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Explaining Shemini Atzeret

Shemini Atzeret occurs immediately after Sukkot. Although its name implies that it is the eighth day of Sukkot, the Rabbis consider it to be a separate holiday. There are many explanations of the meaning and purpose of this holiday. The word "atzeret" can mean either "stoppage," "final," or "gathering."

The Torah states:

Numbers 29:35

On the eighth day you shall hold an *atzeret*; you shall not do any work.

The Mishna teaches that on Shemini Atzeret the world is judged for rainfall. This made Shemini Atzeret a particularly important time in Biblical and Temple times when we lived in an agrarian society.

Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:2

There are four times that the world is judged. On Passover for wheat, on Shavuot for fruit, on Rosh Hashana all inhabitants of the world pass before God like members of a flock... and on Shemini Atzeret it is judged for water.

Your Mishna Navigator

1. Why are there four different times that the world is judged?
2. Can you think of natural rhythms and time periods in our society? If you were to think of "times" in which we are judged today what would they include?

3. What is the significance of being judged for water?

Elsewhere in the Talmud Shemini Atzeret is understood as a day highlighting the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 55b

On Sukkot there were a total of 70 cows offered as sacrifices over the seven-day holiday. They offered 13 on the first day, 12 on the second, etc. until the final day when they offered six. On Shemini Atzeret only one cow was offered

Rabbi Elazar taught. The 70 cows [of Sukkot] are in correspondence to the 70 nations of the world. What is the purpose of the lone cow [of Shemini Atzeret]? It corresponds to the lone nation. It is like a parable to a king who said to his servants, "make for me a great feast." On the last day he said to his lover, "Make for me a small feast so that I may derive pleasure from you."

Your Talmud Navigator

1. Why, according to Rabbi Elazar, is there a need for Shemini Atzeret?
2. Why do we first celebrate Sukkot, which represents God's relationship to the entire world and then celebrate Shemini Atzeret, which represents God's unique relationship to the Jews?
3. What does this teach about how we should interact with the general community?

Later Biblical commentators further elaborate on this explanation of Shemini Atzeret.

Rashi, (Eleventh Century Biblical Commentator) Numbers 29:36

This is language of affection, like children departing from their father. He says, "your departure is difficult for me. Delay it one more day."

Chizkuni places it in the broader context of the Jewish calendar.

Chizkuni, (mid-thirteenth century Biblical Commentator, part of Rashi's school of thought) Leviticus 23:36

This is a parable to a king whose children came to visit him. The first time the king asked, "When will you return to me?" They told him, "in 50 days." He said, "Go in peace." The second time he asked, "When will you return?" They said in four months and he told them to "go in peace." The third time they told him, "we can't return for seven months." The king said, "if that's the case, please stay with me one more day so I can enjoy your company since you will be so delayed for so long." For this reason there is no *atzeret* for the Jews on Passover, because they return on Shavuot. And there is no *atzeret* on Shavuot because they will return on Sukkot. But on Sukkot, when they will not return again until Passover, God delays them one day.

Your Rashi and Chizkuni Navigator

1. How does Rashi's explanation differ from the Talmud's?
2. How does Chizkuni's explanation differ from the Talmud's?
3. Which explanation do you prefer? Why?

Conclusion

As you can see there are many explanations for the holiday of Shemini Atzeret. As is often the case in Judaism, these explanations are not exclusive one to the other. The multitude of explanations and understandings enriches our holiday experience.