

Living in Jewish Time: Sh'mini Atzeret and Simchat Torah OnLine

Check out the website for our Living Jewish Time teachings:
bethelsudbury.org, look under Cantor's Niggunim

To dance like Zorba is a challenge to us all...

Shemini Atzeret, the 8th day of Completion, Assembly, begins on Wednesday evening, October 6 and ends at sundown on Thursday, October 7.
Simchat Torah, Rejoicing in our Torah, is celebrated at Beth El on Wednesday evening, October 6, 7:30 p.m.

Expectation

Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah fall on the 22nd of Tishri

Important Words:

Shemini – eighth

Atzeret – to finish; to gather; to hold back

Simcha – rejoicing

Hakafot – circling, creating a round

Geshem –rain

History

“On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering (atzeret); you shall not work at your occupations.” (Bamidbar 29:35)

Two places in the Torah indicate a seven day holiday for *Sukkot*. Thus, the Rabbis gave this eighth day of assembly its own place as a *Yom Tov*, (*yuntiff*), understanding that originally this was an extra day to “tarry”, to complete the celebration of *Sukkot* before leaving Jerusalem and returning home across the land.

In the cycle of the year, *Shemini Atzeret* holds an important balancing position. Both this holiday and *Shavuot* are referred to as *atzeret*. Here's the pattern:

Pesach :celebrated for 7 days 7 weeks off 1 day *Shavuot*

Sukkot: celebrated for 7 days 1 day off 1 day *Atzeret*

(similar pattern, noting that to wait 7 weeks in the fall would have brought the population to winter and an inability to celebrate together. What a wise tradition we have!)

Seasonally, *Pesach* is our spring festival

Shavuot is our summer festival

Sukkot is our fall festival

Shemini Atzeret is our winter-to-be festival

And, to move us forward in history, feasting on Torah became our focus as both the agricultural holdings and Temple cults died out.

Shavuot: reception of Torah; focus on God's gift to us

Shemini/Simchat Torah: celebration of Torah in our lives; "beloved companion"

The prayer for rain, *Geshem*, was the major ritual of *Shemini Chag HaAtzeret*, emphasizing the rejuvenating power of water, God's fountain of renewal, as we enter the winter, dying months.

By the 10th century, a refocusing on Torah celebration as the major ritual of this holiday brought us to a rabbinic holiday, *Simchat Torah*, which has supplanted *Shemini Atzeret* in power and celebration since that time.

Diaspora communities held to both *hagim* by celebrating *Shemini Hag Hatzeret* on the eighth day and *Simchat Torah* on the 9th day following the start of *Sukkot*. At Beth El, we now combine these two *hagim* into one celebration on the day after *Sukkot*'s seven days. (This follows the pattern in modern Israel as well.)

Themes

The world is judged for rainfall for the coming year: as a still-lingering remnant of *Yom Kippur*, this is our final day for repentance and prayer to bring God's forgiveness and renewal for another year.

Cycle of death, rebirth is emphasized in both festivals. With the flow of the year, we concretize the reality of death in the growing cycle, the end of our harvest year, and the rebirth that spring and new growth will bring. We take time for Yizkor prayers, remembering those who have died.

With the cycle of Torah study, we complete our reading with the death of our teacher, Moses, and then immediately begin the cycle anew, with the words of creation, *Breshit barah Elohim...*

Joy of Torah and our delight in Torah itself is our celebration of *Simchat Torah*. We replace the *hakafot* shaking the *lulav* and *etrog* of *Sukkot* with the *hakafot* dancing with the Torah scrolls of *Simchat Torah*, calling out our joy at this continuing gift.

Preparation

As households, we best prepare for these conjoined festivals by dwelling in our *sukkot*, feeling the fragility and awesomeness of life, and continuing our study of Torah, so that we feel ourselves inside the words of its completion and can rejoice in the ability to begin anew. **And we ready our calendars to be at Beth El on Wednesday evening, October 6 (7:00 p.m. for pre-school families; 7:30 p.m. for the general community) to celebrate this gift of Torah with our congregation.**

As a congregation, we rejoice in our communal *sukkah*; we prepare the Torah scrolls for their return to “everyday” dress; we find Torah readers ready to teach us the end and the beginning in full voice!

Celebration

We begin our festival with a joyful meal in our homes, including

- Lighting of candles: *v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Yom Tov*
- Special holiday Kiddush: (p. 125 in our siddur),
- Option to eat in your sukkah, though no longer an obligation

In traditional communities, Shemini *Atzeret* is a full festival celebration

- Don't go to work
- Special prayer services, including *Yizkor* prayers and the recital of prayers for rain, called *Geshem*. Rains wash away the old and renew the earth. We ask for rain to fall from the heavens and tears to fall from our eyes in memory and compassion.

At Beth El:

- we meet for a short service at 7:30 p.m. and then take our Torahs from the ark, parading them around the room with our youngest legacies (our young children) following the Torah's path.
- We unroll the entire Torah around the expanse of the room (another form of *hakafah*), allowing every person to help in holding its power and strength of word in their hands.
- This year, we will each have an opportunity to study a verse of Torah, relate its meaning (from personal to cosmic) in our lives, and share that meaning with the community
- And then we dance! Our very own *Havurat Zemer* (Friends in Melody) will rock our sanctuary with lively klezmer music as we complete 7 dances of joy with all our Torahs and all our households!
- We complete our celebration by completing Torah...and then beginning its reading again. We enact this crucial cycle and commit ourselves to wonderful lifelong learning!

And what connects Israel with God? Torah!

Yi-yi-yi-yisrael v'oraita Kud-sha B'rich Hu Echad Hu!
Israel, Torah and the Holy One of Blessing –all is One!!

We take that connecting link, Torah, and dance with it, not around it. We enter God's space and embrace it. Yet, it only lasts a moment and we are back in the cycle of time, reading Torah from *Breshit*.

For at the end of the five Books is the death of Moses our Teacher; and at the beginning is the Creation of the World. So *Simchat Torah* acts out by public proclamation what *Shemini Atzeret* preaches as an underlying fact of life: that from seeming death comes profound new energy for birth.” (Arthur Waskow)

**And mark your calendars for our next Living In Jewish Time workshop, Wednesday, October 20, 7:30 pm. Led by Sheila Goldberg, we will focus on the power of ritual in our homes, and the weekly flow of Shabbat time in our personal lives.