

What were the *Ananei ha-Kavod*?

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At first blush, the Torah's explanation for the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* seems crystal-clear:

In order that your [future] generations should know that I caused the Israelites to dwell in sukkot, when I took them out of Egypt; I am the LORD your God

Vayikra 23:43

למען ידעו דרתיכם כי בסכות הושבתי את בני
ישראל בהוציא אותם מארץ מצרים אני ה'
אלהיכם:

ויקרא כג: מג

But what specific element does the *sukkah* commemorate? What are the “*sukkot*” in which we dwelled when we left Egypt? On this question, we find a disagreement between Tannaim. R. Akiva seems to understand the verse according to its simplest meaning: God caused the Israelites to dwell in booths on their way out of Egypt. In contrast, R. Eliezer's opinion is that the “*sukkot*” in which we dwelled were *ananei ha-kavod* (often, but wrongly, translated “clouds of glory”).¹

Interestingly, Rashi, in his commentary on Chumash (Vayikra 23:43) quotes only the view attributed to R. Eliezer, and omits the simpler view. Why should we not understand the verse as referring to actual *sukkot*? Surely it is simpler to understand the *sukkah* as a commemoration of actual booths, than to understand *sukkah* as a commemoration of *ananei ha-kavod*!

Rashi, in his commentary on the Gemara Sukka 11b, hints at a possible reason for preferring to understand *sukkah* as a commemoration of *ananei ha-kavod*. In commenting on the view “actual *sukkot*,” he notes that “when the Israelites camped during their journey in the desert, **they would build** *sukkot* to shield them from the sun.” In this comment, Rashi implies why he rejects the simple view. If we understand the word *sukkot* in Vayikra 23:43 to mean “actual *sukkot*,” or “booths,” then the word would refer to structures the Israelites themselves built. But the verse clearly states “that **I caused** the Israelites to dwell in *sukkot*, when **I took them out** of Egypt; **I am** the LORD your God.” Rashi is aware of the grammatical emphasis, which shows that the making of the *sukkot* of the desert was a divine act. He therefore prefers the view that interprets the word *sukkot* in this verse as *ananei ha-kavod*, since these were presumably produced by God, whereas the booths of the desert were produced by man.

¹ The names of the Tannaim are recorded differently in different sources; here I have followed the gemara in Sukka 11b.

According to Rashi and at least one Tanna, then, the mitzvah of *sukkah* commemorates *ananei ha-kavod*. This begs the question: what were the *ananei ha-kavod*? The phrase “*ananei ha-kavod*” appears nowhere in the Hebrew Bible. It is a phrase which appears for the first time in the words of the Tannaim. *Ananei ha-kavod* is a construct phrase, composed of two words which appear on their own in Chumash: *anan*, meaning “cloud,” and *kavod*, meaning “Divine Presence” (what Hazal call “*shekhina*”). Hazal repeatedly coin construct phrases by combining two words that stand on their own in Chumash. (Another example is *karnei ha-hod*, which appears in midrashim and is quoted by Rashi on Shemot 34:33.) By coining such phrases, Hazal draw our attention to the *pesukim* in which these words are used. We can identify the specific *pesukim* to which our attention is drawn: on several occasions the words *anan* and *kavod* appear within the same *pasuk* in Chumash. These are the *pesukim* we ought to consult to understand the meaning of *ananei ha-kavod*, and ultimately, the meaning of the mitzvah of *sukkah*.

Two *pesukim*² that contain both the words *anan* and *kavod* are:

And it came to pass, as Aharon spoke unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

Shemot 16:10

ויהי כדבר אהרן אל כל עדת בני ישראל ויפנו אל המדבר והנה כבוד ה' נראה בענן:
שמות טז:י

And it came to pass, when the congregation was assembled against Moses and against Aharon, that they looked toward the tent of meeting; and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared.

BeMidbar 17:7

ויהי בהקהל העדה על משה ועל אהרן ויפנו אל אהל מועד והנה כסהו הענן וירא כבוד ה':
במדבר יז:ז

In each of these *pesukim*, the Presence of the LORD (*Kevod Hashem*) is said to appear in (or by means of) a cloud (*anan*). These *pesukim* deal with the period of the Israelite wandering in the wilderness, and each deals with an episode of grumbling among the Israelites.³ As the grumbling reaches a crisis, *Kevod Hashem* appears by means of a cloud, just as the nation is about to turn its wrath on Moses. The appearance of *Kevod Hashem* ends the grumbling, because it forces the Israelites to focus their attention on God's presence and power. On the level of the presented narrative, it shifts the reader's focus from the Israelites' behavior to the divine response.

By connecting the mitzvah of *sukkah* to these *pesukim*, Hazal are encouraging us to examine how the cloud indicating the Divine Presence functions in them. In the story of the *mon* (Shemot 16), the Israelites, fearful of the uncertainty of food supply in the wilderness, demand to return to the fleshpots of Egypt. They accuse Moshe and Aharon of conspiring to starve the Israelites to death in the wilderness, and refuse to acknowledge that Moshe and Aharon acted to deliver them from Egypt. In the story of Korah (BeMidbar 16-17), the Israelites are consumed by their own guilt after the Korah episode. They accuse Moshe and Aharon of having caused the death of

² There are four *pesukim* which contain both the words *anan* and *kavod*. These include Shemot 24:16-17, which speak about Ma'amad Har Sinai; Shemot 40:34-35, which speak about the dedication of the mishkan; and the two *pesukim* discussed here.

³ Very similar narratives appear in BeMidbar 14:10; 16:19; or 20:6, but these do not explicitly mention the *anan*.

the “people of the Lord,” and they refuse to acknowledge that those who died had “made light of Hashem” (BeMidbar 16:30) by denying the hierarchy of Kohanim/Leviim/Israelim that He imposed. In each case, the Israelites refuse to accept the responsibility that comes with being servants of God: they blame Moshe and Aharon for their troubles, and seek to avoid a relationship with God. In the story of the *mon* (Shemot 16), they refuse to accept that having left Egypt, they are now servants of God, and are dependent on Him for their daily bread. Instead, they seek a return to the fictive security of a life in which their daily bread comes from Pharaoh. In the story of Korah (BeMidbar 16-17), those who support Korah’s rebellion refuse to acknowledge God’s right to choose the priesthood. In each of these stories, the appearance of *Kevod Hashem* (in Shemot 16:10 and BeMidbar 17:7) shifts the focus from the people’s complaint to a Divine Sign. In the story of the *mon* (Shemot 16), this Divine Sign is the appearance of manna and quail, which show that sustenance comes from God; in the story of Korah (BeMidbar 16-17), the Divine Sign is the appearance of the flowering rod of Aharon, which shows that God chose the tribe of Levi, and more specifically, the descendants of Aharon.

In both stories, God provides a sign to remind the Israelites that a relationship with God requires acknowledging our dependence on Him. The beginning of this sign is the appearance of *Kevod Hashem* by means of a cloud: these are the *ananei ha-kavod* which God provided in the wilderness.

What does the pasuk “I caused the Israelites to dwell in sukkot, when I took them out of Egypt” (Vayikra 23:43) mean, according to Rashi? That when the Jews in the wilderness grumbled and refused to acknowledge their dependence on God, God provided *ananei ha-kavod* (which should be translated “clouds indicating the Divine Presence”). These saved the Israelites from their own attitude of blaming Moshe and Aharon. They shifted the Israelites’ attention away from their own grumbling, and towards the signs (the manna and quail, and the flowering rod of Aharon) which showed how dependent the Israelites were on God. They served to change the Israelites’ attitude by re-focusing their attention. The *ananei ha-kavod* essentially saved the Israelites from themselves.

But God does not provide *ananei ha-kavod* eternally. Eventually, we need to accept responsibility for shifting our own attitudes, for turning our own attention away from grumbling, for acknowledging our dependence on God without complaint. This is the *mitzvah* of *sukkah*. When God took us out of Egypt he “caused the Israelites to dwell in *sukkot*.” In commemoration of God’s action, we are commanded to perform our own parallel action: we build *sukkot*. Our *sukkot* are not “clouds indicating the Divine Presence,” but they are palpable, physical reminders of our dependence on God. They are built at the time of year “when you gather the products of your labor from the field” (Shemot 23:16), at the time of year when satiety poses the danger that “Your heart shall become haughty and you shall forget the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (Devarim 8:14). By abandoning “houses filled with all valuables” (Devarim 6:11), in which security comes from human endeavors, and dwelling instead in flimsy temporary structures, we remind ourselves of our dependence on God. The *sukkah* serves the same purpose as did the “clouds indicating the Divine Presence.” They shift our attention towards our dependence on God. Essentially, we are commanded to build our own *ananei ha-kavod*, for all generations.

The interplay of Divine and human action in the following *pesukim* is fascinating: “In *sukkot* **you shall dwell** for seven days, every native born one in Israel shall dwell in *sukkot*, in order that your [future] generations should know that **I caused the Israelites to dwell** in *sukkot*, when I took them out of Egypt; I am the LORD your God” (Vayikra 23:43). We react to God’s action by re-creating God’s action, but God’s action itself was a necessary curb and brake on our own mistaken attitude. The idea of humans creating a brake for themselves, to save themselves from failure to acknowledge God’s Presence, is found in the Rambam’s understanding of the *mitzvot* of *mezuzah*, *tzitzit*, and *tefillin*: “He who has *tefillin* on his head and arm, *tzitzit* on his garment, and a *mezuzah* on his door may be presumed not to sin, for he has many monitors – (these are) angels that save him from sinning, as it is said (Ps. 34:8) ‘The angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him and delivers them’.”⁴ By performing these *mitzvot*, the human being creates his own angels to save him from sinning, just as the Torah commands us to create our own *ananei ha-kavod*. This is the *mitzvah* of *sukkah*.

⁴ Translation from Rabbi Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 1972.