

## HOLDING US BEFORE GOD'S PRESENCE

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

What is Shemini Atzeret?

The shortest answer to that question is that it is one of the *moadim* (מועדים). *Moeid* (מועד), from the root ט-ע-ר, means a fixed time; it is our national meeting time with God. Think of the *moadim* (as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel did of Shabbat) like palaces in time—palaces in which festivities take place, in which we are forbidden to work. And clearly this eighth day (that's the *shemini* part) does not belong to the Sukkot festival, but is an independent *moeid* of its own. (Sukkah 48a)

But why do we need it?

After all, we've been doing nothing but meeting with God, it seems, since the beginning of Tishrei. Shemini Atzeret is seemingly not characterized by any special mitzvah. And the seventh day of Pesach is also called *atzeret*. So how is this day different from any of those days?

The scripture (Vayikra 23:36) says about it: *Atzeret hi*. The root ט-ע-ר seems to mean holding together and concentrating. And as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches, if we look at the places in Tanakh where the root ט-ע-ר is used, we find that in the majority of cases it has the meaning of holding onto—persons, things, or forces—to guard against their becoming lost.

But what exactly is it that we are in danger of losing?

Rabbi Hirsch answers that Shemini Atzeret is not a day to bring new lessons and new truths for us to accept. It has instead the mission to hold us before God's Presence. But how is that possible?

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) tells the story of a king who invited his children to a feast for a certain number of days, and when the time came for them to leave, he said: "My children, please, stay with me one more day, it is difficult for me to part with you."

Most of us know this feeling (at least with our own children). Perhaps even Moses himself knew this feeling coming down the mountain from his meetings with God. Is it possible to hang on to the Shechinah and still live in the real world?

Imagine that your boss gives you the assignment of traveling to another world to observe a certain phenomenon in a very limited amount of time. Upon your return, your boss immediately presses you for details. What would your response be? Most of us might say something like: Wait a minute! I have to have time to think about this. I need a day to reflect on what I saw and heard.

And so it is with us at this time of the year, at the end of the cycle of festivals. We need a day to think back on the meaning for our own lives of what we have learned. We need to ask ourselves: how do we not become lost in the craziness of life, when the world wants so very much of us, when the world demands our time, our energy, and even our souls? Shemini Atzeret brings the gift of time.

The words *atzeret hi* tell us that to save ourselves from being lost, we must accomplish two acts. We must remain with God, and we must hold on to the learning we have acquired. But we can really only do the former when we have accomplished the latter.

Shemini Atzeret calls upon us to gather up all the spiritual treasures that we have collected during the days of the Festivals, so that we can step over into the course of our ordinary lives, prepared to use them to transform the ordinary into the holy. In that respect, we are like travelers from another time, who hold on tightly to the treasures they have found in another world but which they intend to put to use in this world.

The day called Shemini Atzeret comes to tell us, once again, to impress what we have learned upon ourselves so deeply that it becomes a part of

us, a part that cannot become lost in the vicissitudes of this dimension. If we can do that, then we can

live in the real world in the presence of the Shechinah.

*Chag sameach!*

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