether historical, agricultural, or spiritual. Unlike Pesah and Sukkot, it does not commemorate the history of Benei Israel in the desert; unlike Shavuot and Sukkot, it has no agricultural meaning

² Jacob Milgrom and Jeffrey Tigay, respectively: Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (on Numbers 29:35), *Anchor Yale Bible: Leviticus* (on Leviticus 23:36); Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (on Deuteronomy 16:8). In Rabbinic literature, the use of the name *atzeret* to refer to Shavuot seems to hinge on the similar absence of any positive *mitzvot*, once the ritual of the *bikkurim* (first fruits) has disappeared after the Temple's destruction. Yet, while Shavuot in *Hazal* takes up an additional, overwhelming meaning (the celebration of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai), Shemini Atzeret remains a "vacant holiday."

³ For these interpretations, see Sifrei Bemidbar #151; Targum Yerushalmi (pseudo-Yonatan) and Rashi on Numbers 29:35; the Seforno and Rashi on Leviticus 23:36.



or origin; it is not connected to communal spiritual processes like remembrance (Rosh Hashanah) or atonement (Yom Kippur). Moreover, no specific *mitzvot* are attached to it: no *shofar*, no fasting, no four species, no dwelling in *sukkot*, and no first-fruits offerings. With no event to remember, no narrative, no script, no props, it is, literally, a festival about nothing.

What can be the meaning of a festival that is, literally, about nothing? Can the void of Shemini Atzeret have a spiritual, emotional, and ritual place in our lives?

R. Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin,⁴ suggests that the vacuum of Shemini Atzeret allows us to access the bare essence of holiness and celebration. In his commentary on Sukkot (Peri Tzaddik Hag ha-Sukkot 39), R. Tzadok compares Shemini Atzeret to all the other festivals: while each has its specific commandments, its rituals, and its contents, Shemini Atzeret stands out as a vacant holiday. Yet this does not make Shemini Atzeret a lesser, less meaningful celebration. To the contrary, it is a day in which the spiritual connection—the flow of holiness (שפע קדושתם) that happens in other festivals through rituals and specific commandments—happens on its own, “without any [initiating] action on the part of human beings (בלי שום פעולה מצד האדם).” That is why, according to the Tikkunei Zohar⁵ cited by R. Tzadok, Shemini Atzeret is a festival in which “all the other festivals are celebrated” (הג דכל) (החגין מתחגגין ביה)—a festival that contains—and perhaps transcends—all other festivals.

Because Shemini Atzeret, suggests R. Tzadok, has no specific content of its own, it is the purest, barest, most essential manifestation of the notion of celebration—something akin to

⁴ Poland, 1823-1900.

⁵ A sort of appendix to the central work of Kabbalah, the Zohar.



the very “Idea” of a Holy Day. It is a day that allows us, precisely because it is stripped down of positive content, to question with a renewed, unmediated intensity: What does it mean to make time and space for holiness and encounter? What does it mean to experience joy—not joy about something, but pure, transcendent joy—as a state of being independent of an object or an event? And how may this joy radiate through our year?

The new layers of meaning superimposed on Shemini Atzeret three years ago will likely reshape our generation’s experience of this holiday. In Israel, there may never again be a Shemini Atzeret-Simhat Torah when we don’t try to juggle and hold together the joy and the mourning, the trauma and the hope, the end and the beginning, the last day and the day after. Just as the solemn gravity of Yom Kippur became a powerful vehicle for the national trauma in the wake of the 1973 war, pouring new emotional contents and spiritual intensity to the most central prayers of the day, the blank canvas of Shemini Atzeret-Simhat Torah might provide to our communities a structure malleable enough to evolve as we process our collective grief and edge towards healing.

But we can try and hold in our heart and in our soul the promise of a festival about nothing: Shemini Atzeret is, in light of R. Tzadok’s reading, a unique opportunity to give an intransitive meaning to the notion of celebration—to experience the idea of celebration outside of any specific historical remembrance or spiritual moment. Shemini Atzeret, the very last of the Tishrei Holidays, calls us to suspend the impulse to celebrate **something**—to fill the celebration with an object, to circumscribe the holiness of the day. It calls us to pause, ponder, and reside in the openness of a celebration that is, literally and essentially, about nothing—that is, about existence, and about presence.

