

**SHEMINI ATZERETH**

# Hold On for Dear Life

Shemini Atzereth is our strangest festival. It appears mysteriously at the end of the seven-day Festival of Sukkoth, and it lasts for only one day (two in the Diaspora). It is a time of joy, yet there are no specific observances. In the days of the Temple, only one additional animal was sacrificed. What is the deeper meaning of this festival?

The Midrash tells us that it is a time of lingering. After the intensely close contact between the Jewish people and Hashem during the month of Elul, the Days of Awe and the Festival of Sukkoth, Hashem declares, "It is difficult for me to part with you. Stay on for a little while, and let us share yet one more small banquet together."

The Rabbis took advantage of this supplementary festival and made it into a time of rejoicing with the Torah. They directed that the annual cycle of synagogue Torah readings should begin on the Shabbat after Shemini Atzeret and conclude on the following Shemini Atzeret. The conclusion of the public reading of the Torah is then crowned by a celebration of prolonged and ecstatic dancing known as Simchat Torah.

Why did the Rabbis choose to designate this particular time for the celebration of Simchat Torah?

The commentators explain that this is really a time of great apprehension. Our close encounters with the Creator are coming to an end, and the long and dismal winter months stretch out before us. For two months, we have been absorbed by prayers and introspection, by fasting and repentance, by observances and celebrations, and now it is back to the grind. Now it is time to grapple again with the mundane considerations of earning a livelihood and all the other material pursuits that insinuate themselves into the fabric of our lives.

How can we prevent that high level of inspiration from fading away?

Only by a strong reaffirmation of our profound commitment to the study of the Torah. Only by embracing the Torah with an outpouring of boundless love.

*During the time of the Talmud there lived a couple who had never been blessed with children. The husband wanted desperately to have a child to carry on his name, and the thought of divorce crossed his mind. However, he still loved his wife, and he was unsure if it would be proper for him to seek a divorce under the circumstances.*

*He consulted the sages of the courts on this question and was told that he could divorce his wife if he so chose.*

*The day arrived when husband and wife would part ways, and she would return to her father's house.*

*"My dear wife," the man said, "I have nothing but the highest esteem for you. You have always been good to me. Please look around and take whatever you cherish most back to your father's house."*

*"You are so kind," she said. "It would mean a lot to me if we could enjoy one last meal together. I will prepare your favorite dishes."*

*"Of course," he said.*

*During the meal, she gave him to drink strong wines and he soon fell into a heavy slumber. She summoned her servants, and they carried off her husband with his bed to her father's house.*

*The next morning, he awoke in confusion. "What am I doing here?"*

*"My dear husband," said his wife, "you said I should take whatever I cherish, and so I took you. I cherish you above all else."*

*In our own lives, when we stand at this juncture of the year, when it seems we must inevitably relinquish our hard-won closeness with the Creator, we must find a way of embracing Him and holding on for dear life. How? Simchat Torah is the answer. As we dance with the Torah clasped in our arms, let us also take it into our hearts with a firm resolution to delve into its beauty and its wisdom. Hashem is always present in the Torah, and if we give the Torah a place of honor in our homes, we can be sure He will always be there as well.*