

Two of Repentance

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In the summer months we read a sequence of haftarot outlined by the Midrash Pesiktah that begin with שלש דפורענותא – Three of Calamity, covering the three Shabbatot between the seventeenth of Tamuz and the Ninth of Av. These are followed by שבעה דנחמתא – Seven of Consolation, and finally ב' דתשובה – Two of Repentance, consisting of the haftorah of דרשו ה' ב' דתשובה, read on the Fast of Gedaliah, and שובה ישראל, read on Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that is identified by name with its haftorah.

Tosafot (Megillah 31b) strangely suggest that should there be a Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, then we read “dirshu” on Shabbat Shuva, and move the haftorah of “shuva” to the Shabbat between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. At first glance this realignment is incredulous, for what is left in the teshuva process after Yom Kippur? According to the Talmud’s tradition⁷¹, the totally righteous and totally wicked have already been judged on Rosh Hashana, while those somewhere between the two extremes have their judgment extended and finalized on Yom Kippur. With the repentance process ostensibly fully completed, what is left post-Yom Kippurim that would warrant reading a haftorah of repentance on the following Shabbat? Indeed we can well imagine the uproar were one’s local rabbi to announce that he is postponing his traditional Shabbat Shuva lecture to the Shabbat after Yom Kippur.

In our early history two major sins bore us cataclysmic consequences; the חטא העגל, the sin of the Golden Calf, and the חטא המרגלים, the slanderous report of the spies scouting out the land of Israel. When did these transpire, and at which juncture were these sins expiated?

The חטא העגל transpired on the seventeenth day of Tamuz, as indicated by the Mishna Taanit (4:6) which lists the breaking of the tablets (Moshe’s reaction to seeing the nation’s worship of the golden calf) as one of five calamitous events that occurred on that date.

The spies delivered their disheartening evaluation concerning the plausibility of conquering the land of Israel on Tisha B’av. The people, upon hearing their slanderous report, cried bitterly that night (Bamidbar 13:33). The Midrash comments, “You cried unwarranted crying, I will therefore establish this night as a night of crying for all generations.” This night historically became a night of crying via the destruction of both Temples and a number of other calamitous events that occurred on the ninth of Av, as listed in the Mishna Taanit (ibid.)

⁷¹ Tractate Rosh Hashana 16b

The **ענני העגל** was clearly expiated on Yom Kippur, for on that day Moshe was granted the second set of tablets which replaced the ones he had broken. When, however, was the sin of the spies forgiven?

The **ענני הכבוד** (clouds of glory) left Klal Yisrael in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf. Yet they did not return on Yom Kippur when Moshe descended from the mountain with the second set of **luchot**. According to the Gaon of Vilna, in his commentary to Shir Hashirim (1:4) the clouds of glory returned on the fifteenth day of Tishrei, the first day of Sukkot.

We can therefore suggest, and will indeed seek to prove, that God returned the clouds of glory on Sukkot because it was on this holiday that the final forgiveness for our second major historical sin, the sin of the spies, was granted.

The Torah commands that we dwell in a Sukkah because we were protected by a Sukkah covering when we sojourned in the desert. According to the prevailing opinion in the Talmud⁷² the covering by which we were protected refers to the **ענני הכבוד** which paved our way in our Sinai desert wanderings.

In both Parshat Shelach, where the Torah initially describes the spy debacle, and in Parshat Devarim, when Moshe recalls the travesty, prominent reference is made to the clouds of glory. In Shelach, where in the aftermath of the spies report, God seeks to annihilate the Jewish people, Moshe deflects God's intention by arguing that once God had already exhibited his love and protection by providing clouds of glory, should He then set out to destroy them the message of the spies would be substantiated. The assumption of the nations would be that though He was capable of delivering them from a single mighty power, He was seemingly incapable of taking on the more numerous and mightier nations that inhabited the land of Israel.⁷³

When Moshe recalls the spy debacle at the very onset of Devarim he once again makes significant reference to the **ענני הכבוד**, this time in a somewhat different vein.

*With this thing you did not believe in the Lord your God,
Who Goes before you on the way to scout for you a resting
place, in fire at night to illuminate the way which you should
go and in a cloud during the day.*

Devaim 1:32-33

ובדבר הזה אינכם מאמינים בה' אלהיכם:
ההלך לפניכם בדרך לתור לכם מקום
לחנתכם באש לילה לראתכם בדרך אשר
תלכו בה ובענן יומם:
דברים א:לב-לג

Here he expresses wonderment at how the nation could have lacked faith in God and question His capabilities once they had witnessed His "scouting out" their path in the desert via the clouds of fire and of glory. The existence of these clouds should have rendered the entire mission of the spies unnecessary.

⁷² See Rashi Sukkah 2a

⁷³ See Rashi Bamidbar 14:14

Sukkot and Slander

The Vilna Gaon⁷⁴ claims that the mitzvah of Sukkah serves to weaken the yetzer of slander (לשון הרע), based on the verse in Tehillim.

Thou shalt hide them in the concealment of Your face against the plotting of man, Thou shalt hide them in a Sukkah from the strife of tongues.

Tehillim 31:21

תסתירם בסתר פניך מרכסי
איש תצפנם בסכה מריב
לשנות:
תהלים לא:כא

Furthermore, he also points out that each of the four letters of the word Sukkah (סוכה) is enunciated with a different component of one's mouth, in the following order: the teeth, lips, palate and throat. None of its letters are enunciated through the tongue, the very symbol of slander.⁷⁵

By returning the ענני הכבוד on the first day of Sukkot it would seem evident that the expiation for the sin of the spies took place on the Sukkot holiday. Its central mitzvah, of dwelling in a Sukkah, recalls the clouds of glory that accompanied us in the desert, which ought to have provided the assurance of the Divine Protection that the spies brought into question with their slander.

The Four Species and the Spies

The second central mitzvah of Sukkot, the taking of the Four Species, similarly connects to the sin of the spies. One may detect this via a juxtaposition of the verses that relate to both the mitzvah and the spy narrative.

And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of date palm trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.

Vayikra 23:40

And [see] what the land is, if it is fat or thin, if it has trees or not, and you shall strengthen and take from the fruit of the land; and those days were the days of the ripening of the grapes ... and they came to the Valley of Eshkol ... and they said "we have gone to the land to which you have sent us, and it is flowing with milk and honey"⁷⁶, and this is its fruit.

Bamidbar 13:20-27

ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ
הדר כפת תמרִים וענף עץ עבת וערבי
נחל ושמתם לפני ה' אלהיכם שבעת
ימים:
ויקרא כג:מ

ומה הארץ השמנה הוא אם רזה היש בה
עץ אם אין והתחזקתם ולקחתם מפרי
הארץ והימים ימי בכורי ענבים ...
ויבאו עד נחל אשכל ... ויספרו לו
ויאמרו באנו אל הארץ אשר שלחתנו
וגם זבת חלב ודבש הוא וזה פריה:
במדבר יג:כז

⁷⁴ Cited in Drashot Nachlat David, authored by a student of R. Chaim of Volozhin

⁷⁵ We recommend the reader concentrate on the enunciation of the word Sukkah and the Vilna Gaon's intent will become obvious.

⁷⁶ The honey to which the Torah refers to is date honey and not bee honey. See Rashi who teaches that the spies' affirmation that the land wondrously flows with honey was with evil intent, in order to lend credence to the slander that followed.

Clearly both central mitzvot of dwelling in a Sukkah and taking the Four Species hint at a reconciliation and expiation for the sin of the spies.

The Joy of the Beit Hamikdash

Sukkot is the only one of the three Festivals where the focal point of the joy that is generally mandated for all the festivals focuses specifically on the Beit Hamikdash. On a Torah level, the mitzvah of the Four Species was mandated for all seven days of the festival only in the area of the Beit Hamikdash. Elsewhere in Israel, and certainly outside of Israel, it is mandated only on the first day of Sukkot, while on subsequent days it is obligatory only by rabbinic decree.

Furthermore, its greatest moments of joy were associated with the *ניסוך המים*, the water libation that supplemented the *ניסוך היין*, the wine libation of the other holidays. The joy that accompanied the drawing of the libation waters (*שמחת בית השואבה*) was unparalleled.

Whoever did not witness the joy of the Simchat Beit Hashoevah failed to witness true joy in his lifetime.

Sukkah 51a

מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה לא ראה
שמחה מימיו.
סוכה נא.

The spy debacle caused the nation to “cry for naught” heading to the catastrophic consequences that most prominently included the destruction of both Temples on that “night of crying”.⁷⁷ Most appropriately, its expiation focused on the unparalleled joy in Sukkot’s unique Temple service.

Finally, in the Kabbalistic literature, the last day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabah (Shmini Atzeret being a separate Chag) is portrayed as a day of enormous solemnity, incorporating the “final seal of judgment”. The most prominent source in rabbinic literature as to the fearsome nature of this day appears in Ramban’s commentary from a verse at the end of the spy episode⁷⁸. Once again Sukkot is found to be prominently connected with the sin of the spies.

Fittingly, the holiday whose major motif is faith, as symbolically exhibited by living in the flimsy confines of the Sukkah for seven days serves as a perfect antidote to the lack of faith of that early generation, the generation of the spies. The spies’ rejection of the land of Israel is replaced by the great joy of being in the confines of a rebuilt Beit Hamikdash, the holiest site in Israel.

In view of our above contention, we can fully appreciate why we read “Two of Repentance” with “Shuva” being ideally moved to the Shabbat before Sukkot, since there were two major sins for which we were in need of expiation, the sin of the golden calf, which was forgiven on Yom Kippur, and the sin of the spies, whose reconciliation took place on Sukkot.

⁷⁷ Ta’anit 29a

⁷⁸ Bamidbar 14:9