

Sh'mini Atzeret

Honeymoon with God

Is Sh'mini Atzeret an independent chag or is it the tail-end of Chag HaSukkot? This is the question that we are going to attack today.

A short learning session.

i. Pick up a chumash with Rashi and look at the following.

a. See the pesukim in Emor (Vayikra 23) and in Bamidbar 29.

- Is Sh'mini Atzeret a separate chag?
- (a Bamidbar question) Do its korbanot fit the pattern of Sukkot?

b. compare the following two comments of Rashi:

1. Vayikra 23:26 op cit. "Atzeret Hee"
2. Bamidbar 28:25 op cit. "Atzeret tih'yeh lachem" (p'shat and aggada)

- Contrast the two midrashim.
- How do each of them view the relationship between Sukkot and Sh'mini Atzeret?

ii. Other sources.

- Look in the machzor/siddur. Is Sh'minni Atzeret a separate chag here?
- See the machloket between the mechaber and Rama in Orach Chayim 668:1 as regards the proper text: "*shminni chag h'atzeret hazeh*" or "*shminni atzeret hachag hazeh*". What is the difference between the two opinions?

When we look in the Torah, we have good reason to assume that Sh'minni Atzeret is a part of chag Hassukot. After all, it is described as the "eighth day" of Sukkot. In addition, just as Pesach is a 7 day festival with a yom-tov at its beginning and end, similarly it would seem that sukkot - although 8 days long - also begins with a day of yom-tov (issur melacha) and ends in the same way. So it should be clear that Shminni Atzeret is simply an integrated part of chag haSukkot and will lack its own independent identity.

But certain questions remain.

1. What is "Atzeret"? Why does this day have a special title?

(If we compare this 8th day to the final day of Pesach, the 7th day of Pesach has no special title. Interestingly however, Chazal did give Shavuot the name of "Atzeret" - a name not used in Chumash for Shavuot - and Chazal were thereby declaring Shavuot as the "eighth day" of Pesach. Interesting!)

2. If you compare the Korbanot of Sukkot to Shminni

Atzeret, you notice that Shmini Atzeret departs from the pattern of Sukkot. During Sukkot we offer Parim - oxen - in a decreasing scale from 13 to 7. Sh'minni Atzeret does not continue the pattern, but instead has just a single Ox. (also 7 as opposed to 14 sheep.) Is this significant? It certainly indicates to us that Shminni Atzeret is distinct in some way.

Chazal distinguish a number of details in which Shminni Atzeret forms its own distinct chag (Found in Maechet Sukka 48a):

1. Birkhat She'hecheyanu
2. No Sukka
3. A different name
4. Distinct Korban
5. The song in the Beit Hamikdash was different. (*Lamenatzeach al Hashminni!*)
6. The ordering of the Kohanim in the mikdash was organised anew for this day and was not incorporated in the Sukkot order of things (For more detail, see Rav S.Y. Zevin in his wonderful work *Hamoadim Bahalacha*.)

So to what extent is Sh'minni Atzeret part of Sukkot and to what extent is it an independent chag?

TEFILLA DILLEMAS

There is a certain "nafka mina" (practical consequence of a theoretical argument) here which has central importance regarding our *nusach hatefilla* (prayer text). This is an argument regarding the proper title of this chag in our tefilla.

One opinion calls it "shminni chag h'atzeret hazeh". This indicates that Sh'minni Atzeret has its own independent status of chag.

But the second "nusach" reads "shminni atzeret hachag hazeh"; i.e. The eighth day - end of this (sukkot) festival. Thus sh'minni atzeret is subsidiary to Sukkot and thereby denied its own standing as a chag.

MIDRASHIM

A resolution to this ancient problem is beyond my capability. The likelihood is that Sh'minni Atzeret contains certain independent element, and also is somehow connected and similar to Chag HaSukkot. However, let us look at Rashi's interpretation of the term "Atzeret" and we will see something rather interesting in Rashi's commentary.

"Atzeret: I have stopped you (from leaving and kept you) with me. It is comparable to a king who invited all his children to a banquet. The banquet continued for a number of days. When the time came for everyone to go home, the king said, 'my

special child, I am making a special request for you to stay with me for a little more time. It is difficult for me to part from you.' " (Rashi in Vayikra 23)

"...The aggadic explanation: All the days of the (Sukkot) festival, they offered sacrifices in the name of the seventy nations of the world. They wished to go, God said to them, 'Please stay so that I can enjoy you!'" (Rashi on Bamidbar)

The imagery here of the party for the world and then an intimate get-together with Am Yisrael is taken from the korbanot of Sukkot. During Sukkot we sacrifice 70 oxen in total. On Sheminni Atzeret only one ox is offered. The number 70 is symbolic of the world community (70 nations). What might the single ox symbolise if not the Jewish nation - "a people who dwell alone and will not be counted amongst the nations." Indeed, Sukkot is portrayed by the prophet Zechariah (See the haftara for 1st day Sukkot - Zechariah Ch.14) as the time when in the future, all nations will arrive in Jerusalem to salute God and recognise Him as the Master of the Universe.

But the Midrashim are different. In the Vayikra quote, the banquet which Am Yisrael participate in is a CONTINUATION of the earlier party. It is not a fresh event with any distinct features. Israel simply stays an extra day because God doesn't want them to leave.

In Bamidbar however, Rashi's Midrash portrays Sheminni Atzeret as a DISTINCT and INDEPENDENT chag. Whereas Sukkot is a universal holiday according to this midrash, Sheminni Atzeret is chosen as a day for a special intimacy between God and Israel. It is particularistic in nature, it is not a continuation of what came before but rather, a radical departure from the previous atmosphere.

A small nuance in the Midrashim distinguishes between Shmini Atzeret as an independent event or rather, the tail-end of Sukkot.

THE NATURE OF SHEMINNI ATZERET.

If Sh'minni Atzeret does have its own independent character, what is that character? Sheminni Atzeret lacks particular modes of observance, rituals and prescribed Mitzvot. What is the nature of this day if it is to have an independent texture?

One option might follow Rashi's midrash and see this day as **a day of connection between God and Israel; a celebration of Israel's chosen-ness and legacy.** In we follow this line of thinking, then Simchat Torah is certainly an appropriate mode of observance, in that we celebrate the covenant between ourselves and God. This certainly is a good possibility.

RAIN – LOOKING FORWARD.

But I did find one commentator who delineates a distinct focus of Shmini Atzeret, seemingly independent of Sukkot.

The Targum Yonatan ben Uziel (Vayikra 23) says:

"It shall be a gathering for you to pray for rain

before God on the eighth day."

Here, we Sh'minni Atzeret takes in a more sombre tone. In contrast to the rejoicing of Sukkot, Yonatan ben Uziel sees Shmini Atzeret as a day of supplication for the winter rains. This clearly relates to our practice of Tefillat Geshem on Shmini Atzeret. It also explains why the korbanot of Shmini Atzeret match those of Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur¹ for these days all share something in common; they are days of judgement and prayer for life and death. Rain, which controls agriculture, is a life and death issue.

One further thing. If we do follow R. Yonatan ben Uziel, there is a further contrast between Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret. Sukkot is the Chag Ha'Assif - the ingathering festival. The ingathering festival celebrates the successes of **the past** season. It looks at the crops stored away in the barn and expresses that satisfaction of a year of prosperity in the form of Hallel and thanksgiving to God. Chag Ha'Asif looks backwards at the year just ended.

But if Sheminni Atzeret is a day of prayer for rain, then Sheminni Atzeret is not looking BACK in time. It looks **FORWARD** in time, towards the year ahead, praying to God that the coming year will be one of prosperity.

Chag Sameach.

¹ In Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar chps. 28-29) we find a complete list of all the korbanot **musaf** which we offered in addition to the daily **tamid** offering in the Bet Ha'Mikdash.

If you make a table of the korbanot for each holiday, you will notice an interesting pattern:

On each of the Tishrei holidays (except **Succot**), i.e. Rosh Ha'shana, Yom Kippur, and Shmini Atzeret, we offer an identical **korban musaf** - 1 "par" (ox), 1 "ayil" (ram), and 7 "kevasim" (lamb/sheep/goat).

On each of the "shalosh regalim" (except **Succot**), i.e. Chag ha'Matzot and Shavuot, we offer an identical **korban musaf** - 2 "parim", 1 "ayil", and 7 "kevasim".

Hence the connection between the Yamim Noraim and Sheminni Atzeret.

For more on this see Rabbi Leibtag at www.tanach.org