

Shemini Atzeret (שְׁמִינִי עֶצְרֶת)

Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17; Numbers 29:35-30:1; 1Kings 8:54-66; 1John 3:1-3

notes by Tim Hegg

The Festival of Sukkot contains an enigma: is it prescribed in the Torah to be 7 days long or 8? The text in Lev 23 seems a bit ambiguous: (vv. 33-36):

Again Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘On the fifteenth of this seventh month is the Feast of Booths for seven days to Adonai. ‘On the first day is a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work of any kind. ‘For seven days you shall present an offering by fire to Adonai. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation and present an offering by fire to Adonai; it is an assembly. You shall do no laborious work.

The festival is specifically detailed as lasting seven days, yet a command is given regarding the eighth day. This is reiterated a few verses later in Lev 23: (v.39):

‘On exactly the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the crops of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of Adonai for seven days, with a rest on the first day and a rest on the eighth day.

In fact, this eighth day is referred to as “an assembly” or a “holy assembly,” which is עֶצְרֶת in the Hebrew of Lev 23:36, and thus שְׁמִינִי עֶצְרֶת, *Shemini Atzeret* means “eighth day assembly.” *Atzeret* is from the root עָצַר (‘*atzar*) which means “to restrain, hold back,” and thus the Sages understand the designation to be referring to a “holding on to the festival” so as to restrain it from ending—making the festival last for yet another day. But since the text clearly states that one is to dwell in the Sukkah for 7 days (not 8), the eighth day was understood by the Sages as a separate festival, yet one which is, in every way, connected to the 7 days of Sukkot, and maintains the character of Sukkot.

In some of the triennial lists, the Torah section chosen for *Shemini Atzeret* was Deut 14:22ff, a section that teaches about the *Shemita* year (sabbatical year) as well as the pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot). In linking this Torah section with the eighth day, the Sages intend to emphasize that *Shemini Atzeret* is symbolic of the conclusion of the whole festival cycle. In fact, if the history of the earth is patterned after the 7 day week, with the 7th day (Shabbat) symbolic of the Millennial reign of Yeshua, then the eighth day represents the World to Come in which (like the Sabbatical year and especially the Jubilee) everything returns to its rightful owner, all debts are cancelled, and freedom is proclaimed for all slaves. Thus, *Shemini Atzeret* is to Sukkot what the *Shemita* year is to the cycle of 7 years, and what the *Yovel* is to the cycle of 7 groups of 7 years.

The *Yovel* (יּוֹבֵל, Jubilee) takes its name from the verb יָבַל, derived either from a word meaning “ram” (and thus “ram’s horn”) or from a word meaning “to produce,” and thus putting attention upon the promise HaShem made that He would cause triple production of the crops in the 6th year so that the people would still be eating the produce in the 9th year (Lev 25:21-22). One question that has always arisen regarding the Jubilee year (both in ancient times as well as in modern) is exactly how one is to reckon the 50th year. The Torah commands that we are to count 7 years for each *Shemita* (Sabbatical) year, and after 7 Sabbatical years ($7 \times 7 = 49$), the 50th year is the Jubilee. (This is demonstrated in miniature by the counting of the omer from Pesach to Shavuot, in which Shavuot is the 50th day after counting 7 weeks [sabbaths]). But here is the question: is the 50th year the start of the next cycle of 49 years, or is it a year independent of the *Shemita* cycle?

It seems that the biblical text supports counting the cycle by groups of 49 (where the Jubilee year, number 50 is the first year in the next cycle of 49). Some have suggested that this can be shown by taking the biblical chronology of Israel. If Israel entered the Land in 1424 BCE and Jerusalem was destroyed in 554 BCE, if one counts using the 49 years cycle, 70 *Shemita* years are neglected by Israel during the 430 years following the building of Solomon's Temple (Ezek 4:5-6), requiring 70 years of exile. God decreed that the Land should receive her sabbaths which Israel had failed to observe (Lev 26:43; 2Chron 36:21). This reckoning only works if one counts cycles of 49 years.

A second corroboration for counting 49 year cycles may be Ezekiel 40:1—

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year; on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was taken, on that same day, the hand of the Lord was upon me and He brought me there.

This must be a Jubilee year because it begins on the 10th of the month (which only happens in the Jubilee year), and the chronology is specifically given to us as the 25th year of the exile. Once again, counting the Jubilee years as cycles of 49 years inclusively, the 18th Jubilee corresponds to the 25th year of the exile.

This counting of Jubilees may give us a clue to a possible interpretation of Daniel 9:24—

“Seventy sevens have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to seal up sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and (the) prophet, and to anoint the most holy.”

This language sounds entirely inclusive, as though this describes the complete plan of God in His eternal work of salvation. If so, perhaps we should understand the opening chronological note as meaning “70 Jubilee cycles have been decreed...,” since a Jubilee cycle is a unit of 7 Sabbatical years. If so, the prophet may be telling us that the span of salvation's history (from the first *Yovel*) will be calculated as 70 Jubilee cycles.

Would this mean we could predict the exact chronology of the end? Hardly! In God's providence the precise keeping of the years has escaped us. But if this is the proper interpretation of Daniel's prophecy, we can certainly say that we are living in the end times, for if Jubilees began being counted 49 years after Israel entered the Promised Land, then surely we are nearing the full count of 70. While we cannot know the exact time, if the above explanation is correct, we may at least surmise that we are approaching the time when our Messiah will return.

What, then, is the central theme of *Shemini Atzeret* as it symbolizes the final Jubilee—the final eighth day—the *‘olam haba* (World to Come)? It is communion with God. Sukkot envisions God dwelling with man, and thus *Shemini Atzeret* symbolizes this dwelling together forever—“and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17). This is the return to *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden, cf. Ps 36:8) where everything is brought back to its true beginning and the full design of HaShem is realized. This is a return to “walking with God in the cool of the day” (cf. Gen 3:8, 9). Thus, the *haftarah* for *Shemini Atzeret* is 1Ki 8:54-66, the prayer of Shlomo in the dedication of the Temple (which took place at the time of Sukkot), the place where God would manifest His presence and desire for communion with His people. Shlomo would have to send the people away “on the eighth day” (v. 66) because they desired to linger (*atzeret*) there forever. But the Temple, in all of its glory, was still only a symbolic representation of the final “eighth day,” the eternal Jubilee, in which God and man will dwell together forever, never again to be separated by the sin and rebellion which entered into that first Eden.

If this is where it is all going—communion with God, fellowship with His Ruach, then it is a

pity if those who claim to be His children actually have little or no desire to have such communion. If the end of all of our striving to grow in holiness and to conform to the righteous ways of God is so that we might have communion with Him, yet in our hearts we have very little desire to actually seek His face or listen to His voice, then how disappointed we will be with the world to come! For nothing is more clear than this: the eternity which HaShem has planned for His children is a never ending Eden in which the primary joy will be simple communion with the Creator and fellowship with all of His children. The compactness of the Fall festivals in which we find ourselves over and over again together in fellowship and meals is a visual reminder that God's idea of the highest pleasure is uninterrupted fellowship between Himself and His children and the communion they enjoy together in His presence.

It appears that Yeshua had this same general thought in mind (that our striving for righteousness in this life is a preparation for our communion with HaShem in the *olam haba* [world to come]) when He speaks of the final judgment day:

“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’” Matt. 7:22–23

The context of Yeshua's words is His warning about false prophets and teachers. They come as wolves in sheep's clothing, meaning they pretend outwardly to conform to the righteousness of God, but inwardly they desire to devour the sheep like a wolf. Their motivation for outward righteousness, then, is not with a true heart to please their Creator, but as a means to further their own agenda. Yet Yeshua teaches that the fruit of their lives will reveal their true nature. Fruits of righteousness come only from a genuine root of righteousness. But though they may fool the sheep by their outward façade, they will not fool the One Who judges all things righteously. As the writer to the Hebrews says,

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Heb 4:13

Thus, in the day of judgment Yeshua will dismiss the imposters with the stern judgment: “depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.” This is a quote from Psalm 6:9, in which the word “iniquity” (אָוֶן, *'aven*) is translated by the Lxx as ἀνομία, *anomia*. This Greek term (used also in Matt 7:22) is the common word used to translate “Torah” (usually translated in our English by “law”) with the *alpha-privative*. This corresponds to our English prefix “un” meaning “not,” as in our English word “uninterrupted” meaning “not interrupted.” Thus, *anomia* means “not Torah.” Those who are workers of iniquity are those who negate Torah—who live “un-Torah” lives. Those whose lives are characterized by breaking God's commandments will receive this stern rebuke of “departure” from Yeshua in the coming judgment day. And this leads us to the reason Yeshua would teach in this way: He intends that our pursuit of righteousness be from the heart and not for the applause of men. That is, our desire to obey Torah must be first and foremost a desire for communion with our Creator, not to please those from whom we seek commendations.

This perspective, of pleasing God first, is illustrated in the Torah section chosen for *Shemini Atzeret*. The notice that generosity should be extended to the poor (Deut 15:7ff) is given with the sabbatical year in mind. Note verse 9:

“Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry

to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you.

This is the very heart of the commandments God gives His children. God asks them to follow His ways and entrust the outcome to Him. When we are obedient to our Father, we may trust our lives into His care. This principle is active in our daily choices, but it also has a long-term reality: we may entrust our lives into His hands, and anticipate the world to come as unending communion with Him. *Such a life of faith experiences a foretaste of that unending communion through the daily fellowship of the Ruach Who is with us and in us.* Coming to recognize the presence of God with us and living each day in His presence becomes the “training ground” for our final and ultimate friendship with Him in the *‘olam haba*.

This is the true motivation for righteous living: the realization that the final outcome of our salvation is the unending and unbroken communion with our Savior, a communion which we long for even now. As we struggle against the flesh and the sinful nature; as we attempt to put to death the evil inclination toward sin; as we strive to overcome the sins that easily entangle us, we do so with an eye to the future when we will dwell in His presence and when our eyes will behold the One Who died and lives for us.

It is this perspective that aids in our purification:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. 1Jn 3:1–3

This perspective, of anticipating and hoping for the return of the Messiah and His reign upon the earth which will usher in the *olam haba*, is not the same as the “apple pie in the sky” escapism in which people are so much taken with “heaven” that they are of “no earthly good.” This perspective recognizes that the world to come is a return to *Gan Eden* in which mankind had responsibilities and commandments to follow. But the hope of the world to come is that those who attain it through the sacrifice of Yeshua will be changed: mortal will put on immortality, and the sinful nature against which we now strive will be gone. We will therefore be able to obey without hindrance, and there will be no possibility of lapse into rebellion the way there was in the original *Gan Eden*. Our great desire for this unhindered communion with God drives our current existence, and the choices we make in it. With our eye set upon the hope of the *olam haba*, we are purified from within through the work of the Ruach Who makes and molds us into a bride fit for the Royal Groom. We are becoming what we inevitably will be.

...He who began a good work in you will perfect it until [with a view toward] the day of Messiah Yeshua. Phil. 1:6

This is our hope. Even as John writes in our Apostolic portion, that we await the return of our Messiah, knowing that when we see Him we will be completely transformed to be like Him—pure even as He is pure. And, having this hope, we strive to be like Him now, purifying our hearts and minds in conformity to Him.

So as we celebrate *Shemini Atzeret* and recognize that it symbolizes the world to come, we are called once again to assess our personal friendship with God. Do we find in Him a joy and comfort which goes deeper than our circumstances? Can we find a soul-rest in His words of promise when there is no rest to be found elsewhere? Is His presence with us through the Comforter Whom He has sent something we strive to live within? Do we make decisions with His

presence in view? And do we long and hope for the conclusion of all things in Him, when all will know that He is One and His Name is One? May our celebration of *Shemini Atzeret* cause us to focus on these things!