

## Shmini Atzeret: Celebrating WHAT?

Shmini Atzeret – Rabbi Jay Weinstein

What would Hanukka be without a *menora*? Pesach without *matza*? Rosh haShana without the *shofar*? This sounds strange because the focus of every holiday is always the special *mitzvot* which pertain to that day. Yet, when you read the verses in the Torah which discuss Shmini Atzeret (the holiday immediately after Sukkot), you'll find that there is no specific commandment connected to this holiday! It is in fact a new holiday from Sukkot, and one recites the blessing of *Shehecheyanu* which signifies a new holiday. How can there be a Yom Tov without any *mitzvot* attached to it?

The Midrash describes the holiday of Shmini Atzeret by comparing God to a King whose children have come to visit him. At the end of a long and pleasurable visit, the King implores his children so stay one more day because their departure is hard on him. The High Holidays we have just marked, beginning with Rosh haShana until the end of Simchat Torah are a "long visit" we have with God. Before returning back to our daily routine and regular lives, God "requests" of us to spend on more day with Him. This day is beyond mitzvot and specific tasks, but rather a day for us to be close to Hashem.

Even though there are no *mitzvot* performed on this day, what makes it unique is the fact that the holiday is on the 8th day of Sukkot. Nachmanides, a 12th century Spanish commentator, explains this significance. The number seven represents the natural world. For example, a week is comprised of seven days, there are seven notes on the musical scale and there are seven directions (left, right, up, down, forward, back and center). The holiday of Sukkot is seven days and therefore is represents the world of nature. Once we pass these seven days and get to day number eight, we move into the area which is beyond nature and celebrate the holiday of Shmini Atzeret.



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The existence of the Jewish people and our connection to God is beyond nature. As Mark Twain wrote: "All things remain mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" The Jewish people have survived thousands of years of persecution, exile, adversity and expulsion. By every natural law, we should no longer exist, and we certainly should not be a leading people in the world. Yet, the Jewish nation has achieved and thrived far beyond their numbers.

Shmini Atzeret, is portrayed in the Midrash as the special relationship to Hashem and by being placed on the eighth day which is beyond the natural world, celebrates this idea. We continue celebrating this idea on Simchat Torah, as we dance and sing with the Torah scrolls that represent us as a Jewish people and God's chosen nation.



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