

Sh'mini Atzeret & Simchat Torah

An Introduction

by Michael Rudolph

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I want to give you a short overview of today's service in which we are celebrating two things. We are assembling on *Sh'mini Atzeret* in compliance with Scripture, and we are also celebrating *Simchat Torah*, the day we finish reading and re-roll the *Torah* Scroll.

Sh'mini Atzeret means the 8th Day of Holding Back and, because it follows the seven days of *Sukkot*, some call it the 8th Day of Assembly or the 8th Day of Completion; strictly speaking, it is not the last day of *Sukkot* – it is an added day given to us by God as though to say: “I care for My people so much that I will give them an additional day of celebration.”

Sh'mini Atzeret appears twice in connection with *Sukkot*, where the *Torah* recites the festivals; the first is in Leviticus 23:33-36 where God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites; it says:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD. 'On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. 'For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it.’”

And in Numbers 29:12 followed by 35-40 several verses later, we read:

“On the fifteenth day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work, and you shall keep a feast to the LORD seven days On the eighth day you shall have a sacred assembly. You shall do no customary work. You shall present a burnt offering, an offering made by fire as a sweet aroma to the LORD: [List of offerings including a sin offering]. So Moses told the children of Israel everything, just as the LORD commanded Moses.”

It is the last commanded feast of the biblical year and, because of the inclusion of a sin offering, it is sometimes thought of as the final day of the season of repentance that begins with *Yom T'ruah* (*Rosh Hashanah*). As with *Sukkot*, *Sh'mini Atzeret* is associated with the Autumn harvest, but also with the Israelite's need for water in the form of winter rain.

Sh'mini Atzeret is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 7:8-10, where the Temple's altar was dedicated for seven days of the feast, and a sacred assembly was observed on the eighth day.

Very prominently, John 7:37-43 speaks of “the last great day of the feast” which I believe to be *Sh'mini Atzeret*, although some think it was *Hoshanah Rabbah*, the seventh day of *Sukkot*:

“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Yeshua stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said,

out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Yeshua was not yet glorified. Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, “Truly this is the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Mashiach.” But some said, “Will the Mashiach come out of Galilee? “Has not the Scripture said that the Mashiach comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?” So there was a division among the people because of Him.”

My reasons for concluding that it is today, *Sh’mini Atzeret*, and not *Hoshana Rabbah* (yesterday) when Yeshua declared Himself to be the source of living water are two-fold: First, *Sh’mini Atzeret* is given Sabbath status by Scripture, whereas the seventh day of *Sukkot* is not. Second, early Rabbinical writings associate *Sh’mini Atzeret* with prayers for rain and water pouring because water was needed in the agricultural season; that is situationally consistent with Yeshua’s metaphoric use of water in identifying Himself as Messiah. *Hoshanah Rabbah*, by contrast, is not associated with water at all in Rabbinical literature, and almost all we know about its meaning and elevated status comes from *Kabbalistic* sources.

Now let’s briefly turn our attention to *Simchat Torah*, which, in the diaspora, begins after sundown, and which we will declare later with the lighting of candles. *Simchat Torah* is not a biblically mandated celebration; in fact, it does not surface in Jewish literature until about the year 1000. It literally means “the celebration of the *Torah*,” and it marks the end of one cycle of *Torah* reading, and the beginning of the next. In recognition of this, we dance around the synagogue seven times with both of our *Torah* scrolls, passing the scrolls to each other, and then we read the concluding verses of Deuteronomy from one of them, and the first part of Genesis from the other. Synagogues situated in residential communities sometimes even dance the *Torah* scrolls into the streets but, in our neighborhood, it would not be very effective.

Now here is where we at Ohev Yisrael are going to take some liberty and mix the traditions of several Jewish observances. There is an important *Sukkot* Scripture associated with rain that we discussed at our *Sukkot* service and, although it does not specifically refer to *Sh’mini Atzeret*, we are going to recognize it during our *Simchat Torah* processional this evening by carrying flags of the nations as we circle the synagogue. The Scripture I’m speaking of is Zechariah 14:16-17:

“And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain.”

This Scripture is of great significance in prophesying that all the nations of the earth will one day come to recognize their connectedness to Israel, a nation of priests to bring blessing to the world.

So, with this short explanation, let us proceed with rejoicing in the Lord and in our observance of *Sh’mini Atzeret*.