

The Transformative Power of the Succah

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We emerge from the Yom Kippur experience brimming with the euphoria of the fast's final moments and buoyed by our faithful declarations of *ה' הוא האלקים* and *שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד*. Despite the temporary absence of our *beit hamikdash* and its *avodah*, we follow in the footsteps of *Moshe Rabbeinu* and proclaim that Hashem has forgiven our sins, and we enter Succot with the joy of a nation that has reaffirmed its personal connection to the Creator of the Universe.

Capitalizing on our rejuvenated connection to the Divine, we then enter the succah. Inside the embrace of those walls and beneath the shelter of that sacred *s'chach*, we enjoy Hashem's protective presence, we bond with Hashem, and we may even reach the wondrous heights of *רוח הקודש*, Divine inspiration.⁷⁹

Living in Hashem's protection

The succah is more than a reminder of Hashem's one-time desert protection; it is a modern manifestation of that protection.⁸⁰ To use the Zohar's term, it is *צילא דמהימנותא*, the shade of a faithful God:

“Any ezrach in Yisrael will dwell in succot.” Anyone who is of the sacred Jewish root and stem will dwell in succot, beneath the shade of Hashem.

Zohar to Emor 103a

כל האזרח בישראל ישבו בסכות כל מאן דאיהו
משרשא וגזעא קדישא דישראל ישבו בסכות
תחות צילא דמהימנותא
זוהר אמור קג.

⁷⁹ For a decidedly more depressing view of the Succah's role, see *Petichta d'Rav Kahana Nispachim 2*: “Why do we prepare Succot after Yom Kippur? So that if the Jews became liable for exile [on Yom Kippur], God considers it as though they had been exiled to Bavel.” The *Maharil* (*Hilchot Succah 2*) viewed the succah's exile as a matter of *kapparah*, saying, “God instructed us in Succah close to Yom Kippur because we need to wander from our homes, in a manner similar to exile, which atones for sin.” *Rav Tzaddok haKohen of Lublin* (*Pri Tzaddik to Devarim, Chag Succot #8*) did highlight a productive aspect to this exile experience: “The mitzvah of Succah is to leave permanent dwellings and shelter in all ways beneath His wings, on Hashem's oversight. This itself is the clarification which comes through *galut*, to shelter in Hashem through all of the oppression and trouble, so that we will know that everything comes from Hashem's direction.”

⁸⁰ *Vayyikra 23:43*

By this light, a Jew who is excluded from the succah is excluded from Hashem's shelter. This sad observation is reflected in the mishna's description of a Jew who is rained out of the succah; the exclusion is not depicted as a technical exemption, but as an outright rejection:

Compare it to a servant who dilutes a cup for his master, and then the master pours the decanter on his face.

Sukkah 28b

משל למה הדבר דומה לעבד שבא למזוג כוס
לרבו ושפך לו קיתון על פניו
סוכה כח:

The sages did not make similar statements regarding a Jew whom circumstance exempts from other mitzvot. This mishnah trains us to understand that the succah is a unique opportunity to draw close to our King, and that a loss of this opportunity is tragic.

Rav Tzaddok haKohen of Lublin saw the Succah's closeness to God as more than a product of Yom Kippur's purification; he described it as the culmination of an extended journey toward intimacy with Hashem. Just as we spend three weeks during Tammuz and Av at a distance from Hashem, so we spend three weeks during Tishrei, from Rosh HaShanah through Shemini Atzeret, drawing closer to HaShem:

It is known: Opposite the 22 days of bein hametzarim is the period from Rosh haShanah to Shemini Atzeret.

Tzidkat haTzaddik 171

וידוע נגד עשרים ושנים ימים שבין
המצרים הם מראש השנה עד שמיני עצרת.
צדקת הצדיק קעא

Rav Tzaddok continued to say that Tisha b'Av, with its distance from Hashem, is parallel to Shemini Atzeret, the day of our greatest closeness to Hashem.⁸¹ Simchat Torah (as observed by Jews living in galut) is parallel to the tenth of Av, the day when the Beit haMikdash burned, a day which Rabbi Yochanan wished to mark in the way that we mark Tisha b'Av.⁸²

Taking this one step further, Rav Tzaddok saw Succot as the culmination of a growth process across three regalim: On Pesach and Shavuot we acquire Torah and awe of Hashem, and on Succot, like a person reaching full maturity, we reject worldly things and draw close to Hashem.⁸³

The minds of elder Torah scholars settle, and they come to a complete and true mentality that will last eternally. This is the time of his joy and the enjoyment he experiences with HaShem, and this is the order of the three patriarchs as well as the three holidays in their sequence.

Tzidkat haTzaddik 202

זקני תלמידי חכמים דעתן מתישבת ובא
לדעת שלימה ואמיתית הקיימת לעד, אז הוא
זמן שמחתו ותענוגו שמתענג על ה', וזהו
סדר של שלשה אבות וכן שלש רגלים
כסדרן
צדקת הצדיק רב

Finally, Rav Tzaddok saw in the succah a direct link to the Beit haMikdash and its ultimate Divine shelter of the Jewish nation. Rav Tzaddok⁸⁴ based this idea on the talmud's linking of

⁸¹ Midrash Tanchuma to Pinchas 16 highlights HaShem's special closeness to bnei yisrael on Shemini Atzeret

⁸² Taanit 29a

⁸³ Rav Tzaddok also ties this into the public reading of Kohelet on Succot

⁸⁴ Tzidkat haTzaddik 176

three ראשון's - three expressions of 'first' which the Torah employs regarding the three regalim - with three events associated with our national entry into Israel:

They learned in the yeshiva of R' Yishmael: In the merit of the three 'rishon' [of the three regalim] we merited three 'rishon' - Destroying the descendants of Esav, building the beit hamikdash and the name of Mashiach.

Pesachim 5a

תנא דבי ר' ישמעאל: בשכר שלשה ראשון' זכו לשלשה ראשון - להכרית זרעו של עשו, לבנות בית המקדש, ולשמו של משיח...
פסחים ה.

In that set of three 'firsts,' Succot is connected to building the beit hamikdash, a connection which also emerges in our use of the term סוכת דוד, the "succah of Dovid," for the beit hamikdash itself.⁸⁵

Bonding with HaShem in the chuppah

Second, beyond Divine shelter, the succah bonds its residents with Hashem. The Baal haTurim linked the original succah to a marital chuppah:

"You shall sit in the succah for seven days" - This is parallel to the seven clouds of glory.⁸⁶ Also, the seven days when the Jews sit in the succah earn them seven chuppot: Cloud, smoke, light, fire, flame, glory of the Shechinah and the succah of the Leviathan.

Baal haTurim to Vayyikra 23:42

בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים - נגד שבעת ענני כבוד, וכנגד שבעת הימים שישראל יושבין בסוכות זוכין לז' חופות, ואלו הן: ענן, עשן, נוגה, אש, להבה, כבוד שכינה, וסוכת לויתן.
בעל הטורים ויקרא כג:מב

These chuppot, the clouds of glory, the smoke of Har Sinai, the presence of Hashem in the mishkan, and the eschatological protection of the succah constructed from the hide of the Leviathan, are all shelters, but invoking the term 'chuppah' suggests an additional, marital bond.

Both homiletically and legally, the chuppah is a place of יחוד, seclusion of the partners entering a marriage. Homiletically, it represents the private home they will construct. And legally, it is a structure into which two different individuals enter, and from which a single, united entity emerges.

This is the role of the succah: We shelter in Hashem's presence, but we also bond with Hashem inside that structure.

Experiencing Divine Inspiration

Rav Tzaddok haKohen and Rav Moshe Isserles (Rama) added one more level to our Succah experience: We shelter in Hashem's presence, we bond with Hashem, but we are also brought to a higher level of spirituality. Our closeness to Hashem in the succah is transformative, elevating our spiritual sensitivity and granting us Divine inspiration.

⁸⁵ Amos 9:11

⁸⁶ Six clouds surrounded the nation on all four sides, above and below, and the seventh was a guide before them.

Rav Tzaddok pointed to Rabbi Shimon's observation regarding a conversation between Rabban Gamliel and his servant Tavi in a succah:

R' Shimon said: From Rabban Gamliel's simple speech [שיחתו] we learn two lessons... Why didn't he say, "From Rabban Gamliel's speech?" Inter alia he taught us a lesson like that of Rav Acha bar Ada, or perhaps Rav Acha bar Ada citing Rav Hemnuna citing Rav: How do we know that even the simple speech of talmidei chachamim requires study? It is written (Tehillim 1): 'And his leaf [i.e. even something light] will not wear out.'

Succah 21b

תניא א"ר שמעון משיחתו של רבן גמליאל למדנו שני דברים... ולימא "מדבריו של רבן גמליאל?" מילתא אגב אורחיה קא משמע לן, כי הא דאמר רב אחא בר אדא, ואמרי לה אמר רב אחא בר אדא אמר רב המנונא אמר רב, מנין שאפילו שיחת תלמידי חכמים צריכה לימוד? שנאמר 'ועלהו לא יבול'.

סוכה כא:

Rav Tzaddok understood that Rabbi Shimon was not speaking of a sage's general 'simple speech,' as might take place on any day, in any venue. Rabbi Shimon's observation was specific to a sage's 'simple speech' in a succah:

From this it appears that in the succah, because they are in the Divine shade, they merit this status, and there they label the sages' words 'his leaf.'

Tzidkat haTzaddik 118

ונראה מזה דבסוכה על ידי שהם בצילא דמהימנותא זוכים להיות כן, ושם קראו לשיחת חולין שלהם 'עלהו' צדקת הצדיק קיה

Rama found this idea of spiritual elevation in the succah within the design of the succah itself. Rama identified this temporary structure as a modern incarnation of the cloud in which Moshe stood at Sinai, a distributed system of 'clouds' in which the Jewish people, as a whole, might experience a prophetic revelation reminiscent of that which Moshe experienced before he received the Torah:

Those succot hint to the Jewish people regarding the material called 'the thickness of the cloud,' which was a succah for them in their departure from Egypt.

Torat haOlah 3:62

אותן הסוכות מרמזין לישראל על ענייני החומר הנקרא 'עב הענן' והיה לסוכה בצאתם ממצרים תורת העולה ג:סב

Rama's direct reference is to the clouds which protected the Jews when they left Egypt, but his use of the term 'thickness of the cloud' is an invocation of Shmot 19:9.

And God said to Moshe: Behold, I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud.

ויאמר ה' אל משה הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן

This is the prophetic space from which Hashem spoke to Moshe, the prophetic space from which Hashem's revelation to Moshe originated, the prophetic space in which the Creator spoke directly to the created, פה אל פה.

Rama pointed out that the laws of the s'chach highlight this connection between the succah and that inspirational cloud: Our s'chach must not come from material which can receive טומאה, just as the cloud was טהור, and the heavens must be visible to a person sitting in the succah.

Rama further pointed out that the laws of succah construction highlight the protective element of that inspirational cloud in which Moshe stood at Sinai: The s'chach must offer more shade than sun, indicating protection from the elements. When that protection halts it is no longer a succah, and so we leave the succah when the rain begins.

Taking the link to Moshe's prophetic cloud a step further, the Rama saw hints to the potential disqualifications of a prophet in the potential disqualifications of s'chach:

Hashem is only manifest upon one who is mighty, wealthy and wise.

Nedarim 38a

אין הקב"ה משרה שכינתו אלא על גבור ועשיר וחכם
נדרים דף לה.

As the Rama⁸⁷ explained this list, a “wise person” is someone of complete understanding, a “mighty person” is someone of complete physical traits and character traits, and a “wealthy person” is someone of perfection in his conduct toward other people.

- A wise person must develop his intellectual understanding, and guard himself against misapprehension of אמונה, of fundamental Jewish beliefs. Disqualified s'chach in the middle of the roof is like a philosophical misconception; the first three tefach of disqualified s'chach are like a misunderstanding in three fundamental elements of this world,⁸⁸ but the fourth tefach is like a misunderstanding in אמונה, in fundamental Jewish belief, and it disqualifies the succah.
- A mighty person must develop his body, and guard himself against physical flaws. The default space of one's body is four אמות, and so the disqualification of bad s'chach situated adjacent to the wall of a succah is four אמות.
- A wealthy person must develop his social conduct, and guard himself against any arrogance. We require s'chach which grows from the earth, communicating a humble closeness to the ground.

Rama saw this message of prophecy in the walls of the succah as well; if the heavenly s'chach represents the prophetic connection between human and Hashem, then the walls represent the surrounding population.

The population in which a prophet lives impacts directly upon his ability to receive the Divine message:

A voice emerged from the heavens and said, "There is a man among you who is suitable for the Shechinah to be manifest upon him, but his generation is not suitable for it."

Sotah 48b

נתנה עליהן בת קול מן השמים ואמרה יש
בכם אדם אחד שראוי שתשרה שכינה עליו
אלא שאין דורו ראוי לכך.
סוטה מח:

⁸⁷ ibid

⁸⁸ See ibid for elaboration upon this concept

In order to merit prophecy, one must live in deserving surroundings, in a Jewish society which is worthy. The walls of the succah represent that worthy society. Therefore, schach without walls, a heavenly connection without a nation, is not a valid succah.⁸⁹

The Rama further explained that each of the walls of the succah, each of the elements of the nation, plays its own significant role in enabling the prophetic experience. A succah needs two adjacent walls with a small beginning of a third wall, or two opposing walls with a longer third wall attached. The two main walls represent the nation and Shevet Levi, or the kingdom of Yehudah and the kingdom of Yisrael, and the third wall represents גרים, those who convert to Judaism. When the Jewish nation resides in Israel, the first two walls are close together, and even a small third wall suffices. When we are in exile, the first two walls split apart, and then we require a longer third wall, as we are taught,⁹⁰ “The Jewish people were exiled only so that converts would be added to them.”

Rejoicing in our succah

These supernal potentials of the succah experience – sheltering in the Divine shade, bonding with Hashem and experiencing Divine inspiration – should inspire us with true joy as we enter the succah.

The Zohar emphasizes this point, writing regarding our welcome for the heavenly ushpizin:

And one must rejoice each day with a shining countenance with these guests who dwell with him. And Rabbi Abba said: Initially it is written, 'You shall sit in succot seven days,' and then, 'they shall sit in succot.' In the beginning you shall sit and then they shall sit? Rather, first is for guests and then second for people of this world, as when Rav Hemnuna the Elder entered the succah: He rejoiced and stood at the entrance to the succah, outside, and said, 'Let us invite the guests!'

Zohar to Emor 103b-104a

ובעי ב"נ למחדי בכל יומא ויומא באנפין
נהירין באושפיזין אלין דשריין עמיה.
ואמר רבי אבא כתיב 'בסכות תשבו
שבעת ימים' ולביתר 'ישבו בסכות',
בקדמיתא 'תשבו' ולביתר 'ישבו?' אלא
קדמאה לאושפיזין, תנייתא לבני עלמא,
כי הא דרב המנונא סבא כד הוה עייל
לסוכה הוה חדי וקאים על פתחא דסוכה
מלגאו ואמר 'נזמן לאושפיזין!'
זוהר אמור קג: – קד.

The ushpizin represent that Divine presence in our world. As one would race to shelter in the Divine presence, as one would run to commune with God, as one would rejoice in Divine inspiration, so we run and race and rejoice at the opportunity to welcome the ushpizin into our succah, to capitalize on the euphoric declarations of the climax of Yom Kippur, and to elevate ourselves for the rest of the year.

⁸⁹ One might add that we require תעשה ולא מן העשוי, that the walls/nation be in place before the סכך/heavenly focus, and that those walls must be strong and not sway.

⁹⁰ Pesachim 87b