

# Yom Kippur and Sukkos: Twin Symbols of Jewish Unity

Rabbi Elchanan Adler

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

## Motifs of Unity in Sukkos

One of the central motifs of Sukkos is Jewish unity. The midrash depicts the *arba'ah minim* as representative of different categories of Jews. The *esrog*, which has a good taste along with a pleasant aroma, symbolizes the Jew who is brimming with Torah and *maasim tovim* [good deeds]. The *lulav*, which has a taste but no smell, typifies the Jew who is knowledgeable in Torah but deficient in *maasim tovim*. The *hadass*, which has a sweet aroma but lacks taste, corresponds to the Jew who excels in good deeds but is bereft of Torah knowledge. Lastly, the *arava*, which possesses neither taste nor smell, personifies the Jew who lacks both Torah and *maasim tovim*. Based on this typology, the midrash concludes:

*Said Hakadosh Baruch Hu: to destroy them is impossible; rather, let them come together as one group and they will atone for one another*

**Vayikra Rabba 30:12**

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לאבדם אי אפשר אלא יעשו  
כולן אגודה אחת והן מכפרין אלו על אלו  
ויקרא רבה ל:יב

The connection between Sukkos and Jewish unity is also alluded to in a Talmudic comment on the verse “*Kol ha’eizrach be’Yisrael yeishvu ba’Sukkos*” – “every native in Israel shall dwell in booths” (*Vayikra* 23:42). Chazal infer from the language of the verse that one *sukkah* theoretically suffices for all of Israel to discharge their individual obligations:

*This teaches that all Israel is worthy of dwelling in one sukkah*

**Sukkah 27b**

מלמד שכל ישראל ראויים לישב בסוכה אחת  
סוכה כז:

While the halachic significance of this derivation is that one may dwell in a Sukkah that is owned by another, the hashkafic import of “all of Israel is worthy of dwelling in one Sukkah” points to a link between Sukkos and collective Jewish identity. Why does the theme of *achdus* figure so prominently in the holiday of Sukkos?

## Motifs of Unity in Yom Kippur

The answer may lie in the nature of the relationship between Sukkos and Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, like Sukkos, accentuates the theme of *achdus*. While to solicit forgiveness from someone we have wronged is desirable all year long, there is a specific mitzvah to do so on *erev Yom Kippur*, as codified in *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 606). Seemingly, the reason for

engaging in this practice is because receiving forgiveness from one another is indispensable to receiving Divine atonement (see Yoma 85b). However, a passage in the Yom Kippur *machzor* (found just after the *Seder Avoda*) suggests another dimension as well. After listing the various halachic restrictions which characterize Yom Kippur, the *machzor* includes two additional features:

<p><i>A day of establishing love and friendship; a day of abandoning jealousy and competition</i></p>	<p>יום שימת אהבה ורעות, יום עזיבת קנאה ותחרות</p>
---	---

Apparently, Jewish unity is as defining an aspect of Yom Kippur as are the basic restrictions. It is no wonder, then, that our Yom Kippur preparations require us to make amends with those whom we have wronged.

The heightened sense of *achdus* which characterizes Yom Kippur serves as a basis for equating the Jewish nation with the angels in heaven, as suggested by the following midrash:

<p><i>Just as amongst the angels there is peace, so the Jewish nation on Yom Kippur</i> (Tur OC, 606, based on Pirkei de'Rebbi Eliezer).</p>	<p>מה מלאכי השרת שלום ביניהם כך ישראל ביום הכיפורים (טור או"ח, סימן תרו, בשם פרקי דר"א)</p>
--	---

Moreover, the Yom Kippur liturgy begins (just before commencing *Kol Nidrei*) with a declaration of license to pray along with the *avaryanim* – unrepentant sinners.

## Yom Kippur – “The Day of One”

The centrality of Jewish harmony to Yom Kippur may be understood on a deeper level in light of the following midrash:

*R. Yanai said: From the beginning of creation Hashem foresaw the deeds of the righteous and the deeds of the wicked. “And the land was astonishingly empty” – refers to the deeds of the wicked; “And G-d said: ‘Let there be light’” – refers to the deeds of the righteous; “And G-d separated between the light and the darkness” – between the deeds of the righteous and those of the wicked; “And G-d called the light ‘day’” – refers to the deeds of the righteous; “And to the darkness He called ‘night’” – refers to the deeds of the wicked; “And it was evening” – refers to the deeds of the wicked; “And it was morning” – refers to the deeds of the righteous; “One day” – that Hashem gave them one day, which is Yom HaKippurim”*

**Bereishis Rabba 3**

א"ר ינאי מתחלת ברייתו של עולם צפה הקב"ה מעשיהן של צדיקים ומעשיהם של רשעים, והארץ היתה תהו אלו מעשיהם של רשעים ויאמר אלהים יהי אור אלו מעשיהן של צדיקים, ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין החושך בין מעשיהן של צדיקים למעשיהן של רשעים, ויקרא אלהים לאור יום אלו מעשיהן של צדיקים, ולחושך קרא לילה אלו מעשיהן של רשעים, ויהי ערב אלו מעשיהן של רשעים, ויהי בקר אלו מעשיהן של צדיקים, יום אחד, שנתן להם הקב"ה יום אחד ואיזה זה יום הכפורים  
**בראשית רבה, פרשה ג**

The midrash interprets the series of dichotomous expressions which appear in the *pasuk* as alternate references to the deeds of *tzadikim* and the deeds of *resha'im*. After a string of contrasts,

the verse concludes with an allusion to Yom Kippur, depicted as *Yom Echad* – the singular day of the year.

The midrashic commentator, *Maharzu* (R. Zev Wolf Einhorn), explains the allusion to Yom Kippur in the following way:

*For it should have stated “the first day” [rather than “one day”], therefore he interpreted it as a reference to Yom Kippur through which Israel becomes one nation like the angels, bound together with harmony between them. And the wicked, through repentance, become righteous.*

שהיה לו לומר יום ראשון ... על כן דרש  
על יום הכיפורים שבו נעשים ישראל גוי  
אחד כמלאכי השרת אגודה אחת ושלוש  
ביניהם, והרשעים על ידי תשובה נעשים  
צדיקים.

In other words, “one day” is interpreted as a “day of oneness” – an allusion to the angelic unity exemplified by the Jewish nation on Yom Kippur. The redemptive power of the day has the capacity to transform the iniquities of the wicked into merits.

## Jewish Unity as Emblematic of Hashem’s Unity

On a deeper level, the unity of the Jewish nation, as well as the harmony of the angels, is meant to parallel the oneness of G-d Himself. The same midrash, a few lines later, cites an additional interpretation of “*Yom Echad*” – as a reference to G-d:

*R. Yudin said: for on it Hashem was a single entity in the world, because there was nothing in the world except for Him.*

א"ר יודן שבו היה הקב"ה יחידי בעולמו, שלא היה  
בעולמו אלא הוא

The link between the oneness of G-d and the unity of the Jewish people is also emphasized in our liturgy:

*Guard the one nation, guard the remnant of the one nation, let not perish the one nation that unifies your name [through declaring] Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is one*

**Daily Tachanun prayer**

שומר גוי אחד שמור שארית עם אחד ואל יאבד גוי  
אחד המיחדים שמך ה' אלקינו ה' אחד  
תפלת תחנון

*You are one; your name is one; and who is like your nation Israel, one nation in the land*

**Amida for Shabbos Mincha**

אתה אחד ושמך אחד ומי כעמך  
ישראל גוי אחד בארץ  
עמידה לשבת מנחה

Yom Kippur is the day that epitomizes the unity of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* - a day when the Satan is powerless and all barriers to G-d are removed. It is the quintessential “*Yom Echad*” – “the day of the One and Only [Hashem]”, Whose unity permeates all strata of creation – not merely the celestial realms but also the earth below via, first and foremost, His chosen nation Israel – the “*goy echad*” whose mandate is to serve as G-d’s ambassador to the world at large. It is thus axiomatic that the nation which bears witness to the Divine symphony should exude a spirit of internal harmony.

## Sukkos: Harbinger of the Messianic Era

Sukkos carries within it the theme of Jewish unity because, like Yom Kippur, it is representative of the oneness of G-d. Sukkos is replete with eschatological undertones, as evident, for example, in the first day's *haftara* reading from the Prophet Zechariah, depicting the Messianic war of *Gog u'Magog*. While many of the finer details of the narrative remain shrouded in mystery, the outcome of the battle is unambiguous:

*Hashem will be the King over all the land; on that day  
Hashem will be One and His Name will be One*  
**Zechariah 14:9**

והיה ה' למלך על כל הארץ ביום ההוא יהיה  
ה' אחד ושמו אחד  
זכריה יד, ט

The *sifrei kabbalah* explain that the offering of 70 bullocks, in decreasing order, during the seven days of Sukkos, is symbolic of the ultimate triumph of good over evil (as symbolized by the 70 nations), and the subsequent revelation of G-d's Majesty in all of Its glory. Furthermore, it is explained that the unbridled sense of joy associated with the festival of Sukkos foreshadows the experience of "*az yimalei sechok pinu*" (Tehillim 126:2) – a state of ecstasy characteristic of the Messianic age (see *Avoda Zara* 3b).

## Vayakhel Moshe: Fusing Yom Kippur and Sukkos

Perhaps there is an allusion in the Torah to this commonality of Yom Kippur and Sukkos. The opening verse in *Parshas VaYakhel* states:

*Moshe assembled the entire assembly of the children of Israel*  
**Shemos 35:1**

ויקהל משה את כל עדת בני ישראל  
שמות לה, א

The central purpose of this grand assembly was an appeal for materials needed for constructing the *mishkan*. (Indeed, the *parsha* goes on to describe the generous spirit in which the contributions were brought in the subsequent days.) Rashi notes the timing of this assembly: *Motza' ai Yom HaKipurim* - the morrow of Yom Kippur (when Moshe had descended with the second set of *luchos*). The Vilna Gaon explains that we celebrate Sukkos in *Tishrei*, rather than in *Nisan*, to commemorate the return of the *ananei ha'kavod* – pillars of glory - which departed as a result of the *chet ha'eigel*. Their restoration, according to the *Vilna Gaon*, coincided with the onset of construction of the *mishkan*, which was the fifteenth of *Tishrei*, a few days after Moshe's appeal. In light of what we have seen, it is most apropos that the mass assembly of "*Vayakhel Moshe*" ("And Moshe gathered") coincided with the morrow of Yom Kippur, the first of the days bridging Yom Kippur and Sukkos. It was none other than *Moshe Rabbeinu* who imbued these days with the spirit of Jewish unity that subsequently became their hallmark.

Moreover, the first lesson taught by *Moshe Rabbeinu* at that historic assembly was the mitzvah of Shabbos, a weekly reminder of "*Yom shekulo Shabbos*" – the eschatological Sabbath where G-d will reign supreme in unparalleled glory. Next, Moshe singled out one of the 39 categories of prohibited labor – kindling a fire:

*You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings  
on the Sabbath day.*

לא תבערו אש בכל מושבותיכם ביום השבת

The *sefer Beer Moshe*, and other Hassidic works, interpret this prohibition as a metaphoric warning against kindling the flame of *machlokes* - divisiveness and inter-personal strife. Indeed, as implied by the traditional Shabbos greeting “*Shabbat Shalom*”, the Sabbath is a day which bespeaks peace and harmony. How appropriate, then, that this message was conveyed on the calendar day marking the transition between Yom Kippur and Sukkos.

## Experiencing the Unity of Sukkos

How do we internalize, in a practical sense, the concept of unity that permeates these days? For Yom Kippur, experiencing unity comes naturally. The somber crisis mode which casts its pall over the tense-filled days of the *yamim noraim* season, the quest to attain personal forgiveness, the withdrawal from physicality which is the hallmark of Yom Kippur, all condition us to feel kinship and solidarity with our fellow Jews. For Sukkos, however, whose overt emphasis is on festivity and material blessings, the challenge is far greater. What can be done to help us embrace the spirit of unity which is intrinsic to Sukkos?

Perhaps the answer lies in appreciating the paradox inherent in the very holiday of Sukkos. On the one hand, Sukkos’ designation as a *chag ha’asif* – festival of the ingathering of the harvest – focuses on the worldly blessings associated with the agricultural bounty. On the other hand, the retreat to a temporary abode from the comfortable confines of one’s home suggests a trivialization of the material comforts afforded by the physical world. How are these dichotomous themes to be reconciled?

Apparently, the message of the Sukkah serves as the ideal backdrop through which to experience the celebration associated with the harvest. Accentuating man’s fragility and ephemeral existence assures that rejoicing in the harvest stems from a heartfelt appreciation of G-d’s largesse rather than from a narcissistic smugness. The harvest ingathering, however much or meager, ought to be infused with the joy of one who is “*samei’ach bechelko*” – genuinely content with his lot. With such an attitude, it becomes relatively easy to include others in our circle of celebration, and to access the angelic unity that underlies this beautiful holiday. (For further elaboration, see *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, Vol. 2. pp. 106-110.)