



Why the Eighth Day?

How many days is Sukkot? The Torah describes it as a seven-day holiday (Vayikra 23, Bamidbar 29, Devarim 16), and yet the *pesukim* add an eighth day as an עֲצֵרָת, literally “stopping” or “gathering.” What is the nature of this eighth day? Why is Sukkot described as lasting seven days, if it actually lasts eight?

Indeed, Talmudic Sages debate whether we say the *beracha* of *shehecheyanu* on Shemini Atzeret (Sukkah 47b). The Gemara concludes we do say it because Shemini Atzeret is considered its own holiday in several different respects.

In Pesikta deRav Kahana (28), Rav Alexandri says that by using extra letters in the *pesukim* regarding the sacrifices of each day of Sukkot,¹ G-d hints to *Am Yisrael* to pray for rain. After Sukkot passes and we still have not taken the hint, G-d gives us a whole day just to pray for rain. The special prayer for rain, תְּפִלַּת הַגֶּשֶׁם, is in fact recited on Shemini Atzeret. According to this view, Shemini Atzeret amplifies a theme latent during Sukkot, and that theme moves to center stage on the eighth day.

What are the Sukkot sacrifices? On each day, we offer bulls on the *mizbeach* — 13 on the first day, 12 on the second, 11 on the third, and so on. But then the pattern breaks — we offer seven bulls on the seventh day of Sukkot, but just one on Shemini Atzeret. Why? Rabbi Elazar explains that the 70 bulls offered over Sukkot correspond to the 70 nations of the world, one offered on behalf of each nation. Shemini Atzeret’s sacrifice, of one bull, symbolizes G-d’s asking His

beloved nation for just a small meal to enjoy. The Midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah slightly modifies this: G-d is like a king who invites all his subjects to a seven-day feast, and afterward says to his most beloved servant, “Let us enjoy whatever you can find, a bit of meat, fish, or vegetables.” According to this idea, Sukkot is a universal holiday while Shemini Atzeret is only for the Jewish people. A modest holiday just to celebrate G-d’s special relationship with His beloved people.

Rashi (Vayikra 23:36) cites the following: “I have stopped you with Me, like a king who invited his sons to a meal for a certain number of days. When the time came to part, he asked his children, ‘Please stay with me one more day, קְשָׁה עָלַי פְּרֻדְתְּכֶם — your departure is difficult for me.’” All of Sukkot is a holiday for G-d to enjoy with His children, the Jewish people. But as we find when we say goodbye to our own children, it’s hard to see them go — so *Hashem* adds Shemini Atzeret because it’s so difficult for Him to see us go after Sukkot.

Let us now return to our original question as debated by the Amoraim: Should we recite *shehecheyanu* on Shemini Atzeret or not? If its main theme is to pray for rain — which we theoretically should have done on Sukkot — it is debatable whether it warrants its own *shehecheyanu*. One could argue that no new blessing is necessary, since rain is a theme that exists on Sukkot through the pouring of the water on the altar and the hints to pray for rain throughout those days. On the other hand, rain is emphasized more prominently on Shemini Atzeret. If Shemini Atzeret is

a holiday purely for the Jewish people, after the universal holiday of Sukkot, we can understand why it warrants its own *shehecheyanu*. However, as Rashi writes, if *Shemini Atzeret* is an added day to Sukkot, just to stay a bit longer, why is that considered a new holiday? Isn’t it just a continuation of the previous seven days?

Perhaps the nature of Shemini Atzeret is exactly that. It’s a day that celebrates our unique, emotional relationship with G-d, in that He loves us and does not want to see us go. It actually *is* a separate day — a day that celebrates our close bond with G-d as His chosen, beloved people. קְשָׁה עָלַי פְּרֻדְתְּכֶם highlights a different quality to our relationship with G-d, one not previously emphasized.

Hence it does not simply add a day to Sukkot, but creates a unique day, one that deserves its own *shehecheyanu*, so we can focus on feeling that closeness to G-d, which will keep us going in the winter months ahead.

1 In Bamidbar 29:29, 33, there are three words the Midrash identifies as having extra letters: כַּמִּשְׁפָּטִים, וְנִסְכֵיהֶם, וְנִסְכֵיהֶם. Those extra letters spell מ-י-מ, water.

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