

Shemini Atzeret is one of our holidays that is most hard to define. The confusion stems from 3 reasons

- 1) The Torah calls it “atzeret”, a term whose meaning has sparked much debate
- 2) It seems to be a part of sukkot, and yet it seems not to be. It is the day after sukkot, and yet it has no mitzvah of sukkah, lulav, or etrog. The Talmud refers to it as “regel bifnei atzmo”, a holiday unto itself, regarding 6 specific things, implying that in other senses it is indeed part of sukkot
- 3) Further, while we often think of Pesach and sukkot as being structurally parallel, that is not the case. Pesach is a seven day holiday, where the seventh day is an atzeret. Sukkot is a 7 day holiday, followed by an eight additional day.

So to get a clearer understanding of the day we must ask ourselves, what does atzeret mean, why is it both part of sukkot and also not, and why is it on the 8th day, and not the 7th like pesach?

So lets start with the first question, what does atzeret mean?

To be totally honest, the torah actually uses 2 words to describe the holiday. In Vayikra, when it is first encountered, we find:

[ויקרא כ"ג:ל"ז](#)

(לז) שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּקְרְיֻבוּ אִשָּׁה לִיקוּק בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אִשָּׁה לִיקוּק **עֲצֵרֶת הוּא** כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

Using the familiar atzeret. But a few pesukim later we get:

[ויקרא כ"ג:ל"ט](#)

(לט) אֲךְ בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת־תְּבוּאֹת הָאָרֶץ תִּתְּנוּ **אֶת־חַג־יִיקוּק** שְׁבַעַת יָמִים בַּיּוֹם הַרְּאשׁוֹן שְׁבַתוֹן וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שְׁבַתוֹן:

The word shabbaton.

If we look to one of the earliest interpretations of atzeret, we find the ibn ezra. He rejects the translation of atzeret as a day of gathering, refuting it from how the word is used elsewhere, and instead translates it as stopping, with the implication stopping from doing melocho.

At first glance, this seems extremely compelling as the word shabbaton, related to Shabbos, certainly has that connotation. Thus, for the Ibn Ezra, the torah is saying the same thing in 2 different ways.

However, at this point we get into a methodological question. Does the torah use synonyms merely for literary purposes? Or by the mere fact that the torah writes atzeret and not shabbaton, must the 2 words mean different things? In modern academic terms, this is the question of omnisignificance.

Obviously ibn ezra is of the first school, but other commentators disagree and translate atzeret differently.

Rashi agrees the implication is to hold back, but he interprets it as God “holding us back” as it were, from continuing with our mundane lives, and instead drawing close to him for one more day.

However, there is a third interpretation of the word, one that resonates with me and begins to show us a bigger picture of the holiday.

Rav Samson Refael Hirsch, who lived about 2 hundred years ago in Frankfurt am Main, translates atzeret as storage. He is of the opinion throughout his commentary on Torah that since Hebrew is a divine language, one can deduce the meaning of a root word from similar roots. He thus relates atzeret with an ayin to otzar with an aleph, which means a warehouse. Thus an atzeret is a day of storing, of internalizing the lessons and experiences we have gleaned over the past holiday and keeping them stored with us until the next holiday.

This explains beautifully why atzeret is only used on 3 contexts. The Torah never calls the first day of Pesach or Sukkot atzeret. Atzeret is the last day of Pesach, where we internalize its lessons. It is Shavuot, which concludes the sefirat haomer, a time of self reflection and inspection. And it is Shemini Atzeret, which concludes Sukkot.

This idea lets us answer the second 2 questions which were why is Shemini atzeret both a part of Sukkot but also not, and why is it the 8th day.

The 3 regalim are actually part of a cycle. This has many ramifications in halacha, one of which is that if a person makes a vow to give an offering, he has one regel cycle to fulfill it. The cycle begins at Pesach, continues at Shavuot, and ends at Sukkot.

The high holidays are also a cycle, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, continuing with Yom Kippur, and ending with Sukkot, specifically with Hoshana Rabbah.

Thus, while the other 2 atzerets were the culmination of their respective holidays, Shemini atzeret is much more. It is the culmination of the *holiday season*. It is both the pinnacle of Sukkot, and the end of both the regalim and Yamim Noraim cycles. Thus, it had to be on the 8th day, signifying that while it is connected to Sukkot, it also has a greater significance beyond Sukkot. It will be an entire 6 months before the next holiday, speaking from a biblical perspective, and thus it is an important time where we must internalize all we have gained from Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, and imbue it into our daily lives.

May we all merit to successfully internalize these lessons!

SECOND DVAR TORAH

Shemini Atzeret, while perhaps its own holiday in some rights, is intimately tied to sukkot. Thus, to understand it properly, we have to digress for a moment and ask, what is sukkot?

Sukkot is actually somewhat unique in the sense that, unlike by most mitzvot, the torah explicitly tells us why we do it. The verse states:

[ויקרא כ"ג:מ"ב-מ"ג](#)

(מב) בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב בַּסֻּכּוֹת: (מג) לְמַעַן יָדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

"In order that your generations will know that I (God) sat the children of Israel in Sukkot".

But we have to ask: what does this pasuk mean?

This may seem like it has an obvious answer, but in fact Jewish sources have debated what the fundamental purpose of sukkot is for hundreds of years. The earliest record of this debate begins when Onkeles takes a side in the early Mishnaic period, and the debate is further recorded in both the Sifra and the Talmud. Medieval commentators as well, including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Rambam, Ralbag, and Rashbam all took sides in this debate. I would even argue that our liturgy, the siddur itself, is a participant. It all relates to how to translate the word sukkah in the passuk

The Sifra gives the debate most succinctly:

ר' אליעזר אומר סוכות ממש היו. ר' עקיבא אומר, ענני כבוד היו: "

We have a fundamental debate. Are we commemorating actual huts that we dwelt in in the desert? Or, as Rabbi Akiva argues, are we commemorating the clouds of glory that protected and enveloped the Jews like a sukkah? This leads to 2 fundamentally different conceptions of the what sukkot is. However, to fully understand the implications of this debate, we have to take a deeper look at the regalim for a second.

The 3 regalim in the torah all have a dual significance. Each holiday has both a commemorative significance as well as an agricultural significance. Pesach commemorates the exodus. It is also the barley harvest. Shavuot is mattan torah and the fruit and wheat harvest.

As torah says in exodus:

וְחַג שִׁבְעַת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ בְּכוֹרֵי קִצִּיר חֲטָיִם וְחַג הָאֲסִיף תְּקִיפֹת הַשָּׁנָה:

And sukkot is both commemorative of the sukka in the wilderness, whatever that may mean, as well as of grain and grape harvest. In the words of the torah:

וְחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאֶסְפָּךְ מִגְרֶנֶךָ וּמִיָּקְבֶּדֶךָ:

After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days.

וְשִׁמַּחְתָּ בְּחַגֶּךָ אֶתֶּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וְהַלֹּוֹי וְהַגֵּר וְהִיתוּם וְהָאֶלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities.

שְׂבַעַת יָמִים תַּחֲגֹל לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה כִּי יִבְרַכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל תְּבוּאָתְךָ וּבְכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אֶחָד שְׂמֵחַ:

The agricultural meaning of the holidays relates to the fact that they were pilgrimage festivals. As the torah says in devarim:

שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים | בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה כָּל־זָכוֹרָךְ אֶת־פָּנֶי | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר בְּחַג הַמַּצּוֹת וּבְחַג הַשְּׁבִעוֹת וּבְחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה אֶת־פָּנֶי יְהוָה רֵיקָם:

Three times a year—on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Booths—all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed,

אִישׁ כַּמְתֵּנַת יָדוֹ כְּבִרְכַּת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלוֹךְ:

Matnas yado refers to the blessings of the most recent harvest.

Following in the theme of dual significance, most mitzvot of the regalim pertain to either the agricultural meaning or historical meaning. For example Matza is historical to commemorate the exodus. The Korban Omer is agricultural. Bikkurim is agricultural. This dual significance is part of a larger torah theme that even our mundane lives, including our very livelihood and work day, should be part of our religious identity.

Yet to have a deeper understanding of each of the regalim, it is necessary to integrate both elements into a holistic understanding.

So now, back to our debate about what sukkot commemorates. Lets start with the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, that we commemorate the clouds of glory.

When we were in the wilderness, enveloped by God's cloud, God's hand in nature was visible in a direct fashion. Someone who saw the clouds of glory would never doubt for a second that God is the source of all his blessings. By leaving the house and going into the sukkah, exposing oneself to the elements, we once again remind ourselves that God is the source of all that we have.

This is akin to the statement of the Rabbis that sailors are all God fearing men. Sailer's very lives often depended upon the elements, which to humanity are more easily perceived as being in Gods control. Thus, sailors don't forget about God, and accordingly, by entering the sukkah and remembering God's direct providence in the wilderness, we don't forget about God either. This is what the ushpizin prayer means when it calls entering the sukkah sitting in "tzilah dimheiminuta" the shade of the almighty.

And it is very important to do this at this time of year. While all the regalim correspond to harvests, sukkot is the biggest harvest of them all, including both grains and grapes. Remember that the torah was given to the Jews when they were an agrarian society. To put this in modern terms, sukkot historically was the time at the end of the year when you get your big bonus. Its when you feel wealthy and on top of the world. That is why it is called zman simchateinu.

It is human nature that when things are going very well and we just got a big paycheck, we attribute it to ourselves. We say *Kochi Viotzem yadi asa li et hachayil ha'ze*. It is precisely at this time that we need the sukkah to remind us who the source of all blessing is. The Talmud says that the reason why sechach must come from the ground is because sukkot is the time of gathering in the produce of the ground. The four species represent the fruits of the land of Israel. By waving them in the four compass directions and towards the heavens and the earth we are taking our paycheck and saying all is from God.

However, according to Rabbi Eliezer Sukkot is about something very different. This is explained by the Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim*. He writes that sukkot is about remembering, specifically during the harvest when we are at the height of our joy, how terrible things were in the midbar. This may seem like a shocking statement, but it actually makes a lot of sense. According to this perspective, to Rabbi Eliezer, we commemorate how in the desert, we didn't have a house. We didn't have property, or any societal institutions. We dwelled in a barren place unfit for habitation. Yes, we subsisted on miracles. But the living conditions were far from ideal. We commemorate this by sitting in uncomfortable huts. Sukkot isn't the matzah of the holiday, it is the maror.

Thus on sukkot, when we take the fruits of Eretz Yisrael, the land God gave us, at the time when things are their best, where we do have a house and a field and a normal life, we must remember where we came from, and thank God for all the good he has done for us. We enjoy the land of Israel in the merit of our forefathers, who themselves weren't as lucky. Thus, the four species as the fruits of the land are an expression not only of proclaiming God's rulership, but of giving thanks.

These two opinions can be seen in hallel as well. We shake the lulav and esrog at two points, by *Hodu*, where we give thanks, and by *ana hashem hoshia na*, where we ask God for aid. This corresponds exactly with the 2 above opinions. According to Rabbi Eliezer as explained by the Rambam, the 4 species are an expression of thanks. According to Rabbi Akiva, they are an expression of God's rulership, and thus it is fitting when requesting something from God, to affirm his ability to deliver.

At the end, while according to both opinions we sit in the sukkah for very different reasons, whether it be to commemorate a more ideal time where God's hand was clearer, or to commemorate a bad time and thus thank and recognize God for what we now have, the result is the same: realizing that God is the source of all.

Yet these 2 conceptions of sukkot lead us to different understandings of Shemini Atzeret.

Rashi, who subscribes to the clouds of glory opinion, presents Shemini Atzeret with the following analogy.

[G-d says to Israel,] "I have detained you [to remain] with Me." This is analogous to a king who invited his sons to feast with him for a certain number of days, and when the time came for them to leave, he said: "My sons! Please, stay with me just one more day; it is difficult for me to part with you!"

This theme relates to the offerings brought on sukkot. The offerings on the first 7 days sum to 70, representing the nations of the world. Yet the offerings on Shemini Atzeret are for us, the Jewish People. Thus, Shemini Atzeret is a special day that shows God's extra love for the Jewish people. The extra closeness we feel with Hashem means that we no longer need the lulav and sukkah to see God's hand; after 7 days of meditating on His presence in our lives, it is self evident. We thus discard the tools that we have used up until this point, i.e. the lulav and esrog, and join with God in a more intimate fashion.

The Rambam presents the relation of Shemini Atzeret to Sukkot differently. He views Shemini Atzeret as the pinnacle, the highest point of the holiday. At this point, the highest part of our enjoyment, it is no longer appropriate to remember that bad times of our past, as now is the time of unbridled joy. and Thus we no longer sit in the sukkah, which is a reminder of the bad times in our past.

One last thought: While these opinions seem in opposition, as we often say, Elu vElu divrei Elokim Chayim. Both opinions are true. But they are speaking to Jews living in different time periods. When the Jews were living in the land of Israel, Rabbi Eliezer's view was very inspiring. At the time when our nation was at its heights both politically and spiritually, it made sense to remind ourselves of more humble origins.

But now we are in exile. In many ways, we are in those bad times. We may have nice houses, but we certainly have a disconnect. We aren't living in Israel. We aren't eating from its fruits. Thus, for those in exile, it is far more useful to view sukkot as a time of strengthening our faith, of remembering how God controls the world and we are destined to be redeemed, to have better times.

I think that is why our liturgy, to my knowledge exclusively, looks at sukkot in the light of Rabbi Akiva, as clouds of glory. The prayers we say were all composed in the post exile period, when our leaders understood that sukkot was sorely needed as a time for rejuvenation.

It is my blessing and hope that speedily we should see the full redemption and merit to experience both aspects of sukkot in their entirety!