

Zman Simchateinu: Understanding the Happiness of Sukkot

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While the common rabbinic names associated with the Shalosh Regalim are usually clearly connected to the events they commemorate, with regard to the common name of Sukkot, referred to as Zman Simchateinu, the connection is less apparent. In addition to the practical mitzvoth which are unique to Sukkot we have an additional command of Visamachta “and you shall rejoice.” When it comes to Sukkot we need to wonder, what are the particular roots of this simcha? How is simcha linked to the events of Sukkot? What joy are we commemorating and revisiting in our observance of Sukkot? And in turn, how is it that we are able to achieve this component of the Chag – what does it look like?

Indeed the peshat of the pesukim (Devarim 16:13-16) indicates a very reasonable and natural explanation for the emphasis on joy during Sukkot. Visamachta can be understood as an expression of our gratitude for the abundance of our crops and harvest. Although the agricultural cycle is often connected to the commemorations of the Shalosh Regalim, alone, this does not characterize the chag and must not be the sole source of Visamachta. An examination of the meaning of zman simchateinu should, however, include an historical and philosophical foundation for this aspect of Chag HaSukkot.

The holiday of Sukkot is also characterized by a number of unique commandments, commemorating the experiences of Klal Yisrael in the midbar. The primary mitzvah is that of dwelling in Sukkot - temporary dwellings, as mentioned in Vayikra (23: 42-43) "In booths you are to dwell for seven days ...so that your generations will know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them from the land of Egypt...." The two components of the mitzvah are significant to note. Sukkot have a particular form and the chag has a unique teleological purpose. The Sukkot we build and move into each year are intended to connect us to a specific period in our nation's history, when in the desert as a newly liberated nation we lived in Sukkot.

What these “booths” are referring to is, however, debated in the tractate of Sukkah (11b). According to Rabbi Eliezer these booths are a reference to the miraculous "Ananei HaKavod,"

the "Clouds of Glory," with which God surrounded the Israelites throughout their forty year journey in the desert after having left Egypt. These clouds represent the miraculous shield that protected the Israelites from the elements and guided them through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains, however, that these "booths" refer to the actual booths or temporary houses that the Israelites built while in the desert.

The Aruch HaShulchan (Orech Chayim 625) wonders about the vast difference in these interpretations and its significance for our understanding of the Chag. Since Rabbi Eliezer's booths were manifestations of God's protection and the miracles performed for the Jews in the desert, they certainly merit commemoration. However, Rabbi Akiva's interpretation is most puzzling in light of the commandment to dwell in the Sukkah. What is the significance of the huts that the Jews lived in while in the desert?

The Aruch HaShulchan suggests that the differing opinions are actually united in the way they understand the significance of commemorating the "booths." While Rabbi Eliezer focuses on the greatness of God and his miraculous protection of Am Yisrael, according to Rabbi Akiva, the Sukkah commemorates the greatness of the Jewish people and their enduring faith. Although beset with struggles, they traveled into the uninhabitable desert following God's command. The booths of Sukkot represent the faithful efforts of Am Yisrael in the face of great vulnerability and physical deprivation. Under these conditions, their dependence upon God was complete and their commitment was immeasurable. In this light, both Rabbi Eliezer's and Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of the "booths" whether physical or metaphorical, point us towards the impermanence of our dwelling in this world and the dependence upon our relationship with God. Thus, our observance of the commandment of Sukkot is connected to God's miraculous protection of the Jews during their forty year sojourn through the desert on route to the land of Israel. Is this the source of Zman Simchateinu? Wouldn't Hoda'a (gratitude) be just as appropriate an association to commemorate the miracles of God and the faith of the Am?

According to Maimonides, in Hilkhot Yom Tov, the simcha of simkhat Yom Tov is not about an individual's emotions. Instead, what emerges from the Rambam's directives is that simcha shel mitzvah is a state of being; a mindset that emerges when there is an alignment of the individual's performance of a mitzva and divine command. The requirement of this form of simcha is fulfilled when the experience of simcha is essentially a transformative occurrence. In the fulfillment of a mitzvah with intentionality, a sense of purpose, and a clarity of priorities, the individual becomes more than the sum total of himself and his actions; he joins a divine collectivity. Therefore, according to Rambam, simcha shel mitzvah is only possible as a community based experience. Simcha shel mitzvah is achieved only when a family rejoices together and extends their celebration of the chag to include others in need. (Hilkhot Yom Tov 10:16-18)

Consider how this understanding of simcha impacts our appreciation of the events we are commemorating on Sukkot. It isn't merely celebrating our individual relationship with God, our heightened appreciation of God's protection, guidance and blessings that we are commemorating. Instead it is a simcha that is rooted in the covenantal community. Our simcha is fulfilled only as an expression of our connection to the destiny of Knesset Yisrael.

The Vilna Gaon supports this understanding of the significance of simcha on Sukkot. He suggests that the simcha of Sukkot is not only connected to the dependence of Knesset Yisrael on Hashem. Instead, Sukkot has an enhanced element of Simcha because the Ananei Hakavod were actually returned, for the first time since the sin of the Golden Calf, precisely on the 15th of Tishrei. On this date, when the construction of the Mishkan began, we have an added degree of simcha. The Gaon concludes that this is why the 15th of Tishrei was designated for Sukkot, Zman Simchateinu. Only then did the community recognize that they had returned to a status deserving the divine presence of the Ananei Hakavod. That confirmation of their identity as a covenantal community is the source of the *Visamachta* of Sukkot.

As we construct our Sukkot and commemorate our continual dependence on God let our celebrations center around the bounty and blessings of belonging to a covenantal community that is guided and protected by the “Clouds of Glory.”