

Bite Size Bible Study

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah #138

By Pastor Lee

Coming at the conclusion of Sukkot are the two holidays of Shemini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Assembly) and Simchat Torah (Rejoicing in Torah).

Shemini Atzeret

Tishri 22, the day after the seventh day of Sukkot, is the holiday Shemini Atzeret literally meaning "the assembly of the eighth (day)." The precise meaning is unclear, but it is mentioned in the Torah and is thought to be a time of bonding between God and the Jewish people. Rabbinic literature explains the holiday this way: Our Creator is like a host, who invites us as visitors for a limited time, but when the time comes for us to leave, He has enjoyed himself so much that He asks us to stay another day.

"Tell the people of Isra'el, 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the feast of Sukkot for seven days to Adonai. On the first day there is to be a holy convocation; do not do any kind of ordinary work. For seven days you are to bring an offering made by fire to Adonai; on the eighth day you are to have a holy convocation and bring an offering made by fire to Adonai ; it is a day of public assembly; do not do any kind of ordinary work. (Leviticus 23:34-36)

Its lack of clear definition may have provided the impetus to celebrate it in conjunction with Simchat Torah, a celebration of the conclusion of one and the beginning of another annual cycle of readings from the Torah.

Simchat Torah

Simchat Torah means "Rejoicing in the Torah." This holiday marks the completion of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings. Each week in synagogue a few chapters from the Torah are read, starting with Genesis 1 and working through to Deuteronomy 34.

Simchat Torah is not mentioned in the Torah or Talmud. It has become a day on which the Jewish people celebrate and express their love of the Torah and the never-ending cycle of reading and studying it.

The day is characterized by joyful dancing with the Torah Scrolls. Everyone in the congregation is invited to dance and sing with the Torah scrolls, and the scene is extremely festive and joyful. The final portion of Deuteronomy is read in the synagogue followed by the beginning of the Book of Genesis. In this manner, the annual cycle of Torah readings continues unbroken.

Simchat Torah conveys a clear message about the centrality of Torah in Jewish life. It is both a source of Jewish identity and a precious gift from God. Simchat Torah is the day on which the whole community gathers

to come into direct contact with the Torah and to express the joy in having received it.

This completion of the readings is a time of great celebration. There is plenty of high-spirited singing and dancing in the synagogue. Drinking is also common during this time.

As many people as possible are given the honor of an aliyah (reciting a blessing over the Torah reading); in fact, even children are called for an aliyah blessing on Simchat Torah. In addition, as many people as possible are given the honor of carrying a Torah scroll in these processions. Children do not carry the scrolls (they are much too heavy), but they often follow the procession around the synagogue, sometimes carrying a small toy Torah (stuffed plush toys or paper scrolls).

Simchat Torah is a festive and joyful celebration of the Jewish people's love of and commitment to Torah.

According to Rabbi Wolbe, what is happening on Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah is that God and the Jewish people "are forging a bond that's going to endure even when we go our separate ways." The connection forged at this time is so deep that it will withstand the relative "distance" between the Jewish people and God during the post-holidays.

For the Christian or Messianic Jew these days represent the Love of the Scriptures given to us. They represent the instructions God has given for a fruitful life and a strong bond between the individual and God, as well as giving us a glimpse of the character of the God we place our faith and trust in.

Israel kept these days as a remembrance, but the images and truths they represent are there for everyone. Celebrating the bond between God and us is not a once in a year event however, but should be remembered and acted upon daily.

The study of the scriptures is equally important, as the digestion of them gives direction and joy to our daily life.

. . .and recalling too how from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which can give you the wisdom that leads to deliverance through trusting in Yeshua the Messiah. All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living; thus anyone who belongs to God may be fully equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 CJB

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