

# Shemini Atzeret: “I Love the Jewish Monastery”

Category: Holidays, Simchas Torah

*The story of the only child at hakafot post-holocaust — and a surprising reunion — is the best description of the meaning of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.*

## The Lost Child

Abe Foxman, who served as chairman of the Anti-Defamation League for 27 years, was born on May 1, 1940 in Poland. When the Germans invaded a few months later, they herded the Jews in the ghetto, and Foxman’s parents decided to leave him with his Catholic nanny. She adopted him, baptized him to Christianity, and gave him a new first name and her own last name. For all intents and purposes, he grew up as a Catholic in Vilnius, Lithuania through the years 1940-1944.

When his parents returned after the war, the nanny did not want to return the child, and it took a series of court battles in the Russian legal system for the parents to obtain custody. By that time, he was a good Catholic boy, to the extent that he had even been taught to hate Jews — and he informed his parents that he didn’t plan to change.

His father wanted to introduce him to Judaism, but he waited for the right opportunity. That opportunity arrived on Simchat Torah 1945; his father thought that a day like this — filled with dancing, joy, and candy for the kids — would be the right moment.

On the way to the synagogue — Abe retold many years later — they passed the monastery, and he crossed himself and ran to kiss the hand of the priest who emerged from the building. His father was obviously unhappy, but he did not say a word.

They arrived at the synagogue, which was actually just a ruin of what remained of the synagogue before the war, and as they entered, little Abe drew the attention of a Jew dancing in a Russian soldier’s uniform.

The soldier approached his father and asked: "Is this boy Jewish?" The question was appropriate, because Abe had blond hair and blue eyes.

"Yes," his father answered.

The soldier turned to the boy and said, "Can I lift you on my shoulders and dance with you?"

Abe agreed, and the soldier danced with him all evening. When he returned home, Abe told his mother that he loved the Jewish "monastery" ....

## **Finding the Soldier**

This story was told by Abe Foxman himself at an event at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. One researcher was deeply moved by the story, and decided to look for the soldier who had danced with Abe that night.

She soon discovered that there is a song written by Abie Rotenberg, which tells about an elderly Jew he met traveling back from a wedding in Chicago. This fellow, who was a holocaust survivor from Vilnius, clearly had difficulty walking, so Abie asked the old man why he bothered to travel to weddings altogether.

The man answered that traveling to weddings was never a hassle; he was overjoyed to participate. This was his story:

He was in Vilnius right after the war, when he decided to go to the synagogue on Simchat Torah. There were no Torah scrolls to dance with, but he noticed a little boy entering the synagogue. Suddenly, he realized that it was the first time in a very long time that he had seen a Jewish child... He lifted the child on his shoulders and danced with him all evening...

The researcher reached out to Abie Rotenberg, who connected her with that Holocaust survivor. It was really him — Leo Goldman, a rabbi in Detroit, Michigan. In 2010, sixty-five years after they danced together at Simchat Torah in Vilnius, Abe Foxman reunited with Rabbi Leo Goldman.

When World War II broke out, Leo Goldman was a 19-year-old yeshiva student in Poland. In the beginning of the war, the Russians took over his town and recruited him into the Red Army to fight the Nazis. In one battle, he was wounded

and sent to a hospital in Uzbekistan where he remained hospitalized for a long time. He was not recruited again, and thus his life was saved.

In Uzbekistan, he met a Jewish girl and they married after the war, and when they left Russia, they came to Vilnius to search for living relatives. They arrived in the city during the holiday season, and on Simchat Torah, Leo decided to go to the synagogue. There, he saw this little boy, and he suddenly realized that during all his travels from Uzbekistan to Vilnius — thousands of miles — he had seen hundreds of destroyed Jewish communities, and not a single Jewish child!

He took the child in lieu of a Torah scroll, and turned to the others and said, “Let’s dance with this child — he symbolizes the future of the Jewish people.”

## **The Child Who Comes Back Home**

Today we celebrate Shemini Atzeret. What exactly does this holiday symbolize?

The Rebbe once cited a teaching in the Zohar which explains that the three festivals correspond to the 3 forefathers (Toras Menachem v. 50 p. 35).

Passover corresponds with Abraham. The story in the Torah (Vayera 18:6) about the angels who arrived to visit him and were fed “cakes” — according to the Midrash, that story took place on Passover, and those cakes were matzos (Bereishis Rabba 48:12).

Shavuot corresponds with Isaac. At the giving of the Torah, there was a strong sound of the shofar — reminiscent of the ram which replaced Isaac as a sacrifice.

Sukkot corresponds with Jacob, because the Torah says that “Jacob traveled to Sukkot...”

What about Shemini Atzeret? The Zohar says that this concluding holiday corresponds with Joseph. When Joseph decided to reveal himself to his brothers, he instructed that all Egyptians leave the room; the Torah says that “no man was present when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers” (Vayigash 45:1) That, the Zohar says, is the theme of Shemini Atzeret.

What is the connection?

The Rebbe noted something very interesting: Joseph was involved in the affairs of the entire world. He was responsible for feeding all of humanity during the terrible famine — “he sustained all the nations of the land” (Miketz 42:6). He was “cosmopolitan.” But when it came time to reveal himself to his brothers, he sent everyone else away. This was a moment just for family.

This is reflected in the holiday of Shemini Atzeret:

On the holiday of Sukkot in the Holy Temple, 70 sacrifices would be offered throughout the seven days, but on Shemini Atzeret, only one special sacrifice was offered. The Midrash explains that the 70 offerings represented the 70 nations of the world, because on Sukkot, we pray for the well-being of all humanity. The Midrash goes on to say that if the nations would have only known and appreciated the benefit of those sacrifices, they would have sent legions of soldiers to protect the holy Temple.

But on Shemini Atzeret, only one offering was brought — for the Jewish people. Sukkot was the celebration of all peoples, but on Shemini Atzeret, G-d says, “this is a day for family.” After all guests leave the party, the close family members stick around for a few extra moments — and those moments are the most memorable.

And that’s exactly what Joseph did when he revealed himself to his brothers. (Sichos Kodosh 5740 v. 1 p. 249).

It’s no surprise that a lost child found his way back to Judaism on, specifically, the holiday of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah — the holiday which represents Joseph, the lost son who found his way back home.

We are about to recite Yizkor, when we remember our loved ones and all those who lost their lives just because they were Jews. It’s a somber moment — but this is a holiday of joy. Therefore, you are all invited tonight to hakafot, to celebrate with the children, the future of the Jewish people.

*Below is the song from Abie Rotenberg*

[The Man From Vilna](#)