

Shmini Atzeret 5784

Yizkor - Shmini Atzeret: Just be  
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Shabbat Shalom, Chag Sameach.

When I was a student in Jewish day school, Shmini Atzeret was the one Jewish holiday I never fully understood. All the other holidays seem to have a special food connected to it, but not this one. All the other holidays seem to commemorate the agricultural cycle or a historical event, but not this one. All the other holidays seem to have a special ritual to do, but not this one (aside from the Geshem prayer for rain). To add to my confusion, in some ways Shmini Atzeret is an extension of Sukkot - for example, it's called "*Shmini* - the eighth," and they both share the same tagline in our prayers "*Zman Simchateinu* - time of our joy." But in other ways Shmini Atzeret is completely separate from Sukkot - for example, we do not eat in the Sukkah. What is Shmini Atzeret really about? What are we even supposed to *do* today?

The answer is...today is not about *doing* but just *being*, and that's really the point.

The Torah doesn't tell us what is special about the day. Over the week of Sukkot, a whopping 70 bulls were to be sacrificed on the altar, while on Shmini Atzeret only one bull was to be brought. For the rabbis, the number 70 represented the whole world, for there were originally 70 nations. And the number one stood for Israel, alone and unique. Rashi understands that Sukkot was thus a universal holiday, celebrated by us on behalf of the world. But Shmini Atzeret was a particular holiday, just for ourselves. He teaches that this holiday is G-d reaching out to the Jewish people to spend just a little more time together after the world was invited to the Sukkot party, as it were. Rashi cites the parable of a king who invites his children to dine with him at a big party for a number of days, but when the time comes for all the guests to leave, he asks his children to stay for another day, since it is difficult for him to part from them. It's a sort of after-party.

Rabbi Asher Lopatin, formerly of Chicago, takes this further. He writes: "*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 G-d and the Jewish people... The term, 'atzeret,' means 'stop and come in.' As busy as G-d is with the whole world, G-d 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.'*"

This is the appropriate end to the holiday season of Tishrei - Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot - all in the past now. Those were big moments, each with their own highlights and anxieties. And now we move forward into the ordinary rhythm of life without holidays for

two months until Hanukkah. We'll gain some more free time and Sundays...but also lose some special moments as a community and families.

Here's one thing we definitely *do* on Shmini Atzeret - say Yizkor. We take time to remember our loved ones who are no longer with us. But when we remember our family members who are no longer alive, exactly what do we remember? What images come to mind? What specific moments do we recall?

I bet we remember the big events with our loved ones: Simchas together, birthdays together, holiday meals together, vacations together, ball games and shows together. In short, we think of being together for life's special moments, the ones we knew in advance to bring our cameras for (that was when people actually brought cameras). We probably have photos on our walls of these snapshot moments together: trips, games, graduations, parties, weddings, and the like. In a way, these moments are like the other big Tishrei holidays - big events at key moments surrounded by lots of people. Those are Tishrei moments.

But Shmini Atzeret prompts us to remember those other special moments we shared with our loved ones, where there was nothing obviously special about it. The in-between moments. The just-at-home moments. The just-hanging-out moments. The moments we didn't dress up for or bring our cameras to.

The moments when we didn't make plans for or think anything exciting would happen, like watching a movie on a couch together, or cooking dinner together, or talking on a rainy day together, or enjoying Sunday dinner together, or going for a walk together, or playing catch together. We may have photos of these moments on our walls too, the ones we didn't dress up for but moments we just wanted to capture and last. These moments, which are pivotal to all relationships, mimic Shmini Atzeret - "stop and come in. Just sit there and be there." These low-key moments, Shmini Atzeret moments, mattered tremendously, the ones that were just about being present with our loved ones. And the holiday of Shmini Atzeret captures that energy perfectly. G-d wants to just be with us for one more day. We get one more chance to invite company for meals (of course we have Shabbat too). And those are truly gifts.

As Rabbi Eryn London writes: *"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 G-d. It is a chance to appreciate the extra time we have with our friends and family. It is a time to 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 - after the holidays' will be."*

Chag Sameach.