



Torah Reflections for *Shemini Atzeret*

22 Tishrei, 5781

October 10, 2020

When the last *Sukkot* meal has been eaten and cleared
And the week's outdoor festivities concluded,
The Jewish liturgical cycle shifts to *Shemini Atzeret*,
A solemn eighth day
For rest and reflection,
And a prayer for rain.

From Fall through Spring
The heavens bring wind and water,
Bathing the Israeli landscape between harvests—
Mehalkel hayim b'hesed – with loving-kindness you sustain life.

From these cooling days and nights to the blossoming-season of Passover
Our liturgy addresses God as Bringer of Wind and Rain, Restorer of Life,
A reminder that each tiny drop on Israel's often-parched soil
Is a blessing and gift;
That winter storms and damp gray days nurture life's holy process;
That our lives depend on so much more than our own labors.

Yet one day each year, there is a pause in the prayerbook
And its litany of grateful praise for what is already and naturally in the cycle of our
lives;
The poetic pause an echo of ancient Jerusalem's annual rite of
Tefilat Geshem—A Prayer for Rain,
When Jewish farmers and city-dwellers
Reached back to the penitential mood of Yom Kippur
Reached out in humility to the Bringer of Wind and Rain
Reached out with fear and unguarded yearning to the Source of Life,
Praying that life-giving waters be released from their heavenly chambers
Over the coming months—enough to sustain the fields and orchards
Animals and storehouses
For another year of Goodness and Life.

O endless skies, O Restorer, even today the Land of Israel needs your gentle
blessing
And even here, we pray for your rains in their good measure
For the forested hills and communities scarred by fire,
and for the horizons browned by drought and smoke;
For the fields that have been harvested,
now await new nourishment

before they can blossom again in eventual gratitude;
For the parched and dusty corners of our hearts,
now yearning for cleansing and thirsting for hope
For the places in our world and the parts of ourselves
that are in need of healing and renewal.
On this day, Source of Inspiration, please accept my prayer, our prayer, for rain;
And may I, may we, like the land, be welcoming and porous, to receive
nourishment and blessing this season in whatever form it may come.

Shemini Atzeret (“eighth day pause” or “eighth day assembly”) is observed at the end of the week-long Jewish harvest festival of *Sukkot* (Festival of Booths). It is marked by a poetic prayer for rain, the reading or chanting of a series of psalms (*Hallel*), special Torah and prophetic readings, and a *Yizkor* memorial service. In some communities, the observance of *Shemini Atzeret* is combined with *Simhat Torah*, and accompanied by joyful hymns and processions as the annual Torah reading cycle is concluded (with the last two chapters of Deuteronomy) and then begun anew (with the beginning of Genesis).

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner, BCC of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

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