

The Eighth Day: Celebrating Limits

Nahum Ward

This fall I am completing my first cycle of the seasons in the Pacific Northwest. I am not accustomed to living in the country, nor to life in a colder, more northern climate. This particular turning of summer into fall has played on my emotions with particular poignancy. The fields and the gardens around me have given their summer's best. Our meals reflect the bounty of the earth. Every dinner is a harvest celebration resplendent in fall colors: green zucchini, yellow squash, white corn, green peppers, and bright red tomatoes, all fresh from neighboring fields. My body feels strong and vibrant, well-nourished by the pleasures and satisfactions of long sunlit summer days. My heart is full of the joy of the harvest.

My joy is tinged with another feeling as I note the increasing chill in the evening air. I sense deep inside me a subtle dread at the approach of Winter, the dark time. Winter means dark, wet days and cold, starless nights. Winter means letting go of the sun and its warm invitation to enjoy the outdoors.

I am interested in the strength of my emotional response to this change of seasons. At one and the same time I feel both gratitude for the beauty and abundance all around me and a definite sense of loss that summer must end and winter must come. This mixture of joy and sadness, fullness and loss, captures my imagination. When I am out on my walks I keep thinking that there is something important about the effect of this season on my heart and mind, something to learn from this turn in the cycle. God is speaking to me about life through the language of the seasons.

After a few such ambling conversations with myself, my mind finally settled on, of all things, *Sh'mini Atzeret*. Yes, I found a satisfying response to the admixture of emotion that I was feeling in this obscure Biblical holiday. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I have become that *Sh'mini Atzeret* embodies the message of this moment in time, an important message for our day.

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The Torah mentions *Sh'mini Atzeret* only twice, once in Leviticus and once in Numbers. In Leviticus (23:34–6) we read “On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be the Feast of Booths to the Lord, seven days ... On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to the Lord; it is a solemn *atzeret*: you shall not work at your occupations.” The passage in *Numbers* details the sacrificial offerings of the day (see *Num.* 29:35–38).

We do not know much about the nature of this holy day or even what the word *atzeret* means in this context. The *New JPS Translation* translates *atzeret* as “gathering” with the following footnote: “precise meaning of Hebrew ‘*atzeret*’ uncertain.”

During the days of the Second Temple *Sh'mini Atzeret* marked the turning point of the year when the people once again prayed for rain. Today we follow this same pattern in our *Amidah* prayers, praying for rain for the first time on *Sh'mini Atzeret*.

The word *atzeret* comes from the root ‘*atsar*’ which means to restrain or retain. For me this sense of the word gives meaning and power to the occasion. *Sh'mini Atzeret* comes at the end of *Sukkot* and serves as a restraint, a container for the joy of *Sukkot*. We find a similar pattern in the relationship between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. *Shavuot*, falling seven weeks and a day after *Pesach*, celebrates the giving of the Torah which provided a container, a context for the freedom achieved at *Pesach* time. Similarly, *Sh'mini Atzeret*, falling seven plus one days after the start of *Sukkot*, provides limits to the spirited celebration of *Sukkot*.¹

Sukkot, the harvest festival, is our holy day of great unbounded joy and unrestrained gaiety. The *Mishna* tells us that one who has not seen the joy of the celebration of *Sukkot* during the days of the Second Temple has not seen joy. For seven days, the people in Jerusalem gave themselves over to singing, dancing and wild celebration. The container which both limited and contained this joy was *Sh'mini Atzeret*. Seven days of joy were followed by a more solemn gathering, a time to remember our ancestors and to pray for rain. Unrestrained sacred joy was enhanced and focused by means of a sacred limit provided by the eighth day.

We live in a society that abhors restraint and which experiences limits as an offense. We live in a culture that worships growth and expansion, and which labors incessantly to overcome every limit or restraint. Yet, in our day, we are learning that we are limited creatures living in a world of limited resources. Hence, we would do well to learn the value of limita-

tions, the gift of living within limits. *Sh'mini Atzeret* comes to teach us this lesson.

As I went for my walk this *Sh'mini Atzeret*, I thought about my limits. I would like to hold on to the sun and hold back the rain and the darkness. But, of course, I cannot. *Sh'mini Atzeret* comes to tell me that there is a limit to sunlight, a limit to the harvest, a limit to joyous celebration. The time comes when one must turn with the seasons. *Sh'mini Atzeret* signals me that the time has come to prepare for Winter, prepare for the darkness, prepare to turn inward.

I do not find much support in our society for turning inward, for nurturing the inner life. Our culture values activity and production at the expense of passivity and contemplation. *Sh'mini Atzeret* brings a different message, the message of *Koheleth*: A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.

Our tradition is wise in putting the prayer for rain on our lips at *Sh'mini Atzeret* time. I may not want rain, but I need the darkness and the rain as much as the forests and the fields do. After a busy season of activity, it is time for me to let go of everything extraneous, to go back to my essentials, to go back to root and seed. In this culture which worships the light and abhors darkness, I might not choose this inward turn. I would choose an endless Summer. But such is not the way of living things for Fall and Winter must follow Summer for there to be another Spring.

This turning of the seasons also suggests to me the long Winter that awaits me at the end of my years. I do not want to face that Winter either, but it comes nonetheless. And perhaps *Sh'mini Atzeret* can teach me the gift of that Winter, the gifts of my limits, the gifts of my mortality. The numbering of my days makes each day precious. My limited ability and strength calls upon me to focus my attention on what is most important.

An architect friend of mine once said that the limiting factors in his trade — limits in space, time and resources — demanded his creativity. Without limits there can be no creativity. I find his observation to be true.

Limits lend joy, creativity and preciousness to life. Without limits our lives become vacuous. In hungry search for ourselves, we destroy ourselves and our earth. We live at a time when the earth is veritably crying out to us to learn to live within our limits, to value our limits.

I suggest that our ancient festival of *Sh'mini Atzeret* can be an important teacher in this regard. Let us make this holiday of *atzeret* a time when we focus on the value of restraints, when we celebrate limits.

Our tradition has provided us with customs and practices for *Sh'mini Atzeret* which promote this awareness of limits. We have the prayer for rain. In many synagogues the seasonal reading of the book of *Kohelet* is reserved for *Sh'mini Atzeret*. The philosophical outlook of the well-seasoned king provides a suitable tone for the occasion. The observance of *yizkor* and the remembrance of our ancestors reminds us of our own mortality. In a similar vein, *Sh'mini Atzeret* would be a good time to write ethical wills, or to review our legal and ethical wills on an annual basis.

Sh'mini Atzeret might also be a good time to examine how we are living within nature's limits. As individuals and as a community, can we live well with less? What forms of consumption can we do without this year? As we head into winter are our homes well-insulated? Are our automobiles well-tuned?

A proper celebration of *Sh'mini Atzeret* in Reform congregations would require that we return to the earlier tradition of celebrating *Simchat Torah* on the ninth day. I have never felt comfortable with celebrating *Simcha Torah* a day before our Conservative and Orthodox counterparts. I therefore see double value in separating the two holy days and giving each holy day the attention which it deserves. *Sh'mini Atzeret*, the festival of limits, would follow *Sukkot*, the festival of unbounded joy, and precede *Simchat Torah*, the festival of committed, bounded and focused joy.

I sense great potential in a meaningful observance of *Sh'mini Atzeret*. We can make this holy day the occasion for reviewing, valuing and celebrating the gift of limits. This minor festival of *Sh'mini Atzeret* has been waiting in obscurity for all these centuries, waiting to emerge and give its gift. I believe that we are the generation for whom that gift was intended.

NOTES

¹ I am indebted to Arthur Waskow for his understanding of the meaning of *atzeret* in the context of this holiday. See Waskow, A. *Seasons of Our Joy* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 68