



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 26, 2013  
Shemini Atzeret/Yizkor

**The Secret Power of Eight**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## **The Secret Power of Eight**

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### **ABSTRACT**

"Great things are done (only) by great people." True or False?

Shemini Atzeret teaches that this statement is patently false.

Have you ever uncovered an engraved stone deeply buried in layers of moss or grime? Or a hidden pattern concealed in the annals of history? Or, perhaps – like just happened in Israel this past month – a treasure trove of gold coins centuries old? Few things compare to the thrill of discovering a hidden treasure embedded in the earth or underwater, or a long-lost message forgotten over the ages.

As Jews we have countless such gems hidden beneath the layers of our heritage and in the words of the Torah which, once uncovered, explain many historical and modern-day phenomena.

Since today is Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Assembly which follows the seven days of Sukkot, let's take the number eight and mine its secrets. The number eight has a special meaning and power in mathematics, science and philosophy. Just check out the Wikipedia entry on EIGHT and you'll find that eight is unique in practically every field (not just math): music, dance, religion, architecture, engineering, physics, astronomy, chemistry, geology and biology!

What is it about the number eight that makes it so outstanding? What makes the musical octave so magical? We find the answer embedded in the more than 3,300 year-old Torah teaching, in the story of Shemini Atzeret.

This sermon takes the obvious contradiction about Shemini Atzeret – on one hand it's a "separate holiday," on the other it's the eighth day of Sukkot – combines it with fascinating insights into the number eight by medieval sages and reveals the power of Shemini Atzeret and how eight – or, more precisely, seven plus one – contains the secret to life. It also teaches us the power of remembering our loved ones during Yizkor.

What is special about Shemini Atzeret? It teaches us how an ordinary person can do something absolutely extraordinary. How great things can be done by regular people, and why the most realistic thing is to be unrealistic.

## THE SECRET POWER OF EIGHT: HOW A REGULAR PERSON CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

### 1. Numbers (Humor)

Did you hear the one about the guy who said that there are three types of people: Those that can count and those that can't?

Or this one:

The news spread like wildfire – the town *schlimazel* actually won the lottery.

When asked how he, a man who never got anything right, managed to do it, he answered, "It was a little bit of brains and a little bit of luck." And then he explained,

"When I was young, my father told me that thirteen is a lucky number. So I figured thirteen times thirteen must be extremely lucky. Therefore, I picked 155. That was the brains..."

"But thirteen times thirteen," exclaimed those who heard him, "is 169!"

"That," replied the *schlimazel*, "was the luck."

## 2. The Eighth Day

Whether you can count or not, I am confident that everyone here knows that today is Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Assembly – so called because it arrives on the eighth day after the holiday of Sukkot has begun.

What's so special about the number eight?

Well let's begin by looking in contemporary sources.

Universally, the number eight has special meaning and power in sciences and thought systems across the board. Just check out the Wikipedia entry<sup>1</sup> on EIGHT and you'll find that eight is unique in practically every field (not just math): music, dance, religion, architecture, engineering, physics, astronomy, chemistry, geology and biology!

Here is a small sample:

- Written straight up, 8 is a beautiful number; lay it down and it means infinity (in mathematics and in life).
- In China the number 8 is believed to express the totality of the universe.
- The number 8 is the largest cube in the Fibonacci Sequence (I personally don't really know that that means, but it sounds good).<sup>2</sup>
- All spiders, and in fact all arachnids, have eight legs.
- In Karate and Kung Fu there are said to be 8 virtues: respect, honesty, courage, integrity, humility, compassion, patience, and peacefulness.
- In measurement, there are eight fluid ounces in a cup, eight pints in a gallon and eight furlongs in a mile.
- In technology, a byte is eight bits.
- In geometry, a cube has eight vertices.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight>

<sup>2</sup> See "Fibonacci Sequence, the Fingerprint of God" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Uo4Oond1e8>

- In chemistry, eight is the atomic number of oxygen.
- In music, there are eight notes in the symmetric scale.
- In human adult dentition there are eight teeth in each quadrant; the eighth tooth is the so-called wisdom tooth.
- There are eight cervical nerves on each side in man and most mammals.
- The Pythagoreans made the number 8 the symbol of love and friendship; they called it the Great Tetractys.

### 3. Discovery

I bet you never knew that. I certainly didn't.

It's fun to discover new facts. Indeed, one of the most exhilarating experiences is to discover something unusual.

Have you ever uncovered an engraved stone deeply buried in layers of moss or grime? Or a hidden pattern concealed in the annals of history? Or, perhaps – like just happened in Israel this past month<sup>3</sup> – a treasure trove of gold coins centuries old? Few things compare to the thrill of discovering a hidden treasure embedded in the earth or underwater, or a long-lost message forgotten over the ages.

As Jews we have countless such hidden gems hidden beneath the layers of our heritage and in the words of the Torah which, once uncovered, explain many historical and modern-day phenomena.

For one, Shemini Atzeres reveals the true power of eight and offers a surprising insight that can change our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.timesofisrael.com/gold-treasure-trove-unearthed-at-base-of-temple-mount/?utm\\_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm\\_campaign=844e44d121-2013\\_09\\_09&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_adb46cec92-844e44d121-54429653](http://www.timesofisrael.com/gold-treasure-trove-unearthed-at-base-of-temple-mount/?utm_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=844e44d121-2013_09_09&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_adb46cec92-844e44d121-54429653)

## 4. An Obvious Contradiction

The very name Shemini Atzeret contains an obvious contradiction:

On one hand, the Torah specifically defines it as the eighth day, following the seven days of Sukkot:

*The fifteenth day of the seventh month shall be a sacred holiday to you ... You shall celebrate a festival to God for seven days ... The eighth day shall be a time of assembly (Atzeret) for you when you shall do no mundane work.*<sup>4</sup>

But then, the Talmud states that this day is not merely an eighth day of the holiday, but a “separate holiday,” a holiday of its own.<sup>5</sup> In other words, instead of reading the Torah literally, as on the eighth day of Sukkot you shall celebrate *Atzeret*, we read it as new clause, the eighth day of Atzeret.

So what is Shemini Atzeret? The eighth day of Sukkot or a separate holiday?

The answer is both: Shemini Atzeret combines the seven days of Sukkot with an eighth dimension, as we learn from this fascinating and revolutionary insight offered by the Rashba.

## 5. Rashba Insight

Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, known by the acronym of his name – Rashba – was one of the greatest medieval scholars. One of the top Jewish leaders during the Golden Age of Spain, he served as a rabbi in Barcelona for 50 years, counted the Ramban among his teachers and Rabbeinu Bechayei among his students.

The Rashba was an outstanding rabbinic authority, and more than 3,000 of his responsa are still in existence. In one classic teaching, the Rashba writes about the power of eight:

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<sup>4</sup>Numbers 29:12; 35. See Leviticus 23:36.

<sup>5</sup>Talmud, Sukkah 48a.

The design of the universe – as divinely ordained – is structured around the number seven, as in seven days of the week. Also in Torah we find the number seven chosen to define the structure of time: in days (Shabbat), weeks (the seven weeks of the Omer) and years (the seven years of Shemitah, and then seven times seven – 49 – years leading to the Jubilee). As well as the holidays: the seven days of Passover and Sukkot. Also in the Temple we find the seven branches of the menorah.

Seven is the cycle (*hekef*) of existence. The number eight thus is the transcendent force that protects/preserves the cycle, *shomer es ha'hekef*.

The seven days of Sukkot encompass a complete cycle. Shemini Atzeret is designated as a special holy day, and that is why it is a “separate holiday.”<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Klei Yakar

The power of eight is further illuminated for us by another medieval scholar, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, the rabbi of Prague in the early 1600s, and author of the Torah commentary *Klei Yakar*.

In the *Klei Yakar*, he explains why the Torah<sup>7</sup> tells us the exact day that the Temple was finished – on the eighth day following the seven days of the Temple's dedication, and the training and installment of the priests. He writes:

Perhaps we can say that since God revealed Himself to them on that day,<sup>8</sup> and not in the (seven) days prior, therefore the verse needs to explain the reason why this day more than any other day? [Why was the divine revelation specifically on this day and not all the prior days? And the answer is:] Being that this was “the eighth day,”

<sup>6</sup> Shaalot U'Teshuvot HaRashba Part 1, Section 9.

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 9:1.

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 9:4; 23.

this fact generated an intensified state of holiness. Because every number seven signifies the mundane and eight denotes holiness<sup>9</sup> ... And that is why God revealed Himself to them on this day being that it was the "eighth day," because this number is exclusively for the Divine.<sup>10</sup>

In other words: Seven defines the complete structure of existence. In personal terms, it refers to the power each of us can acquire by actualizing our natural potential. Eight symbolizes a state of transcendence and holiness that is one step above the natural order, higher than the natural structure and its limitations – it is that which we can personally achieve beyond our natural capacity.

## 7. Practical Implications

Lest you think that the words of the Rashba and the *Klei Yakar* are just abstractions, let me spell out their far-reaching and practical implications.

Thinkers and philosophers, poets and scholars – and for that matter, all people throughout the ages who sought the meaning of life – have grappled with the question whether mortals could achieve immortality or at least a measure of transcendence in their lives.

Clearly, we human are restless souls seeking to escape the monotony of our habits and routines. The big question is this: How high can we climb? Can we experience true transcendence and at what price? Do we need to give up our material pursuits to find spirituality? Can we fuse matter and spirit without compromising one or the other?

<sup>9</sup> As the Midrash (Yalkut Shemoni, *Beshalach* 241. See *Shemot Rabba* 23) states that all of Moses' extolling [dealings] was with the word "az" ((אז, like... *Az yashir Moshe*, because "az" is "*alef/echod rochev al zayin*," one riding on seven [which adds up to eight], to effect the Divine (One, *echod*) rule over ... existence which was created in seven days.

<sup>10</sup> He adds that this is also the reason that circumcision (which is on the eighth day) overrides Shabbat (which is on the seventh day), because the spiritual prevails over the physical (the world created in seven days).



In general, there are two schools of thought. One school holds that we have to escape the seductive tug of materialism to find a higher truth. The other school holds that, in order to succeed in the physical universe we have to give up on the idealism and dreams of youth and resign ourselves to the limits and boundaries of mortal flesh.

In other words: Asceticism or material immersion, or some type of hybrid mix or compartmentalization of the two, are our only viable options.

## 8. Another Way

Enter Shemini Atzeret – which is both the eighth day and a “holiday of its own” – and emphatically declares: There is another way.

And that way is called eight. But eight is not eight; it is seven plus one. Or, more accurately, eight is “the one that rides on the seven” (in the words of the *Klei Yakar*), the one that “protects/preserves the cycle” (in the words of the Rashba).

Eight means that we have the entire structure of existence, every one of the seven building blocks, the seven-piece cycle of time. Plus one additional, transcendent dimension, that goes beyond and infuses the structure with a higher power.

Music is a beautiful example for this: The spectrum of sound breaks down into seven notes of the diatonic scale. But then something extraordinary happens: the seven notes lead into the octave (which means eighth in Latin). The octave relationship is a natural phenomenon that has been referred to as the “basic miracle of music,” which defines the harmony of music. The magic of music, then, reflects “the one riding on the seven.”

We all know that music touches us like nothing else. It has the power to soothe us and transport us to another time and space. But no one knows why: What is it about the harmony of music that transcends all language?

Shemini Atzeret provides the answer: Music introduces the transcendent eight (octave) into the regularity and structure of seven. And that is the secret of harmony.<sup>11</sup>

Eight, in other words, captures the essence of Judaism – to be within and above, all at once ... to have our head in the clouds, while our feet are firmly planted on the grounds.

## 9. Slicing the Eight (Optional Humor)

Indeed, eight is very special. Especially when you consider its structure.

Teacher: “How much is half of 8?”

Student: “Up and down or across?”

Teacher: “What do you mean?”

Student: “Well, cutting it in half up and down makes a 3, but across the middle makes two zeros!”

## 10. Seven And Eight

When seven dominates, then there is no real hope for breaking out of our routines. Consider the “quiet desperation” of most people’s monotonous lives – with so many going to “the grave with the song still in them,” as Henry David Thoreau so sadly put it.

That is why seven needs to be protected by eight. Without the eight, the seven may be complete, but it is limited, defined, confined and trapped.

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<sup>11</sup> This perhaps is the reason that the harp in the days of Moshiach will be made of eight chords. (Talmud, Erchin 13b. Cited in the Klei Yakar brought earlier.)

[Maybe that's why the number 6 was afraid of the number 7?  
Because 7 ate 9.]

But when the transcendent eight is in control, we have the perfect balance between the extraordinary and the ordinary – between our human structures and institutions and our yearning to soar.

And that is the essence of Shemini Atzeret – the eighth day. On this day we celebrate – even more than during the days of Sukkot – but we do so on the ground below, bringing heaven down to earth.

This principle – as revolutionary and groundbreaking (no pun intended) as it may sound – can be practically applied to our daily lives.

## 11. Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

What do you think about this statement? Great things are done (only) by great people. True or false?

Many of us buy into the myth that greatness is the domain of the gifted, of special people, of geniuses and giants.

Shemini Atzeret teaches us that nothing can be farther from the truth. The greatness of eight rides upon the “regular” cycle of seven. Actually, the fact is that there is nothing “regular” about “regular.” Our so-called “regular” lives have the power of the irregular eight. All we need do is reveal it.

Of course, we can be trapped in the cycle of seven and never break out. But that is because we are not trying hard enough. If we but look around, we see that miracles are engineered by regular people just like us.

This means that at any given moment each of us has the opportunity to do something absolutely extraordinary!

## 12. Two Examples (Inspirational Stories)

Two examples. The first is a true story reported on CNN:

When a man in Texas was stopped for an expired car registration, he told the cop that he had not renewed it because he simply could not afford the cost of the registration. It was either that or feeding his kids. The cop still issued him a ticket, but when the man took it, tucked inside, he found a \$100 bill. Now he had the money to renew the registration and pay the fine. He broke down in tears.<sup>12</sup>

Another example:

There was a distinguished Chassid, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, who wanted to see the Prophet Elijah. Meriting *Gilui Eliyahu* (the revelation of Elijah) is considered to be a great privilege, attained by chosen mystics and tzaddikim. The Chassid asked the Baal Shem Tov which spiritual exercises he needed to undertake in order to merit the same.

The Baal Shem Tov discouraged him, but the Chassid persisted. For months he implored the Baal Shem Tov, yet the great master kept rebuffing him. Finally, a few days before Sukkot, the Baal Shem Tov acquiesced. He told the Chassid that he would help him to meet Elijah, but on one condition – he'd have to carry out his instructions exactly as conveyed, without deviating even one iota. The Chassid readily agreed.

"If you want to see the prophet, this is what you need to do," the Baal Shem Tov instructed. "Fill up nine boxes with large quantities of food: fish, meat, wine, etc. Then, on Erev Sukkot, travel to the neighboring town with all the food you have purchased. At the outskirts of the town, at the edge of the forest, there is a dilapidated house. Shortly before the holiday begins, knock on the door and ask if they would put you up for the holiday."

With enthusiasm, the disciple followed the instructions of the Baal Shem Tov. He purchased parcels of food and drink, and, on the designated day, traveled to the impoverished home. He knocked on the door. The woman of the house opened it, and he asked her if he could stay with them for the holiday.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.cnn.com/video/?hpt=hp\\_t3#/video/us/2012/12/12/pkg-cop-puts-money-inside-ticket.ktv](http://www.cnn.com/video/?hpt=hp_t3#/video/us/2012/12/12/pkg-cop-puts-money-inside-ticket.ktv)

"How can I welcome you when I don't have any food in the house?" she cried. "We are a very poor family."

"Well, I happen to have plenty of food here with me," he replied. "I have enough food for all of us." The woman could not believe her ears and welcomed him in; she introduced him to her husband and children and gave him a bed to sleep in. Seeing the entire family overjoyed and the children dancing around, the guest realized how impoverished they truly were. These poor kids had never seen so much food in their life. And the parents were the happiest people in the world, feeling that they could finally celebrate Sukkot properly, with abundant food and wine.

The Chassid spent the first two days of Sukkot with them. All the while, he was eagerly waiting to see Elijah. But to no avail ... Elijah never showed up.

Frustrated, he returned to the Baal Shem Tov and complained: "I was in that house for two days, but I did not see Elijah! Why did you disappoint me?"

"Did you do everything I told you?" asked the Baal Shem Tov.

"Yes, I did!" he asserted.

"And you didn't see him?"

"No!"

"In that case," said the Baal Shem Tov, "go back to the house for the last days of the holiday, but this time, when you arrive, remain outside and just stand near the window, listening.

The Chassid wondered about the meaning of this strange instruction. But he followed orders. He went back to the house. He stood near the window. Inside he heard the following conversation taking place between the wife and the husband: "Sarah," the husband was saying, "Where will we get food for Shemini Atzeret and Simchas Torah? I am so concerned."

To which his wife responded: "Why are you worried Yankel? Didn't we see how God send us Elijah during the first days of Sukkot with all that delicious food? Surely God will send Elijah again for the last days of the holiday!"

And suddenly the man understood what the Baal Shem Tov was telling him. You want to see Elijah? Don't look for him in the heavens above, or among the holy people living in the mountains or caves. You want to see Elijah, the miracle worker? Fill up boxes with food, feed hungry children, then take a good look in the mirror!

You will see Elijah in yourself. You will see the extraordinary in you.

### 13. Our Parents and Yizkor

Most of us need not go far to find examples of the extraordinary. We need not look farther than our parents.

Quietly, without fanfare, our parents nurtured us and shaped us into who we are today. Any parent knows the countless hours, the cost, the pain, the agony (and of course, the joy) – the tremendous investment that goes into raising children.

And yet, like the foundation of a building, all this huge effort by parents goes largely unnoticed until ... until a parent passes on (may no one know of this).

*Yizkor* – accesses the eighth, transcendent dimension and connects it with our existence. When we recite *Yizkor* and remember our loved ones, we don't reminisce about them as distant memories; we state their names and speak to them as if they are here with us. And indeed, their souls are here with us – breathing, walking and living through us. And we pledge to give material charity in their honor – in effect channeling their spirits into our physical world.

Like the number eight, *Yizkor*, is not an escape into the ethereal. It is discovering the transcendent eight in the seven – in the very fiber of our lives and structure of existence. For our parents, like no one else, epitomize the extraordinary power of eight wielded by seemingly "ordinary" individuals doing seemingly "ordinary" things, which are not ordinary at all.

## 14. An Extraordinary Lesson

That is the extraordinary lesson of Shemini Atzeret. This special holiday teaches us that we, every one of us – you, you, and you and everyone assembled here today – can change the world!

Eight means that we don't have to upend our structures, for eight is only possible after there is a structure of seven. Eight does not destroy or annihilate the natural order. What it does do – is climb on top of the seven. It is the “one that rides on the seven.”

This eighth day, following the seven days of Sukkot, shows us that the most realistic thing is to be unrealistic, and the greatest risk is taking no risk at all.

So, let us use this special day to do something special – not just today but all year long. Let us apply ourselves today to make an extra gesture to our spouse and loved ones. Go the extra mile. Go out of our way to help someone.

And then, let us make this a daily habit – let us make a routine of anything but routine.

And now, let's dance.