

Symbolism of the Sukka: Perspectives on the Impact of Sitting in the Sukka Rabbi Maury Grebenau

The Torah seems clear that the sukka is commemorative of our experience in the desert. There is an argument as to the exact nature of this commemoration. The well known Gemara records it as follows:

Talmud Bavli (Sukka 11b)

<p>It was taught in a Braisa: “For I have placed Bnei Yisroel in Sukkot.” The [Sukkot] were the clouds of glory (<i>Ananei HaKavod</i>), these are the words of R’ Eliezer. R’ Akiva said, they made actual huts.</p>	<p>דתניא: כי בסכות הושבתי את בני ישראל - ענני כבוד היו, דברי רבי אליעזר. רבי עקיבא אומר סוכות ממש עשו להם</p>
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When the Jewish people were in the desert they were protected by supernatural clouds and they also dwelt in huts constructed by their own hands¹. The question is which of these elements provides the reason for the commandment that all generations should live in Sukkot on the holiday by the same name. Let’s examine each side of this debate and see some of the practical lessons which may be central to the practice of living in the Sukka.

Huts - What is to be gained from this Mitzva?

Within the approach that we are mainly commemorating the huts we find a broad swath of possible goals for our stay in the Sukka.

The Rashbam (Vayikra 23:29,34) explains that although we would expect the holiday of Sukkot to take place closer to Nissan and the Exodus, its placement in Autumn is by design. Immediately after the harvest the farmer is most susceptible to feeling that his own prowess and ability are the source of his bounty. Sukkot is the remedy for this type of damaging hubris. The Rashbam seems to mean that moving out of our comfortable house into a more temporary dwelling allows us to be thankful for all the goodness we enjoy on a daily basis. There is no more powerful reminder for the good in our lives than being forced to experience the lack of that good.

The Rashbam’s vision of the purpose of the holiday is far less Historical, and of much more constructive relevance in our current experience. The chag does not seek to connect us with the past as much as offer a remedy for our current struggles². Rabbeinu

¹ See Chayei Adam (146:1) for an intriguing explanation that at different times we used each of these protections.

² Later commentaries including the Chidah (in his work *simchas haregel*) follow this approach. The Chidah also uses this idea to explain why Sukkot comes after the *yomim noraim*. We seek to continue the idea that our spiritual relationship is of primary importance and all physical strivings are secondary.

Bachya (Vayikra 23:34) offers a very different perspective. His focus is far more Historical. He explains that we are recalling the amazing faith of our ancestors as they willingly followed Moshe into the desert on Hashem's command, despite the flimsy protection. Although they lived in simple huts and were entering the wilderness, their faith in Hashem carried them through. It is this impressive national faith which Yirmiyahu (2:2) calls "chesed neuraich" – "the kindness of your youth".

Ananei HaKavod - What is to be gained from this exercise?

The second perspective is also rich with possible goals for our experience in the Sukka. The Ramban (Vayikra 23:34) agrees with Rashi's identification of the 'sukkot' which Hashem wants us to recall as the *Ananei haKavod*. He believes that this is the true pshat (simple reading) of the pasuk. The Ramban adds that the point of recalling this miracle is the wonderful kindness of Hashem while we were in the desert. It seems that the experience is to engender a sense of gratitude to Hashem.

This idea of gratitude is very similar to the Rashbam's perspective on the point of the Sukka experience, with one fundamental difference. The Rashbam believes that this gratitude is cultivated initially through the appreciation of our current bounty, while the Ramban has us recall the past kindness of Hashem as a catalyst for our appreciation.

Rabbeinu Bachya takes the idea of gratitude to a more intense level, utilizing the phrase of "*pirsumei nissah*" – publicizing the miracle. Similar to the Mitzva of lighting the menorah or reading the megillah on Purim, sitting in the Sukka seems to also be meant as an announcement to all of Hashem's continued kindness.

A final symbolism of the clouds may be as a wedding canopy. Sukkot is a celebration of our relationship with Hashem. A relationship we have forged in the intensity of the *yomim noraim* (high holidays). In the Sukka we bask in the shade of our faith in Hashem. This connection with Hashem is the true goal of not just the Sukka experience, but of our entire existence.

Synergy of Perspectives

There are many commentaries which merge the two opinions, showing how they both have important lessons. Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (HaEmek Davar Bamidbar 10:34) explains that when the Jewish people traveled they required the *Ananei haKavod* and when the Jewish people were at rest they stayed in actual huts.

This can be understood on a deeper level as well. When we are at rest in this world we must keep the lessons of the huts in mind³. This world is temporary and we must keep our goals in mind. But when we are on the move, realizing that we must grow and strive for the next world, we must recall the lessons of the *Ananei haKavod* and use them to guide us.

We can add that the Biblical limitations of the materials necessary to construct the *Schach* may also be hinting at these ideas.

Rambam (Hilchos Sukka 5:1)

<p>The <i>Schach</i> of a Sukka can't utilize material from all sources:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) One can only use matter which grows from the ground 2) It must be [currently] uprooted from the ground 3) It can't be able to acquire <i>tumah</i> (ritual impurity) 	<p>הסכך של סוכה, אינו כשר מכל דבר: אין מסככין אלא בדבר שגידוליו מן הארץ, שנעקר מן הארץ, ואינו מקבל טומאה, ואין ריחו רע, ואינו נושר ונובל תמיד.</p>
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- a) It must have grown from the ground but can't be currently attached – We too must walk the fine line between the extremes of being too involved in this physical world and being aloof and uninvolved.
- b) It must be something which can't become *tamei* – Objects usually can become *tamei* only when they have been altered from their natural state by man and made into some sort of vessel. We use only things which are in their natural state to remind us that ultimately Hashem is the source of everything.
- c) We also know that the *Schach* must be under the sky without anything blocking its air space – We acknowledge that Hashem is always “above” and we remain focused at all times on our true goals.

Why is Sukkot in Tishrei?

One of the most often asked questions about Sukkot is its placement in the calendar. It would seem that we are commemorating a situation which stretched through the entire year for all forty years of the desert. If we were to pin down the date at all it would be logical to append this commemoration to Pesach when we left Egypt or soon thereafter. How do we justify its placement in Tishrei, about as far from Nissan as the calendar allows. Let's examine four approaches⁴.

Ibn Ezra (Vayikra 23:43)

³ Rabbeinu Bachaya (Vayikra 23) adds that the walls of the Sukka represent this world which was created with the letter 'heh' and thus the laws that the minimum amount of walls creates a letter 'heh.' While the Skach represents the next world which was created with the letter 'yud.'

⁴ The Rashbam quoted earlier offers yet another approach

<p>And if you will ask, “Why is Sukkot in Tishrei?” We can explain that the clouds of Hashem protected the camp during the day and the sun did not effect them. But from the month of Tishrei they started using Sukkas (at night) because of the cold.</p>	<p>ואם ישאל שואל למה בתשרי זאת המצוה, יש להשיב, כי ענן ה' היה על המחנה יומם, והשמש לא יכם. ומימות תשרי החלו לעשות סוכות בעבור הקור</p>
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The Ibn Ezra suggests that the Historical reality is not what we might expect, but with good reason. Although we did leave Egypt in Nissan the booths were not necessary until the colder weather began. He explains that the huts were purely for warmth and not for protection, since that was provided by the *Ananei haKavod*. Therefore we celebrate Sukkot to recall the huts which we built for added warmth on those cold nights. This places the Ibn Ezra squarely in the camp of commentaries who lean towards the hut as the model for our Sukkot today.

Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Tur O.C. 625)

<p>And although we left Egypt in the month of Nissan we were not commanded to make Sukkot at that time since it is the days of summer. And it is the way of all people to make a hut for shade [at that time] and our building of Sukkot would not be recognizable as a command of the Creator. Therefore, He commanded us that the Sukkot be made in the seventh month (Tishrei), a time of rain, when it is the way of people to leave their huts and live in their houses. And we leave our houses to live in the Sukka. In this way we demonstrate to all that it is a commandment of the King.</p>	<p>ואע"פ שיצאנו ממצרים בחדש ניסן לא צונו לעשות סוכה באותו הזמן לפי שהוא ימות הקיץ ודרך כל אדם לעשות סוכה לצל ולא היתה ניכרת עשייתנו בהם שהם במצות הבורא יתברך ולכן צוה אותנו שנעשה בחדש השביעי שהוא זמן הגשמים ודרך כל אדם לצאת מסוכתו ולישב בביתו ואנחנו יוצאין מן הבית לישב בסוכה בזה יראה לכל שמצות המלך היא עלינו לעשותה</p>
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The Tur (Orech Chaim Siman 625) suggests that the placement of Sukkot in Tishrei may not be historically based, rather the placement enhances the holiday's effectiveness. If we were to live outside in booths in the spring after Pesach it would not be evident (to ourselves or others) that we were commemorating anything out of the ordinary. In the colder month of Tishrei, as winter is around the corner, moving outside is unusual. I would add that it also brings the lessons of the Sukka to a sharper point. When the weather is pleasant it is harder to appreciate shelter; we appreciate the protection Hashem provided more when the weather is inclement. Perhaps this is part of the Tur's argument. We sit outside in our Sukka in the colder months to help ourselves recognize what was done for us.

The Vilna Goan (commentary on Shir HaShirim 1:4) believes the date is of far more Historical significance. He explains that the *Ananei haKavod* were lost when the Jewish people committed the sin of the golden calf. The placement of Sukkot on the 15th of Tishrei corresponds to when the clouds returned. The Vilna Goan's explanation has similarities to the Ibn Ezra's approach in that they both seek a date which is inherently meaningful. However, the Vilna Goan links the date with the returning of the *Ananei haKavod*, instead of their initial appearance. In this way, the Sukka represents not simply a recollection of Hashem's kindness in giving us His divine protection, but also His continued mercy and forgiveness even after we have sinned and repented.

A final approach is offered by the Aruch HaShulchan. He also cites the idea of the Vilna Goan that Hashem continued his kindness of the *Ananei haKavod* to us even after we had sinned with the golden calf. However the Aruch HaShulchan connects this beautifully with our cycle of Tishrei holidays.

Aruch HaShulchan (695:5)

<p>There is another correct interpretation of why this holiday is in Tishrei as opposed to Nissan. Because Hashem wishes to show that despite the fact that we have sinned, His supervision has not been removed. We reside in His shade and rest under His wings. Just like after we received the Torah we made the (golden) calf and despite this Hashem forgave them with the second set of tablets we were commanded to build the Mishkan... so too Hashem has given us a commandment which is symbolic for the generations. That despite the fact that we sin all year, still in Yom Kippur we attain atonement for our sins when we repent and the symbol of this is that immediately after Yom Kippur Hashem commands us to build a Sukka and sit in Hashem's shade.</p>	<p>ועוד י"ל טעם נכון על מה שהמצוה בתשרי ולא בניסן לפי שרצה הוא יתברך להראות שאע"פ שחוטאים אנחנו מ"מ לא סרה השגחתו מעלינו ובצלו אנחנו יושבים ובמחסה כנפיו נתלונן וכמו שאחר מתן תורה עשו את העגל ועכ"ז נתרצה להם הקב"ה בלוחות אחרונות והיה זה ביוה"כ ולאחר יוה"כ צונו לעשות המשכן ששכינתו תשכון בינינו כדכתיב [שמות כט, מה] ושכנתי בתוך בני ישראל ולא הסיר מעליהם ענני הכבוד כדכתיב בנחמיה שהבאנו בסעיף ב' כמו כן עשה לנו הקב"ה במצוה זו דוגמתה לדורות שאע"פ שאנו חוטאים כל השנה מ"מ ביוה"כ מכפר עונותינו כשאנו שבים בתשובה וסימן לדבר שתיכף אחר יוה"כ צוה עלינו לעשות סוכה שנשב בצלו של הקב"ה</p>
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The Aruch HaShulchan beautifully describes the commandment to build the Sukka as Hashem's demonstration of His capacity to forgive and bring us close despite our consistent sinning. He connects the Sukka to Yom Kippur specifically paralleling the sin of the golden calf and the commandment to build the Mishkan⁵. In both cases Hashem commands us to become closer to Him in the aftermath of being forgiven for our sins. This also explains very nicely why there is a specific custom to begin building the Sukka

⁵ The Aruch HaShulchan follows Rashi's chronology rather than that of Ramban and others who believe that the command to build the Mishkan preceded the golden calf, as the order of the parshiot seems to imply.

immediately after Yom Kippur⁶. It is a way to show the substantive connection between Yom Kippur and the building of the Sukka.

Conclusion

The Mitzva of living in the Sukka is clearly meant to have a very real and significant impact on us. We are told that if the *Schach* is too high up for us to notice then in fact the Sukka is invalid. Both the idea of actual huts and the concept of *Ananei haKavod* both have many practical lessons to impart. Even the timing of Sukkot is filled with significance. The Sukka specifically is very much tied to the ideas of Yom Kippur and specifically the goals of Teshuva and closeness to Hashem. May we be blessed to really experience living in the Sukka as living in *Tzilah D'Mehemusa* - the shade of faith.

⁶ See Ramo (Orech Chaim 624:5 & 625:1) quoting the Maharil