

something out into the open; in Chaldean [i.e. Aramaic], too, *b-r-'* means 'outside' . . . It is creating something purely out of one's mind and will and out of nothing else . . . The whole world is accordingly nothing but a materialized thought of God. The use of *b-r-'* to designate plump, corpulent, and healthy also comes from this meaning of the root of becoming visible, concrete, tangible . . ." (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, 3).

The image Hirsch suggests in describing the divine act of Creation involves the freeing of potential—the releasing of that which hitherto had been constrained. His explanation dovetails well with the balance of the Creation narrative, which, far from suggesting that God creates *ex nihilo*, seems rather to allude to a very different portrait. God works with the building blocks of Creation—bringing things out into the open, employing powers of revelation as well as imposing order on the primordial chaos that exists. One need look no further than the leitwort (the word that repeats itself) in the Creation narrative: *va'yavdil* ("and God separated"). The essential act of creation then involves both liberation and separation.

Rabbi Jack Riemer, a dear colleague whom I had the privilege of learning from during my years of teaching in Boca Raton, Florida, opened my eyes anew to a fresh understanding of *b-r-'*. He explained that it is not surprising that the Hebrew word for being healthy, *bari*, or health, *bri'ut*, comes from the same root as *b-r-'* ("to create"). To be a healthy human being, Rabbi Riemer explained to me, in itself means that one must be a creative person. Creation and good health are intimately linked one to another. May this coming year be a time of freedom, innovation, and good health.

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Shemini Atzeret and
Simhat Torah 5781

שמיני עצרת
שמחת תורה תשפ"א



One Day More

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Of all of the holidays in the month of Tishrei, Shemini Atzeret is the most puzzling. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the new year for the world, Yom Kippur focuses on atonement and forgiveness, Sukkot is about joy and vulnerability. Even Simhat Torah, which is not mentioned in the Bible, has a clear purpose and clear rituals. But if asked to explain the purpose of Shemini Atzeret, beyond having the opportunity to pray for rain for the coming season, most people would be hard pressed to articulate what, exactly, this eighth day does for us, for God, or for the world.

This question is not a modern one. The Rabbis themselves offer various explanations for this mysterious holiday. Shemini Atzeret is mentioned in Leviticus 23:36, where the Torah says, "On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to the Lord; it is a solemn gathering: you shall not work at your occupations." Rashi, commenting on this verse, explains that the word *atzeret* comes from the root *atzer*, which means "to hold back," making this holiday the one of "holding back." This "holding back" is not God's remaining while we leave. Instead, God is asking us to remain in the holy space created by the month of Tishrei for an extra day, for one more moment. This is not because there are more things we have to do, but simply so we can be together, in God's presence and with one another. Rashi, paraphrasing a gemara in BT Sukkah 55b, brings an analogy to understand the role of Shemini Atzeret:

It is similar to the case of a king who invited his children to a banquet for a certain number of days. When the time arrived for them to take their departure he said, “Children, I beg of you, stay one day more with me; it is so hard for me to part with you!” (Rashi on Lev. 23:36)

The parable suggests that Shemini Atzeret is not primarily for us; rather, it is for God. We typically conceive of the month of Tishrei as being about ourselves. What are *our* goals for the coming year? How can we overcome our past failures, to ensure that we can do better in the future? What does it mean for *us* to confront the precariousness of our own existence and still experience deep happiness? When we spend time during this season considering our relationship with God, it’s often in terms of what God can do, or has done, for us. Shemini Atzeret offers something different. It’s about what we can do for God.

Certainly, after the many days of holidays and hours in shul, Shemini Atzeret can feel almost excessive. Do we really need an extra day just because God wants us to stay close? Aren’t we offered the opportunity to be close every day? Whether through daily prayer, learning Torah, or performing mitzvot, we can always be acting with our relationship with God in mind. At the same time, though, this idea is so beautiful. God doesn’t need us to be close so we can pound our chests or wave our *lulavim*. God doesn’t *need* us to be close at all. God *wants* us to be close. How extraordinary that God, who shouldn’t need people at all, wants to be in relationship with the Jewish people, just for the sake of intimacy.

This year, perhaps more than any other, the feeling of longing for each other’s company is deep, and yet that intimacy feels unattainable. Whereas I usually enter Shemini Atzeret exhausted from too much shul and too much deviation from routine, this year, I long to reenter that communal space, if only for one more day. As God longs for the Jewish people to remain in His company, if only for one more day, many of us long to be together, even though we know that for us to be safe, we must be apart. In that sense, Shemini Atzeret is the perfect holiday for this moment, for 2020, and for Tishrei 5781. “Please,” we say to each other. “It is so hard for me to part from you.” When we seek God, we do so without the expectation that we can see God. And so too now, when

we seek each other, we have learned to trust that being in community can happen without being in physical proximity. May the day come soon when we can gather with each other, but until we can, Shemini Atzeret promises us that even when we are apart, we are still together.

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A Taste of Torah



Creation and Good Health

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With this week’s celebration of Simhat Torah and Shabbat Bereishit, we return to the very beginning of Torah as we read anew the narratives of Creation, the Garden of Eden, and the tragedy of Cain and Abel. Not surprisingly, the book of Genesis opens in philological complexity. Much ink has been spilled in attempting to understand the unusual grammatical construct of “*bereishit bara Elohim*.” Though these words are typically translated as “In the beginning God created,” translators have wrestled with numerous other options. Rashi explains the problem succinctly: namely, that *bereishit* is a construct state and, therefore, another noun in the Hebrew should follow. It seems that a word has been omitted and rather than a noun, we have a verb (*bara*) in its place. Moreover, the word *bara* also sparks a plethora of commentary. As Nahum Sarna notes, “The Hebrew stem *b-r-‘* is used in the Bible exclusively of divine creativity” and as such “it must be essentially distinct from human creation” (JPS Bible Commentary: Genesis, 5). How else may we understand and mine the depths of this unique verb that begins all of Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that cognate roots of *b-r-‘* (*bara*) found in Hebrew all suggest the meaning of “striving to get out.” He continues that the “underlying conception of *b-r-‘* is that of bringing