

Shabbat Shemini Atzeret 5781

Stay.

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You may wonder why we have Yizkor today, seeing as how we did it less than three weeks ago, on Yom Kippur. It's a reasonable question, which begs other questions: When is yizkor, and why then?

It would be easy to say that we do Yizkor at each of the shalosh regalim, the three ancient pilgrimage festivals--Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot--and on Yom Kippur. That would almost be true. Almost, but not quite--because Sukkot is over. Shemini Atzeret is not Sukkot. If we wanted to recite Yizkor on Sukkot, we should have done any day of the week that ended yesterday.

So, what, then, is Shemini Atzeret, why do we tend to think of it as the last day of Sukkot, and why did the rabbis decide to slide Yizkor off the full-on Sukkot pilgrimage and place it on this holiday of unclear meaning?

Let's start with the easy question. Why do many people think that this is the last day of Sukkot? The reason is because Sukkot is a 7-day holiday, but in the diaspora, we add an extra day to make sure we're observing the holiday on its correct date. It's an outdated practice, unnecessary with today's technology, but we've held onto it. So, one could argue that this is the 8th day of a 7-day holiday, since we live outside of Israel. And it would not be wrong.

But Shemini Atzeret is a biblically commanded holiday on its own terms. By Diaspora counting logic, we should observe it tomorrow.

But tomorrow is Simchat Torah, you say. Well, that holiday was created much more recently. In Israel, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are observed all in one day--the day that is really Shemini Atzeret, now with a twist of Torah celebration. Honoring the completion of our Torah reading cycle and starting anew on Simchat Torah is worthy of celebration, especially when nobody seems to know what Shemini Atzeret is supposed to be about.

In Temple times, Shemini Atzeret was a time for a ritual cleansing of the altar after an intense week of sacrificial use. An offering would be brought on this day, per the Torah's instruction, and then a series of water libations would be performed, with celebration lasting into the night.

Some have linked Shemini Atzeret to Shavuot, in the sense that each sort of frosts the cake of the festival that preceded it. Shavuot is the religious follow-up to Pesach, and Shemini Atzeret is the religious follow-up to Sukkot.

Now I'd like to answer the harder questions: What is the purpose of Shemini Atzeret, and why do we say Yizkor on this particular day? I think the answers are related. I would suggest that

we recite Yizkor today precisely because of what Shemini Atzeret is about. So now--what *is* it about?

The answer is not that it's about rain, although this is the day when our liturgy changes from praying for dew in the dry season to praying for rain in the wet season. But this is *not* a Jewish rain holiday.

The Torah tells us in two places that it is a solemn gathering and a holy day: "*Atzeret hi, mikrah kodesh*" (Lev. 23: 36, Num. 29: 12-38). Following seven days filled with sacrificial offerings--the biggest barbecue of the year and far and away the most joyful holiday of the year for our ancestors, here we have one day, and one bull to offer.

The name of the holiday tells us it is a gathering. The nuance of the word "*atzeret*" is that people have been retained, together, as if being held back from dispersing. Rashi quotes a midrash to flesh this out: A king gave a banquet for his children who had grown up and moved away. The banquets went on for several days, and when it was over, the king begged his children: Please, stay one day longer. It is so hard for me to part with you" (Rashi on Lev. 23:36). And that is exactly what this holiday is about--the sadness of parting, of saying goodbye to those we love.

Ibn Ezra adds that the word "*Atzeret*" really doesn't mean "assembly," but rather, a stoppage. He means "a stoppage of work," but I have always interpreted it as a continuation of what Rashi teaches: That parting is so difficult, we stop it for a day to be together simply, without fanfare, without a big party--to savoring one another's presence. In ancient times, it would be God and the Israelites holding each other's presence for one more day, and also the Israelite assembly delighting in a quiet encore before going their separate ways. In modern times, normally it is much the same--one last, but quieter day of sacred convocation with each other, here in our sanctuary, and with the Divine.

This year, Shemini Atzeret could feel almost unkind, because we have not been able to gather in our usual ways this entire holiday season. But we have gathered. In the past week alone, our kahal has had 14 organized, festive gatherings, 13 on screens and one delightful kumitz, in person. It's worth holding onto the extra togetherness many of us enjoyed together for one more day.

Now I want to tell you, if you haven't connected the dots yourselves, why I think it is that we say Yizkor on this day. This is the one day when we are called to stop and hold onto the feelings we felt and still feel in relationship to people who are no longer with us. Yizkor gathers us together with our memories of loved ones now departed, and brings them into our midst. We stand together, spirits of those who are here and of those who walk the earth no longer, in Divine unity, connected through God's unending love. Anyone who has loved knows that love never dies. Today, we remind ourselves what a sacred and precious blessing that is.

The Sefat Emet has a great deal to say about Sukkot, and whether or not he intends to, I think he offers support for my suggestion. He sees Shemini Atzeret as a prolonged send-off after the

7 days of Sukkot. Drawing on the Jewish practice of accompanying guests as they take their leave, he teaches that this is what God is doing with us--lovingly walking us out the door of the holiday season, as it were. He says that the language of send-off is also the language of accompaniment, *levayah*. *Levayah* the Hebrew word for funeral. It means accompaniment. We accompany our dead to their final rest (SE Deut., Sukkot 29:6). We walk slowly to the grave, stopping along the way, because it is so painful to say that final this-worldly goodbye to those we love.

The Sefat Emet makes another profound point. He draws on a midrash very similar to the one I quoted earlier, about the King who makes a banquet for his children and then begs them to stay one more day. The related midrash has the king making a banquet for his servant--metaphorically God hosting the Israelite nation in Jerusalem. Taking the perspective of the servant who is held back for one more day, the Sefat Emet offers this: "For the wise person who receives a gift from the King is happy because of the king, not because of the gift. Simply having received from the king brings eternal fulfillment" (Ibid.).

When we say Yizkor, we know how true that is. We may have items left to us by those who are gone--trinkets, maybe books, candle sticks, a tallit or kiddush cup, perhaps even an item of clothing or furniture. We treasure those things because we loved the person who left them for us. They make us happy because they remind us of how we felt in the presence of someone we loved, someone who loved us. We touch those objects and the door to eternity opens, lovingly.

This is the moment when we stop. We could not stop their leaving but we can make their memories so real now that we can almost feel their gentle touch on our cheek, their firm hand on our shoulder, their strong arms lifting us. Together, now, we stop and invite them in.

We rise and turn to page 330 in Siddur Lev Shalem, 516 in Sim Shalom, as I open the Aron for Yizkor.

PS

I will admit that we could tease out other possible meanings for this obtuse holiday. My son Benjy taught a webinar this past week, in which a group of rabbinical students came together over Zoom to try to figure out what this day is about. There were a few other possibilities. What I have offered today remains for me the strongest idea with the most ancient textual support. I am grateful to Benjy for giving me the Sfat Emet text with his well done translation.