



shema bekolah · hear her voice
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

Atzeret: A Celebration
Of Cycles

Shira Eliassian

Atzeret: A Celebration of Cycles

By Shira Eliassian¹

One is never quite sure what to call the last two days of the High Holiday season. Do we refer to this eighth (and outside Israel ninth) day of hag by its biblical name, Shemini Atzeret, by its more historically recent name, Simhat Torah, or simply subsume it under Sukkot as a whole and term it the second days of yom tov? It seems that in *hutz l'aretz* we've tried to escape this conflict in nomenclature by calling the eighth day Shemini Atzeret and the ninth Simhat Torah. But even in divvying up names, it remains unclear how these days of yom tov relate to the whole of Sukkot, the High Holidays, or the Jewish calendar at large.

Looking at the biblical verses surrounding the holiday only serves to exacerbate this question:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר
בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לֵה': בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ כָּל־
מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּקְרְבוּ אֵשָׁה
לֵה' בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרֵא־קֹדֶשׁ יְהִי לָכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם
אֵשָׁה לֵה' עֲצֹרֶת הִוא כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:²

G-d spoke to Moses, saying: Say to the children of Israel: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot [to last] seven days. The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations; seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to the Lord; it is a solemn gathering: you shall not work at your occupations.

Leviticus 23, where all the Jewish holidays

¹ Shira Eliassian is pursuing a Masters in Religion at University of Chicago's Divinity School. She has been on JOFA's staff since 2016, working as the blog editor and a program coordinator. She has served as scholar-in-residence for JOFA UK's Be'er Miriam Program and on the JOFA Maharat Summer Tour.

² ויקרא כג:לג-לו.

are listed, uses the verse “וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר” to introduce each holiday. Sukkot is described as a seven-day holiday, the first of which is observed by refraining from work. The verses continue to state that sacrifices will be offered all seven days, and then, without signaling the introduction of a new holiday, mention an eighth day, during which the people will also refrain from work and offer a sacrifice.

Structurally, this eighth day of yom tov both is and is not its own holiday. Sukkot is defined as a seven-day holiday, which means it cannot extend into this eighth day. But at the same time, this holiday is not introduced as a separate entry in the catalogue of Leviticus 23, and being marked as an eighth means it is inherently tied to the seven days that precede it.

To complicate matters further, this eighth day seems to be lacking in any attributes. It has no special rituals and is not explicitly linked to the agricultural cycle, as is the case for the other holidays. We have taken to calling the day Shemini Atzeret, but in the verse itself, the word “עֲצֹרֶת” appears as an adjective describing the holiday, rather than a name. It connotes the sense of this day somehow halting, ending, or culminating that which came before. But even still, this seems to be a derivative status rather than an essential quality of the day.

What culmination could this day be referring to? Is it simply an additional day of celebration tacked on to Sukkot? Is it an ending to the holiday season of Tishrei? Might it be a reference to the end of the agricultural cycle, which does in fact occur in autumn? Or could it even be the last of the holidays on the biblical calendar, which begins not with Rosh Hashanah, but with Pesah in Nissan?

Choosing to answer this question by taking the agricultural route, Rav Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion offers an explanation for the name Shemini Atzeret, which also helps us understand why it has become known by the name Simhat Torah:

As opposed to “Biblical Jews,” for whom agriculture stood at the center of existence, “post-Temple Jews” concentrate their religious life in the proverbial “four cubits of halakha.” Therefore, the agricultural calendar was replaced by the “Torah calendar.” In this system, the festival of the first harvest (Shavuot), which commemorated the first opportunity to benefit from one’s produce, was transformed into the holiday of Matan Torah, the first step in the nation’s acceptance of the Torah. Shemini Atzeret, which, for the agrarian society, was celebrated as the end of the year, evolved into the celebration of the completion of the Torah reading, Simhat Torah.³

Rav Bazak notes that when we were living as an agricultural people with a Temple in Jerusalem, holidays such as Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret were inherently bound up with our land. The destruction of the the Beit HaMikdash and the ensuing diaspora prompted the rabbis to imbue the holidays with a new dimension of meaning, rooted not in the cycle of land, but in the cycle of Torah. In place of celebrating our harvest of the final crops of the year, we celebrate our completion of the Torah by reading *VeZot HaBerakha*, and immediately initiate our reading of Bereishith.

When thought of in this way, Shemini Atzeret is less about endings than it is about recognizing cycles as the natural rhythm of human life. Rather than marking an end point, Atzeret is an opportunity to create a liminal space, a place where we can pause for a moment and reflect on all that has passed, and all that is about to happen. It is a moment that allows us to experience the inevitable sadness that accompanies all endings, while simultaneously building our excitement for the future.

This may also help us make sense of the ambiguity of Shemini Atzeret’s status as a holiday. Our inability to mark the difference between the first seven days of Sukkot and the eighth day of

yom tov speaks to the challenge in marking out where one cycle ends and the other begins. The absence of specific ritual features enables the day to become a celebration of an entire cycle, rather than one specific moment.

We physically enact this cyclicity in a remarkable way on Simhat Torah. We dance in endless circles with our *sifrei Torah*, pouring out our love through songs that repeat the same verse over and over again. The more we move in circles, the more we affirm our devotion to that which is at its epicenter – the Torah.

The inevitable sense of loss we feel at the end of any cycle describes the sadness we felt this past August, upon Dr. Sharon Weiss-Greenberg’s departure from JOFA. JOFA saw tremendous growth during Dr. Weiss-Greenberg’s tenure as Executive Director, from expanding our reach across the United States and forging relationships with international communities, to building a powerful, content-driven social media presence.

Dr. Weiss-Greenberg understood JOFA’s responsibility as a Jewish feminist organization to be about more than innovating religious opportunities for women in Orthodoxy. Under her leadership, JOFA began addressing issues of sexual assault in the Jewish community, representations of women in Jewish media, reshaping communal expectations around dating and marriage, and pioneering conversations around Jewish reproductive rights and fertility issues.

Dr. Weiss-Greenberg fought tirelessly for the cause of Jewish feminism, and we know she will take her strength and courage to continue reshaping the Jewish community with her to Israel, where she now lives with her family. Just as Shemini Atzeret signals to us both the end of one cycle and the beginning of another, we express a deep *hakarat haTov* to Sharon for all she has done for JOFA, while wishing her much *hatzlaha* in her next endeavors.

³ Rav Amnon Bazak, “The Nature of Shemini Atzeret,” trans. by David Silverberg, published online through the The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/nature-shemini-atzeret>.

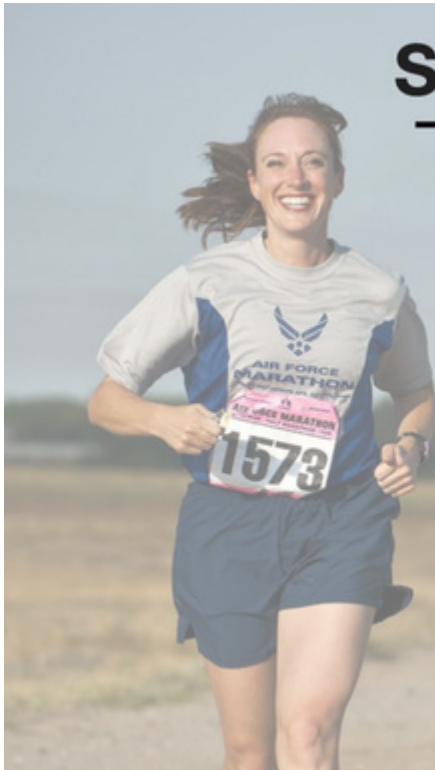
Wish you had more female scholars teaching
in your communities and programs?

SPEAKERS

BUREAU

So do we! JOFA is in the process of compiling a Speakers Bureau to feature great female scholars. This will serve as a resource for communities and organizations to easily access and hire women to speak at their programs. It will also benefit our speakers by giving them more visibility, featured in the company of other impressive speakers, plus access to special JOFA programming. Want to join? Go to <https://bit.ly/2LFM8qs> or email rivka@jofa.org

SAVE THE DATE



Who: **You!**

What: **JOFA's first-ever 5K
Run/Walk with Generosity NYC**

When: **November 11, 2018**

Where: **Riverside Park, NYC**

More details coming soon!



205 E 42nd St, 20th Floor • New York, NY 10017
212-679-8500 • www.jofa.org

JOFA's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.