Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth and Simhat Torah

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In Jewish tradition, the number seven is associated with perfection. We have 7 days of creation; Shabbat is on day 7; there are 7 weeks between Pessah and Shavuoth; 7 years in the sabbatical cycle; 7 cycles of 7 years in the jubilee cycle; 7 days of Pessah and Succoth by biblical rule.

But what is the significance of 8? What comes after the holiness and perfection symbolized by 7?

This question is especially relevant in relation to the festival of Shemini Hag Atsereth--the 8th day closing festival. No other festival day in the Torah is tied to the number 8.

Perhaps we have a clue from the circumcision ceremony--which optimally takes place on the 8th day. Some commentators have explained that the berit (covenant) is entered on the 8th day so that the baby boy will first have lived through one Shabbat. The first seven days of life, encompassing Shabbat, symbolize spiritual perfection and purity. But now comes the eighth day. This symbolizes the beginning of facing reality in an imperfect world. 8 symbolizes starting out on a new path, with all the excitement and anxiety that this entails.

8 holds great promise, but also great dangers and risks. If 7 symbolizes the nearness of the Divine Presence, 8 symbolizes the human predicament of carving out one's own life.

The 7 days of Succoth remind us of God's providence over the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. The 8th day festival is marked by our leaving the succah, when the onus of life is put squarely on our shoulders. The challenge of 8 is the challenge of living as a responsible human being, even when God's Presence seems to have receded.

In the Torah, Shemini Hag Atsereth is a day of stark simplicity; it lacks any special symbols. It is a reminder of the unadorned challenges symbolized by the number

8.

But the Jewish folk spirit added a new dimension: Simhat Torah. Simhat Torah is not a biblically ordained festival, but grew out of the spirit of the Jewish people. Although we are anxious about the future (symoblized by the number 8), we are not afraid. We have the Torah. We rejoice. We strengthen ourselves spiritually. We have created Simhat Torah as an addendum to Shemini Hag Atsereth.

If Shemini Hag Atsereth is God's challenge to the Jewish people, Simhat Torah is the Jewish people's answer to God. It is a very good answer, an inspiring answer; it is the only answer that can give us genuine strength and happiness as we face the complexities of the real world in which we live. Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat