SHEMINI ATZERET AND SIMCHAT TORAH IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide
WHAT ARE SHEMINI ATZERET AND SIMCHAT TORAH?

The two holidays of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah mark the conclusion of Sukkot, a weeklong Jewish holiday that celebrates the gathering of the harvest. In 2020, Shemini Atzeret begins at sunset on Friday, October 9, and ends at sundown on Saturday, October 10, followed by Simchat Torah, which begins at sunset on Saturday, October 10, and ends at sundown on Sunday, October 11.

What do Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah mean, and what do the days commemorate?

Shemini Atzeret means the “Eighth Day of Assembly” that brings the seven-day Sukkot period to an end. According to Jewish tradition, Shemini Atzeret signals the beginning of a special prayer for rain, which is included in the regular weekly prayers until Passover.

Simchat Torah means “Rejoicing with the Torah” and marks the end of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and the beginning of the new cycle. It is a joyous holiday that celebrates the Jewish love of Torah and study.

Simchat Torah is generally celebrated on the same day as Shemini Atzeret in Israel and among Reform Jewish groups. These two occasions are observed as two separate days among many Jewish communities outside of Israel.
How are Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah observed?

On both holidays working, driving, writing, or switching on or off electronic devices are prohibited. Cooking and carrying outdoors are permitted (unless it is also Shabbat).

According to Jewish custom, Shemini Atzeret features the prayer for rain and a good harvest for the coming year in the Jewish calendar. We recite the prayers for rain and Yizkor, the prayer to remember the souls of the departed.

The highlight of Simchat Torah is the hakafot, held on both the eve and the morning of Simchat Torah, in which attendees march and dance with the Torah scrolls while circling the synagogue seven times. During the Torah service, the concluding section of the fifth book of the Torah, D’varim (Deuteronomy), is read, and immediately following, the opening section of Genesis, or B’reishit, is read. This practice represents the cyclical nature of the relationship between the Jewish people and the reading of the Torah.

How can we create an inclusive environment?

1. **Get Educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah and how they can be supportive.

2. **Intentional Planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah if possible.

3. **Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to swap shifts to observe Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

4. **Don’t make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Jewish colleagues may take the time off, but they may still observe in various ways.