

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

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Rain, Memory, and the Dance with the Torah — For the Home

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Today is Hoshana Rabbah. This morning we circled the bimah seven times, struck the willows on the ground, and finished the seven days of water and joy. Tonight a different day begins. In Eretz Yisrael, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are one day, and this year that day is Shabbat. In a single day we ask for rain, remember our dead, finish the Torah and begin it again, and dance.

This piece follows the day in order. Behind all of it is the same question that ran through the Sukkot week: how does each single Jew stand inside the whole people? On Shemini Atzeret the nations' seventy bulls are gone and only Israel remains. On Simchat Torah every one of us, scholar and child, is called up to the same Torah.

I. Shemini Atzeret: a festival of its own

"Stay with Me one more day"

The Torah calls the eighth day atzeret: "On the eighth day there shall be a holy convocation for you... it is an atzeret; you shall do no work of labour" (Vayikra 23:36). Rashi explains the word as "I have held you back with Me." He gives a parable: a king invited his children to a feast for a set number of days. When the time came for them to leave, he said, "My children, please, stay with me one more day; kashe alai preidatchem, your parting is hard for me" (Rashi on Vayikra 23:36).

The Gemara gives a second parable, which closes the offerings of the festival. Over the seven days of Sukkot seventy bulls were brought, corresponding to the seventy nations of the world. On the eighth day a single bull was brought, corresponding to the single nation. It is like a king who told his servants, "Make me a great feast," and on the last day said to his beloved friend, "Make me a small meal, so that I may enjoy your company" (Sukkah 55b).

Sukkot was for the whole world. Shemini Atzeret is between G-d and Israel alone. There is no sukkah, no lulav and no special mitzvah, only the being together.

"A festival in its own right"

The Gemara establishes that the eighth day is not merely the tail end of Sukkot: "The eighth day is a festival in its own right" (regel bifnei atzmo). It has its own offering, its own song, its own blessing and its own requirement to stay overnight in Yerushalayim (Sukkah 47a). For this reason we say Shehecheyanu again tonight in Kiddush and at candle lighting, as for a new festival.

II. Mashiv haruach umorid hageshem

When we begin

The Mishnah asks when we begin to mention "the power of rain" in our prayers. Rabbi Eliezer says from the first day of the festival, and Rabbi Yehoshua says from the last day. Rabbi Yehoshua reasons that rain during Sukkot is a sign of curse, so why mention it while we are sitting in the sukkah? (Mishnah Taanit 1:1). Rabbi Yehudah adds that on the last day of the festival, the one who leads the Musaf service mentions rain, and the one who leads Shacharit does not (Mishnah Taanit 1:2).

That is the halacha. We begin mashiv haruach umorid hageshem, "He causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall", in the Musaf of the last festival day, Shemini Atzeret, and continue until the Musaf of the first day of Pesach (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 114:1). Tomorrow, therefore, at Shacharit we still do not mention rain. The chazzan's announcement before Musaf changes the year.

Why in the blessing of the resurrection?

Rain is mentioned in the second blessing of the Amidah, the blessing of tehiyat hametim, the reviving of the dead. The Gemara explains: "Because it is equal to the resurrection of the dead, they set it in the blessing of the resurrection" (Berachot 33a). A dry field that comes back to life after rain is a small resurrection, one that happens every winter in front of our eyes.

Israel and abroad; rain and dew

The day itself differs. In Eretz Yisrael, Shemini Atzeret is the single last day of the festival, and rain is mentioned from its Musaf. Outside the Land, where two days are kept, the eighth day is Shemini Atzeret and the ninth is Simchat Torah, and rain is mentioned from the Musaf of the eighth day.

In the summer months, Sephardim and most communities in Eretz Yisrael say morid hatal, "He causes the dew to fall." The Rema records that Ashkenazim abroad mention neither dew nor rain in the summer (Rema, Orach Chaim 114:3). From tomorrow, everyone says mashiv haruach umorid hageshem. (The actual request for rain, veten tal umatar, begins later. In Israel that is the seventh of Cheshvan, fifteen days after the festival, giving the last pilgrims time to get home dry (Mishnah Taanit 1:3).)

III. Tefillat Geshem

At Musaf the chazzan, in many Ashkenazi communities dressed in a white kittel as on the High Holidays, leads the prayer for rain. In Ashkenazi practice it comes within his repetition of the Amidah; in Sephardi practice it is said before Musaf. Its central poem, Af-Beri, is by Rabbi Elazar HaKalir, the great early poet of the liturgy. Af-Beri is the name of the angel appointed over the rain.

The prayer then asks for rain in the merit of the forefathers, one by one. "Remember the father [Avraham], drawn after You like water..." Then come Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, who drew water from the rock, Aharon, who washed in water on Yom Kippur, and the twelve tribes, whom You brought through the parted waters. Every stanza ends with the refrain *ba'avuro al timna mayim*, for his sake do not hold back water.

The kittel is the reason this prayer feels like the High Holidays. The Mishnah teaches that on the festival the world is judged for water (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2). Tefillat Geshem is the last plea of that judgment. Once it is said, the season of awe is over.

The words also teach something about the Klal. We do not ask for rain on our own merit. We ask in the merit of fathers whose stories every one of us shares. And the rain we ask for falls on every field, the righteous man's and his neighbour's alike.

IV. Yizkor on Shemini Atzeret

The custom and its reason

On Yom Kippur we remember the souls of the departed and pledge charity for them. The Shulchan Aruch writes: "It is the custom to pledge charity on Yom Kippur for the dead and to mention their souls, for the dead too have atonement on Yom Kippur" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 621:6). Ashkenazi communities extended this to the last day of each of the three festivals: the eighth day of Pesach, the second day of Shavuot, and Shemini Atzeret.

The reason usually given, recorded by later authorities such as the Levush, comes from the Torah reading used abroad on those days. It ends, "Each man according to the gift of his hand, according to the blessing of Hashem your G-d which He has given you" (Devarim 16:17). On a day we read about giving, we give *nodrin tzedakah*, a pledge of charity in memory of those who are no longer here to give. The pledge is the heart of Yizkor. It is something the living do for the soul's sake that the soul can no longer do for itself. In Eretz Yisrael the reading for the day is *Vezot HaBerachah*, but the custom of Yizkor on Shemini Atzeret remains.

Sephardi communities do not have a fixed Yizkor service on the festivals. They say the *Hashkavah*, the memorial prayer, for the departed at other times, especially when one is called to the Torah or on a *yahrzeit*.

Who steps out

In many communities, people whose parents are both alive leave the room during Yizkor. The reason given is simply not to stand among the mourners when one has no need to (some speak of avoiding an *ayin hara*). Practice for those within the first year of mourning varies. In some communities they do not say Yizkor in the first year, because the loss is still too fresh; in others they do. Each person should follow the custom of his community and ask his rabbi.

When the day is Shabbat

This year in Israel the day falls on Shabbat. Yizkor is said as usual. Since nothing may be written on Shabbat, the pledge is made in the heart, without naming or writing an amount, and is paid after the festival. In Ashkenazi practice, *Av HaRachamim*, the ancient prayer for the martyred communities, is said after Yizkor. The Rema records the custom of saying it on Shabbat, but not

on days when Tzidkatcha is omitted at Mincha (Rema, Orach Chaim 284:7). A festival is such a day, so ordinarily it would be left out. When Yizkor is said, however, Ashkenazi custom is to say it, because it belongs with the remembering of souls. Tzidkatcha, the short acceptance of judgment at Shabbat Mincha, is not said on Yom Tov, so this Shabbat afternoon it is omitted.

The calendar

In Eretz Yisrael, Shemini Atzeret–Simchat Torah falls on the same day of the week as Rosh Hashanah, so it can only be a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday or Shabbat. In recent years it fell on Shabbat in 5781 (2020), in 5784 (2023), and now in 5787. It did not fall on Shabbat in the last two years: in 5785 it was a Thursday and in 5786 a Tuesday. Next year, 5788, it will again be on Shabbat.

The Shabbat Simchat Torah of 5784, the seventh of October 2023, is in every Israeli memory. This year, on the same Shabbat-and-festival, many will say Yizkor for those killed that day and since. The individual name and the national loss are said in the same breath.

V. Simchat Torah: the name and the origin

The Torah never mentions a festival called Simchat Torah. The day's reading is already fixed in the Gemara: "On the next day we read Vezot HaBerachah" (Megillah 31a). This follows the Babylonian custom of finishing the Torah every year. In the Land of Israel in the time of the Gemara, many communities followed a cycle of about three years (Megillah 29b). The name and the celebrations grew up in the post-Talmudic period, in the age of the Geonim and the early Rishonim, as the annual cycle spread.

The Rema explains the name: "The last festival day is called Simchat Torah, because we rejoice and make a feast for the completion of the Torah" (Rema, Orach Chaim 669:1). He adds that the one who finishes the Torah and the one who begins Bereishit pledge gifts and invite others to a celebration (there, from the Tur).

VI. Hakafot and the dancing

Circling with the Torah

The Rema records the custom of taking out all the Torah scrolls from the ark at night and in the morning. People sing songs of praise, "each place according to its custom", and circle the bimah with the scrolls "as we circle with the lulav, and all of it for the sake of joy" (Rema, Orach Chaim 669:1). This morning we circled the bimah holding the four species around one Torah. Tonight the Torah itself is in our arms.

The custom of seven hakafot, both at night and by day, is associated with the Ari in Tzfat, whose practice is recorded in the writings of his students. In Eretz Yisrael, where the festival is a single day, many communities hold Hakafot Shniyot, "second hakafot", on the night after the festival ends. They are often public celebrations with music, held at the same hour as Simchat Torah abroad, so that the dancing joins the whole people across the world. This custom too is often traced to the Ari's Tzfat, but its origins are less certain. It became widespread in modern Israel.

Joy in a mitzvah

The Rambam, writing about the Simchat Beit HaShoevah, set the standard for this kind of dancing: "The joy a person rejoices in doing a mitzvah and in love of G-d who commanded it is a great service." He continues that whoever holds himself back from it, or stands on his dignity there, is a fool, and that true greatness is to dance before Hashem as King David did before the ark (Rambam, Hilchot Lulav 8:15).

The Lubavitcher Rebbe often drew attention to a strange feature of Simchat Torah. We dance with the Torah closed, in its mantle, and do not learn from it while we dance. On this day the celebration is not about how much each of us understands. The Torah, as it were, rejoices with every Jew, and the dancing is done with the feet, the part of a person that carries the whole body and is the same in the scholar and the simplest Jew. Here every Jew stands at the same height before the Torah.

VII. The three Sifrei Torah

After the hakafot, three scrolls are taken out for the reading. The Shulchan Aruch sets the order: in the first scroll we read Vezot HaBerachah to the end of the Torah; in the second, Bereishit until "which G-d created to make"; in the third, the maftir reads the offering of the day (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 669:1). In Eretz Yisrael all this is done on Shemini Atzeret itself, so the maftir is the offering of the eighth day. This year it is also the Shabbat reading.

The first scroll: Vezot HaBerachah and the Chatan Torah

The last portion of the Torah is Moshe's blessing to the tribes, one by one, on the last day of his life. Each tribe receives its own blessing, matching its own nature and role, and yet the blessing opens with the whole people: "Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Yaakov" (Devarim 33:4). The Torah is given to each tribe separately and belongs to all of them together, as an inheritance no one earns and no one can lose.

In many communities the portion is read again and again, so that every person in the shul can be called up. The Rema records the custom of "increasing the number called to the Torah, reading one portion many times, and there is no prohibition in this" (Rema, Orach Chaim 669:1). Then comes Kol HaNe'arim, "all the children". The children who are not yet bar mitzvah are called up together, under a great tallit spread above them like a canopy, and the congregation blesses them with Yaakov's words: Hamalach hago'el oti, "May the angel who redeemed me from all harm bless the lads" (Bereishit 48:16). Every child has a place under the same tallit.

The last aliyah is given to the Chatan Torah, the "bridegroom of the Torah". He is called with a special reshut, a poetic summons that begins Merashut ha'El hagadol hagibor vehanora, "By permission of the great, mighty and awesome G-d". He reads the final verses, the death of Moshe and the closing words, "before the eyes of all Israel".

The Gemara records a dispute about those last eight verses. Who wrote "And Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there"? One view is that Yehoshua wrote them. Rabbi Shimon says that the Holy One dictated and Moshe wrote them bedema, with tears (Bava Batra 15a; Rashi brings the same view on Devarim 34:5). Rashi explains the very last words, "before the eyes of all Israel", as

referring to the breaking of the tablets, to which G-d agreed (Rashi on Devarim 34:12). The Torah ends with the whole people watching, and it is the whole people that answers Chazak chazak venitchazek.

The second scroll: Bereishit and the Chatan Bereishit

Immediately, without a pause, the second scroll is opened at the creation of the world, and the Chatan Bereishit is called with his own reshut. The Tur gives the reason: "It is customary to begin Bereishit at once, so that the Satan should have no opening to accuse, saying: they have finished it and do not want to read it any more" (Tur, Orach Chaim 669). The Torah has no last page. The moment one cycle closes, the next opens. A Jew is never done with the Torah.

The two chatanim are individuals, singled out with a poem and an honour, and they traditionally host a celebration for the whole community. They stand at the seam of the year on behalf of everyone: one closes for all of us, and one opens for all of us.

The third scroll: Maftir, "On the eighth day"

The third scroll is read for the maftir: "On the eighth day it shall be an atzeret for you; you shall do no work of labour..." with its one bull and one ram (Bamidbar 29:35–30:1). After the finishing and the beginning, the day returns to what it is in the Torah itself: Shemini Atzeret, the small meal with the King. The single bull of this reading is the "single nation" of the Gemara's parable.

So the order teaches the meaning. We finish, we begin at once, and then we come back to the plain obligation of the day.

VIII. The Haftarah: Yehoshua

The Gemara names a haftarah from the book of Kings for the day (Megillah 31a). The custom everywhere today, however, is to read the opening of the book of Yehoshua, "And it was after the death of Moshe" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 669:1). Tosafot record that this was attributed to Rav Hai Gaon (Tosafot on Megillah 31a).

The reason is plain. The Torah has just ended with the death of Moshe, and the haftarah begins with the words "after the death of Moshe". The story does not end with the great teacher. Leadership passes on, and the Torah passes with it. G-d says to Yehoshua, chazak ve'ematz, be strong and of good courage, three times, and "This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; you shall meditate in it day and night" (Yehoshua 1:6–9). That is the restart of Bereishit in the language of the prophets: you have finished, now begin.

Sephardim conclude the haftarah at verse 9, with G-d's promise: "for Hashem your G-d is with you wherever you go." Ashkenazim continue to the end of the chapter. There the tribes answer Yehoshua, "All that you have commanded us we will do... only be strong and of good courage" (Yehoshua 1:16–18). In the Sephardi ending G-d gives the leader strength. In the Ashkenazi ending the people give it back to him. Both are true, and both together are the relationship of the individual to the Klal.

IX. Why so much in one day?

In Eretz Yisrael, Shemini Atzeret is one day, as the Torah commands: "On the eighth day... it is an atzeret" (Vayikra 23:36). Outside the Land, Jews keep a second day of Yom Tov, a custom from the time when communities far from Yerushalayim were unsure of the date. The Sages ruled that even once the calendar was fixed, they should hold on to the custom of their fathers (Beitzah 4b). The result abroad is two days. The eighth is Shemini Atzeret, with Tefillat Geshem and Yizkor, and the ninth is Simchat Torah, with the finishing of the Torah. In Israel all of it falls on the single day, and this year it is Shabbat as well.

So in one day we hold Shabbat, a festival, the prayer for rain, Yizkor, the end of the Torah, its new beginning, and the dancing. It can feel like too much. Yet the crowding matches the meaning of the day. The King says, "Stay with me one more day; your parting is hard for me" (Rashi on Vayikra 23:36), and asks for a small meal with His beloved friend (Sukkah 55b). It is one day, not a week. A guest who has been asked to stay just one more day brings everything he has to it. The rain for the year to come, the memory of those who came before, the Torah that joins them, and the joy all converge in a single, gathered day of closeness. In the Land, where the Torah's own calendar is kept, the small meal is truly small, and very full.

X. The arc of Tishrei

The month began in Elul with the King in the field, accessible to anyone who goes out to meet Him. On Rosh Hashanah we crowned Him and were judged. On Yom Kippur we were sealed. On Sukkot we left our homes for His shade, poured water and rejoiced, and yesterday the notes went out.

Shemini Atzeret is the moment after all of it. The judgment is done, the world's bulls have been offered, and the King asks only for one more day. We answer with rain, memory and Torah. Rain is the year ahead; with Tefillat Geshem the judgment of water ends in a request. Memory is the people behind us, gathered in Yizkor. Torah is what joins the two, finished and begun again in one breath. The month that opened with the shofar of awe ends with dancing.

XI. The individual and the Klal

One bull, one people

All week the offerings were for the seventy nations. Today there is one bull. On Shemini Atzeret Israel is addressed as one, a single beloved friend at a small table. Within that one people, everyone is equally close.

Each tribe, one inheritance

Moshe blessed each tribe in its own words, and called the Torah "the inheritance of the congregation of Yaakov". No tribe's blessing was another's, and no tribe owned the Torah more than the others.

Each name, one Yizkor

At Yizkor each person says a name that only he or she can say: a father, a mother, a child. Yet it is said together, in one room, at one moment, and this year on a Shabbat when the whole country remembers together.

Every aliyah, one Torah

On Simchat Torah everyone is called up: the scholar, the newcomer, the man who has not been called up all year, and the children together under one tallit. The Chatan Torah and the Chatan Bereishit are honoured as individuals, but they finish and begin on behalf of the whole congregation.

Feet, not heads

We dance with the Torah closed. What we understand differs from person to person. The dancing, with the feet, is the same for everyone. On Hoshana Rabbah the water, which has no taste, belonged equally to all. On Simchat Torah the closed Torah does. In both cases the deepest thing in the festival is exactly what we hold in common.

Chazak ve'ematz

The haftarah ends, in the Ashkenazi custom, with the people telling their leader to be strong. The individual gives strength to the Klal and the Klal gives it back. So tonight, as the scrolls come out, each of us takes hold of a Torah that belongs to all of us, and tomorrow we will hear the chazzan ask for rain for the whole world.

Chag sameach, and a good, blessed, rainy year.

Sources

- Vayikra 23:36, with Rashi; Bamidbar 29:35–30:1
- Devarim 16:17; 33:4; 34:5, 12, with Rashi
- Bereishit 48:16
- Yehoshua 1:1–18
- Mishnah Taanit 1:1–3; Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2
- Sukkah 47a; 55b
- Beitzah 4b
- Berachot 33a
- Megillah 29b; 31a, with Tosafot
- Bava Batra 15a
- Rambam, Hilchot Lulav 8:15
- Tur, Orach Chaim 669
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 114:1, 3; 284:7; 621:6; 669:1, with the Rema
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe, talks on Simchat Torah (dancing with the closed Torah)

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