

# 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 מ-ע-ד, means a fixed time; it is our national meeting time with God. Think of the *moadim* like palaces in time—palaces in which festivities take place, in which work is forbidden. 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.

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 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 says about it: *Atzeret hi*. And the root of *atzeret*, א-צ-ר, is evidently related to other roots, all of which mean holding together and concentrating. If we look at the places in Tanakh where the root א-צ-ר is used, we find that in the majority of cases it has the meaning of retaining or keeping back—persons, things, or forces—to guard against their becoming withdrawn or lost.

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

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches 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.

For example, 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."

The idea is to strengthen and solidify the impressions and knowledge we have already gained, so that they remain with us permanently and do not become lost in the hurly-burly of life. This would be entirely in accordance with the designation of the last day of a festival.

Take Pesach: For six days of Passover we permeate ourselves with all the facts and teachings about *yitziat mitzraim*, the coming out of Egypt. Then on the seventh day, called *atzeret*, we gather

up all the spiritual treasures that we have collected during the days of the Festival, so that we can, at the end of this seventh day, step into the course of our ordinary lives which then begin, truly enriched by them.

The purpose of *atzeret* is accomplished by our realizing once again all that we have gained by the festival, and by a firm resolution not to allow ourselves to be robbed of it in the turmoil and struggle and work of our day-to-day lives.

*Atzeret* is really two ideas: (1) Remaining with God and (2) holding on to all the spiritual acquisitions we have obtained. But they both really add up to the same thing. Now, if *Atzeret* were on the seventh day of Sukkot, it would only have the meaning of summing up and holding on to what we have learned during that festival. But *atzeret* here comes *bashemini*, on the eighth day, as an independent festival of its own, and with it brings to a close, not only the cycle of Festivals of the seventh month, but also the whole cycle of the festivals of the year.

Shemini Atzeret comes to tell us, once again, to summarize and gather to ourselves all the thoughts and messages and resolutions that the *moadim*, the meeting times of the whole year, have brought to us, and to resolve to hold on to them. That is, to impress them so deeply in our hearts that they become a part of ourselves, a part that cannot become lost in the course of our ordinary lives that we soon go back to. So that in all the vicissitudes that may be awaiting us, richly endowed by the *moadim*, we may persevere and remain with God.

On Bamidbar 29:35, the Sifre takes the word *atzeret* in connection with a general law about every offering that is brought. Nobody, the law tells us, may bring an offering in the Sanctuary and then immediately leave Jerusalem, as if the object of bringing an offering is achieved merely by offering it. But every one who has brought an offering over the threshold of the Mikdash must stay in its immediate neighborhood, the city of Jerusalem, at least until the next morning so that he first gathers together the impression of holiness he has received to *take back* with him on his return to the circle of his own home.

*Chag sameach.*

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