

The First Night of Sukkot: Is This Night Different?

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Why is this night different from all other nights? This question, usually associated with the first night of Pesach, is not a question we would expect our children to ask on the first night of Sukkot. They might inquire about the holiday of Sukkot in general or about the idea of sitting in a sukkah. However, there is no event on the first night of Sukkot that would elicit a question about the unique nature of the meal in the Sukkah on the first night of Sukkot as opposed to all other meals that are eaten in the Sukkah. There is one exception: if it rains on the first night of Sukkot. A child may remember from previous years or may have learned in school that if it rains, there is no obligation to eat in the Sukkah. So if it does rain on the first night of Sukkot, the child may wonder why we delay our meal waiting for the rain to stop and if the rain keeps on falling, why we put on our raincoats and start our meal in the Sukkah. The answer to the child's question: this night is different from all other nights.

There is a unique obligation to eat bread in the Sukkah on the first night of Sukkot. One of the main applications of this obligation relates to rain on the first night of Sukkot. Yet, a further analysis of this obligation can provide us greater insight into the unique character of the first night of Sukkot as well as a deeper understanding of the mitzvah of living in the Sukkah. [Any discussion about the first night of Sukkot applies in the Diaspora to the first two nights of Sukkot. For presentational purposes, this article will refer to this obligation as an obligation of the first night.]

The Mitzvah of Living in the Sukkah

The Torah states that we must live in the Sukkah for seven days:

You shall live in the sukkah for seven days. All citizens of Israel shall live in sukkot.

Vayikra 23:42

בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים כל האזרה בישראל ישבו
בסכת.
ויקרא כג:מב

How does one define “living” in the sukkah? Are there specific activities that one must perform in the sukkah in order to be considered “living” in the sukkah? Rambam (1138-1204) describes the mitzvah as follows:

How does one fulfill the mitzvah to live in the sukkah? One should eat, drink and dwell in the sukkah all seven days, during the day and at night, the same way one lives in one's home the rest of the year. All seven days, one's house should be temporary and one's sukkah should be permanent as it states "You shall live in the sukkah for seven days." How is this accomplished? One's nice utensils and nice tablecloths should be brought to the sukkah ... it is prohibited to eat outside of the sukkah all seven days unless one eats a small amount, approximately the size of an egg. One may not sleep outside of the sukkah, even a nap. One may drink water and eat fruit outside of the sukkah, but one who is stringent and doesn't even drink water outside of the sukkah is praiseworthy.

Rambam, Hilchot Sukkah 6:5-6

כיצד היא מצות הישיבה בסוכה, שיהיה אוכל ושונה ודר בסוכה כל שבעת הימים בין ביום בין בלילה כדרך שהוא דר בביתו בשאר ימות השנה, וכל שבעת הימים עושה אדם את ביתו עראי ואת סוכתו קבע שנאמר בסוכות תשבו שבעת ימים, כיצד כלים הנאים ומצעות הנאות בסוכה ... ואסור לאכול סעודה חוץ לסוכה כל שבעה אלא אם כן אכל אכילת עראי כביצה או פחות או יתר מעט, ואין ישנין חוץ לסוכה אפילו שינת עראי, ומותר לשתות מים ולאכול פירות חוץ לסוכה, ומי שיחמיר על עצמו ולא ישתה חוץ לסוכה אפילו מים הרי זה משובח.

רמב"ם הל' סוכה ו:ה-ו

Rambam's description teaches us in general terms that we should live in the sukkah, the same way we live in our homes. In providing the details, he describes the style of living in the sukkah and the activities that may not be performed outside of the sukkah. He does not mention any frequency required for activities that must be performed in the sukkah. In ordinary circumstances, if a person eats all meals in the sukkah and sleeps in the sukkah, that person is clearly living in the sukkah. However, when one considers some of the exemptions from sukkah, it becomes less clear. Let's take, for example, someone who doesn't generally eat bread or grains and relies on one of the leniencies presented by Rama (1520-1572), *Orach Chaim* 639:2 to exempt one from sleeping in the sukkah. It is possible for this person to spend his entire *chol hamoed* without actually entering the sukkah. Can we say the he is considered to be "living" in the sukkah?

To answer this question, let's explore the background to Rambam's formulation. The Mishna notes an important dispute between R. Eliezer and the rabbis regarding the required frequency of eating in the sukkah and the explanation of the dispute is provided by the Gemara:

Mishna- *R. Eliezer states: One must eat fourteen meals in the sukkah, one meal each day and one meal each night. The Chachamim state: there is no fixed amount except for the first nights. R. Eliezer further stated: One who did not eat on the first nights can make it up on the later nights. The Chachamim say that there is no makeup and on this the verse states "Mistakes cannot be fixed and an omission cannot be counted."*

Gemara- *What is the reason for R. Eliezer? "You shall live" should be similar to ordinary living. Just like ordinary living, people eat once during the day and once at night, so too, one must eat in the sukkah once each day and once each night. The Rabbis [are of the opinion] that just as ordinary living allows one to choose whether to eat or not, so too, regarding sukkah, one may choose whether to eat or not. If so, the same should*

רבי אליעזר אומר ארבע עשרה סעודות חייב אדם לאכול בסוכה, אחת ביום ואחת בלילה וחכמים אומרים אין לדבר קצבה חוץ מלילי יום טוב ראשון של חג בלבד ועוד אמר רבי אליעזר מי שלא אכל [לילי] יום טוב הראשון ישלים לילי יום טוב האחרון של חג וחכמים אומרים אין לדבר תשלומין ועל זה נאמר מעות לא יוכל לתקן וחסרון לא יוכל להמנות. גמרא. מאי טעמא דרבי אליעזר תשבו כעין תדורו מה דירה אחת ביום ואחת בלילה אף סוכה אחת ביום ואחת בלילה ורבנן כדירה מה דירה אי בעי אכיל אי בעי לא אכיל אף סוכה נמי אי בעי אכיל אי בעי לא אכיל

apply on the first nights [and one should not be required to eat]? R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yehotzadak: it states “the fifteenth” here (regarding sukkah) and it states “the fifteenth” regarding the holiday of Pesach. Just like there, the first night is obligatory and the rest is optional, so too here, the first night is obligatory and the rest is optional.

Sukkah 27a

אי הכי אפילו לילי יום טוב ראשון נמי אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יהוצדק נאמר כאן חמשה עשר ונאמר חמשה עשר בחג המצות מה להלן לילה הראשון חובה מכאן ואילך רשות אף כאן לילה הראשון חובה מכאן ואילך רשות.
סוכה כז.

R. Eliezer and the Chachamim agree that the mitzvah of living in the sukkah must reflect ordinary living. According to R. Eliezer, this means that one must eat fourteen meals in the sukkah as eating two meals per day is part of ordinary living. The Chachamim are of the opinion that ordinary living must include the option to skip meals. The only exception is the first night because we derive from a hermeneutical principle that the first night of Sukkot parallels the first night of Pesach.

One must then examine the nature of the obligation to eat a meal in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot according to the Chachamim. Is this obligation an exception to the ordinary rules of living in the sukkah? Is it a separate obligation unrelated the normal obligations associated with living in the sukkah?

The Nature of the Obligation on the First Night

Many Rishonim ask the following question regarding the obligation of eating in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot: At every Yom Tov meal there is an obligation to eat bread. Accordingly, there is an obligation to eat bread on the first night of Sukkot. Being that all bread meals must be eaten in the sukkah, why is there a need for a separate obligation to eat bread in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot? Isn't one required to eat every Yom Tov meal in the sukkah?

Tosafot, *Berachot* 49b s.v. *Ee Ba'I*, quote Rabbeinu Yehuda who suggests that this special obligation is necessary for a situation where it rains for part of the first night of Sukkot. The ordinary obligation to eat one's meals in the sukkah does not apply when it is raining. Furthermore, if one started a meal inside while it was raining and then the rain stopped, there is no obligation to finish one's meal in the sukkah (*Tosefta, Sukkah* 2:5). According to Rabbeinu Yehuda, this exemption would not apply on the first night of Sukkot. Since there is a specific obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot, if it stopped raining in the middle of one's meal, one would be required to subsequently go out to the sukkah and eat bread in the sukkah. [See the comments of the Vilna Gaon to *Orach Chaim* 639:5, for further explanation of Rabbeinu Yehuda's opinion.]

It is clear from the comments of Rabbeinu Yehuda that there is no obligation to eat in the rain even on the first night of Sukkot. According to Rabbeinu Yehuda, if it rains the entire first night of Sukkot, one is exempt from this obligation. However, Rabbeinu Asher (c. 1250-1327), *Berachot* 7:23, offers a different approach. He suggests that the obligation to eat bread in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot is independent of the normal obligations of the sukkah. The exemption from eating in the sukkah while it is raining is based on the fact that it is not considered ordinary living to eat in a dwelling when water is coming in. The exemption applies to the obligation to live in the

sukkah. However, the obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night of sukkah is not a function of living in the Sukkah, but rather an independent obligation to eat bread in a sukkah and therefore, one must eat bread in the sukkah on the first night even if it is raining.

Rabbeinu Nissim (c. 1320-1380), *Sukkah* 12b, s.v. *Matnitin*, presents a third approach. The Mishna, *Sukkah* 26b, states that one is permitted to eat less than a *k'beitza* (the size of an egg) outside of the sukkah. A *k'beitza* is much larger than the *k'zayit* (the size of an olive) that is normally required for the Yom Tov meal. Rabbeinu Nissim suggests that in theory, one is not obligated to eat the Yom Tov meal in the sukkah provided that he only eats a *k'zayit* of bread. Therefore, there is a necessity for a special obligation to eat bread in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot. Rabbeinu Nissim then presents a question as to whether one must eat a *k'beitzah* or a *k'zayit* on the first night. He explains that the obligation on the first night of Sukkot is to eat a fixed meal in the sukkah, one that would be obligatory throughout Sukkot. He is just not sure whether the definition of a fixed meal follows the standard definition or whether the obligation on the first night transforms even a *k'zayit* of bread into a fixed meal. It is clear from the comments of Rabbeinu Nissim that if it is raining on the first night, one is exempt from sitting in the sukkah as the obligation on the first night is reflective of the ordinary obligation to live in the Sukkah.

From a practical perspective, Rama, *Orach Chaim* 639:5, rules in accordance with the opinion of Rabbeinu Asher that if it is raining on the first night of Sukkot, one should eat a *k'zayit* of bread in the sukkah. *Mishna Berurah* 639:35, notes that although Rama does seem to rule conclusively on the matter, one should be concerned for the many Rishonim who maintain that one cannot fulfill the mitzvah of the first night while it is raining. Therefore, one should not recite the *beracha* of *Leishev BaSukkah* if it is raining because according to these Rishonim there is absolutely no fulfillment of any mitzvah. Furthermore, it is preferable to wait for the rain to stop in order to fulfill the mitzvah according to all opinions.

Rambam's Opinion

Rambam does not directly address the issue of what to do if it rains on the first night of Sukkot. Yet, his formulation about the nature of the obligation on the first night seems to provide us with a fourth approach:

Eating in the sukkah on the first nights is obligatory. One fulfills his obligation by eating the size of an olive. The rest of the days, it is optional, if one wants to eat a meal one must do so in the sukkah, if one does not want to eat a meal the other seven days, but rather eat fruit or nuts outside of the sukkah, one may do so, just like the rule of eating matzah.

Rambam, Hilchot Sukkah 6:7

אכילה בלילי יום טוב הראשון בסוכה
חובה אפילו אכל כזית פת יצא ידי
חובתו מכאן ואילך רשות רצה לאכול
סעודה סועד בסוכה רצה אינו אוכל כל
שבעה אלא פירות או קליות חוץ לסוכה
אוכל כדין אכילת מצה.
רמב"ם הל' סוכה ו:ז

There are a number of questions one can ask regarding Rambam's formulation. First, being that the obligation is derived from the obligation of eating matzah on Pesach, one would expect that Rambam would have formulated this obligation in a similar way to his formulation of the obligation to eat matzah. In *Hilchot Chametz UMatzah* 6:1, Rambam writes “מצות עשה מן התורה לאכול מצה בליל חמשה עשר

fifteenth.” Yet, regarding the obligation to eat in the sukkah on the fifteenth of Tishrei, Rambam does not state that it is a positive commandment, but simply an obligation. Why does he present a different formulation? Second, Rambam places the obligation to eat in the sukkah in the middle of the rules of what one must do in the sukkah and what one may do outside of the sukkah. Why does Rambam include this obligation on the list? Isn't the obligation on the first night an exception to the rule or an independent obligation? Third, why does Rambam state “just like the rule of eating matzah” in the second half of the formulation which deals with the permissibility of avoiding bread during the rest of Sukkot? Shouldn't he have compared sukkah to matzah in the first half where he states that one must eat bread on the first night?

To answer these questions, perhaps one can suggest that Rambam does not see the obligation to eat bread in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot as an independent obligation or an exception to the rule. According to Rambam, the Chachamim agree fundamentally with R. Eliezer that in order to establish oneself as living in the sukkah, one should be obligated to eat a specified number of meals in the sukkah. However, the Chachamim derive from the laws of matzah that this can be accomplished by eating a single meal on the first night of Sukkot. Once one eats the first meal in the sukkah, he is considered “living” in the sukkah provided that he follows the other rules of what activities must be performed in the sukkah. The derivation from matzah is just as much an exemption from eating the other thirteen meals in the sukkah as it is an obligation to eat the first meal.

As such, we can understand why Rambam formulated the obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night in this manner. The obligation of the first night is not a mitzvah that is independent of the mitzvah to live in the sukkah throughout Sukkot. Therefore, he does not write “there is a positive obligation to eat in the sukkah on the fifteenth of Tishrei.” Since it is a detail of the general mitzvah to live in the sukkah, it is appropriately placed on the list of what one must do in the sukkah and what one may do outside of the sukkah. Just as Rambam lists *what* activities require a sukkah, he also lists *when* certain activities are obligatory. The obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night is not the exception to the rule, but more of a defining feature of the rule. If anything, the exemption to eat a meal the rest of Sukkot is the exception to the rule. This is also why Rambam states “just like the rule of eating matzah” at the end of his formulation. Since the derivation from the laws of matzah applies to the thirteen meals that one is not required to eat in the sukkah, it makes sense to equate this aspect of sukkah to matzah.

It is unclear how this approach is applied to a situation where it is raining on the first night of Sukkot. On the one hand, one can argue that since the purpose of eating in the sukkah on the first night is to establish oneself as living in the sukkah, one should eat even if it is raining. Although there won't be a fulfillment of any mitzvah, it will serve the purpose of establishing one's home as the sukkah for the next seven days. On the other hand, one can argue that one can only establish the sukkah as one's home by fulfilling the normal obligations of sukkah. When it is raining, that cannot be accomplished. Perhaps rain is one of the situations where the Chachamim state that the missed opportunity cannot be made up and establishing oneself as living in the sukkah might only be accomplished passively (i.e. by avoiding violation of the other rules).

The Educational Component of the First Night

The first night of Pesach is a night which focuses on teaching children about the exodus from Egypt. Does the equation of the first night of Sukkot to the first night of Pesach also include an educational component? While the formal mitzvah of *maggid* (recounting the exodus) does not apply, there is an element of education related to the sukkah. When the Torah presents the mitzvah of living in the sukkah, it states:

In order that your descendants will know that I placed the Jewish people in sukkot when I took them out of the Land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God.

Vayikra 23:43

למען ידעו דרתיכם כי בסכות הושבתי
את בני ישראל בהוציאני אותם מארץ
מצרים אני ה' אלקיכם.
ויקרא כג:מג

The Gemara, *Sukkah* 11b, records in a *beraita*, a dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva regarding the meaning of “I placed the Jewish people in sukkot.” According to R. Eliezer, this refers to the clouds of glory. According to R. Akiva, this refers to the actual huts that the Jewish people lived in while in the desert. While the ramifications of this dispute seem to be limited to biblical interpretation, R. Yoel Sirkes (1561-1640), *Bach, Orach Chaim* no. 625, suggests that the dispute is relevant to anyone who wants to properly fulfill the mitzvah of living in the sukkah. R. Sirkes notes that since the Torah states that the purpose of the mitzvah of sukkah is to teach future generations about the sukkah experience that the Jewish people experienced in the desert, knowing what experience the Torah refers to is very relevant.

R. Ya'akov Ettlinger (1798-1871) takes this idea one step further:

Regarding sukkah, where the verse states that one must have specific thoughts [as we learn from] “in order that your descendants will know,” an idea advanced by Bach, it is possible that even ex post facto, one [who did not contemplate this idea] has not fulfilled the requirement. This is similar to what was said that one who did say these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation.

Therefore, if one ate on the first night and did not think about the meaning behind the sukkah, he should eat another [piece of bread] the size of an olive with this idea in mind. At the very least, everyone should make sure on the first night to teach their children and members of the household about the reasons of the sukkah just as one should teach them the reasons for the commandments on Pesach.

Bikkurei Ya'akov, 625:3

בסוכה, שציווי הכתוב הוא
שיכוון כן מלמען ידעו כמש"כ
הב"ח, י"ל דאפילו בדיעבד לא
יצא וכדאמרין כל שלא אמר ג'
דברים אלו בפסח לא יצא ידי
חובתו. ולכן אם אכל בלילה
ראשונה בסוכה בלא כוונה זו,
יש להחמיר לאכול שוב כזית
בכוונה. ועכ"פ יזהר כל א' ללמד
ולספר לבניו ולבני ביתו בלילה
ראשונה כוונת מצות סוכה, כמו
שצריך ללמד להם טעם המצות
בליל פסח.

בכורי יעקב תרכה:ג

According to R. Ettlinger, the comparison between the first night of Sukkot and the first night of Pesach extends beyond eating to understanding the reasons behind the mitzvot of the night. Why does this educational component apply specifically on the first night? If the intent of the Torah in stating “in order that your descendants will know” is to associate understanding the mitzvah with the mitzvah itself, why isn't this required every time one enters the sukkah?

Based on the approach to explain Rambam, one can suggest that since the purpose of the obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night is to establish oneself as living in the sukkah, it is also the time to establish the purpose of living in the sukkah. Once one declares his purpose of living in the sukkah, it remains with him throughout Sukkot. Although the other rishonim don't necessarily follow this approach to understanding the obligation to eat in the sukkah on the first night, they may agree that the independent obligation or exception does serve an additional goal of establishing oneself and one's purpose for living in the sukkah.

Weather permitting, the child may not notice that this night is different. Yet, we don't need rain or other inclement weather to have a meaningful discussion about the unique nature of the first night, the sukkah experience of the Jews in the desert, or the sukkah as a representation of God's Divine providence. Like Pesach, Sukkot has a unique educational component and if we take advantage of the opportunity, it can greatly enhance our own sukkah experience.