

Sukkat Shalom: Paradigms for Peace

Mrs. Chaya Batya Neugroschl

Head of School, Yeshiva University High School for Girls

With the escalation of dangerous events in Eretz Yisrael during this past summer, we've all felt the yearning for peace with increased intensity. While peace in the world remains a universal hope, when Klal Yisrael is endangered, we are more contemplative about the absolute need for peace and the cost of its absence. Our frequent recitation of the tefillah "Oseh Shalom, He Who makes peace" at the end of our daily Shemoneh Esrei is a place of comfort where, in prayer or song, we beseech Hashem to do what we seemingly can't manage to do on our own:

He Who makes peace from His high places, He should make peace for us and for all of Israel, and let us say Amen.

עשה שלום במרומי. הוא יעשה שלום
עלינו ועל כל ישראל. ואמרו אמן:

In this context the peace we seek is the product of heavenly intervention. This is expressed by the opening words of the paragraph *Sim Shalom*, which describe peace as a gift bestowed upon a deserving or needy people. Certainly this type of peace has its place, in its ultimate sense, but universal peace is beyond the scope of our individual efforts. This image leaves us without specific direction.

The uptick in communal prayer this past summer combined with the creative efforts to increase *chesed* (kindness) and expressions of unity allow us to enter the month of Tishrei with a new perspective on the need for peace. How do we lead lives that increase the chances for peace in the world? What paradigms for peace can we find and use for guidance in this season of renewed hope and prayer?

Peace is not a new theme—it is a universal dream, and indeed it is a part of our daily prayers. Not only is it the concluding blessing of each Shemoneh Esrei in the form of *Sim Shalom*, but there is a unique formulation that relates specifically to Sukkot as well. Each night, as we reflect on the completion of a day and recognize the symbolic and realistic dangers of night, we seek the protection and assurances of Hashem in the Maariv prayer. The fourth berakha before the Amidah begins with Hashkiveinu—Lay us down to peace (ful rest), and introduces this image of the sukkah as a protective shelter of peace:

Help us lie down, O Lord our God, in peace, and rise up, O our King, to life. Spread over us Your canopy of peace. Direct us with Your good counsel, and save us for the sake of Your name ... Guard our going out and our coming in, for life

השכיבנו ה' אלקינו לשלום, והעמידנו
מלפני לחיים.
ופרוש עלינו סכת שלומך. ותקננו בעצה
טובה מלפניך... ושמור צאתנו ובוואנו

and peace, from now on and for ever. Blessed are You, Lord, who guards his people Israel for ever.¹⁷

לְחַיִּים וּלְשָׁלוֹם מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם:
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' שׁוֹמֵר עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַד

As we prepare for the festival of Sukkot, this phrase—from our nightly Maariv prayer—resounds with hope and expectation. In the context of our nightly prayer, the metaphor conveys an image of a heavenly peace that is benevolently confirmed as a protective shield upon the hopeful People of Israel. As we look toward the positive potential for a future day we hope that Hashem's guidance is there, as well as His protection, in the form of a *sukkat shalom*.

How do the sukkat that we build on the festival connect with this sense of security, peace and protection? Furthermore, we see this phrase *ufros aleinu sukkat shelomekha*—slightly altered as we examine the same Maariv prayer that welcomes in Shabbat. Here we read:

Spread over us Your canopy of peace. Blessed are You, Lord who spreads the canopy of peace on us and on all of the nation of Israel and on Jerusalem.

וּפְרוֹשׁ עֲלֵינוּ סוּכַת שְׁלוֹמְךָ ... בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
ה' הַפּוֹרֵשׁ סוּכַת שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל עַמּוֹ
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.

The mainstay of this tefillah is essentially the same, and is presumably also about invoking Hashem's protection as night begins to fall and as our week draws to a close. We see in this formulation a redoubled emphasis on peace that is highlighted by the concluding blessing. In this way we find that the same prayer for a personal peace, and a personal security, that we wish for every one of our kin has been transformed, elevated and expanded. On Shabbat, we reconsider our nightly focus during the week and consider the need to secure our own needs and our own safety as insufficient. On Shabbat, we ask for more. We ask for a type of peace that includes the destiny of our people, our national sovereignty. On Shabbat, the prayer for peace is presented as part of the national dream. The cornerstone of this prayer becomes more about peace than about security, and is expanded to include a prayer for more than just a personal form of protection; rather, it adds a national and political aim for peace and sovereignty for all of Israel and Jerusalem. Thus, the closing blessing that usually summarizes the key feature of a prayer concludes with the addition of peace for all of Israel and Jerusalem.

Why does our Shabbat tefilla make this, ever so slight and yet clearly significant, shift in this way?

Prayer for a Communal Experience of Peace

Shabbat as a model for communal peace is well-rooted in our tradition. Many customs of Shabbat emphasize the effort to create unity and build up our community. As we refrain from commerce, we are able to move away from the competitive nature of weekly business and avoid its inherent interpersonal strife. In recognizing Hashem's mastery over creation, we remove ourselves from being active agents in the creative process and are “at peace” with the natural order that God has granted us. In spending our day focused on both basic physical and spiritual matters, we bring together the needs of both our body and soul, which for many hours of our busy week may be neglected, at best, or actively competing with one another. Lighting Shabbat candles is one custom that helps to bring peace to one's home. Having formal meals suffused

¹⁷ Translation from Koren Siddur.

with prayer and song even elevates the mundane physical needs and embraces a Shabbat quality in our homes and throughout our communities.

This emphasis is reflected in the reoriented *Haskiveinu* prayer and in the three main stanzas of *Shalom Aleikhem* as we welcome Shabbat into our homes and set the context for peace, in singing:

Peace onto you ... Come in peace, angels of peace, angels of high ... Bless me for peace, angels of peace, angels of high ... Leave in peace, angels of peace, angels of high.

שלום עליכם...בואכם לשלום מלאכי השלום מלאכי
עליון...ברכוני לשלום מלאכי השלום מלאכי עליון...
צאתכם לשלום מלאכי השלום מלאכי עליון...

On Shabbat, the day of rest, we find that our prayers, customs and songs reflect this broader contemplation of our place in this world. On this day we remind ourselves of our ability to make a difference by increasing the peacefulness in our homes and in our communities; we thereby embrace our dream for a universal peace and recognize that we can model that peaceful engagement with nature, with those closest to us, and with those who are “others” too.

Why then does the refrain *ufros aleinu sukkat shelomekha* appear in the Maariv prayer of each weeknight and then retain its prominence on Friday night? In what way does the sukkah reflect a peaceful paradigm that inspires these prayers?

The notion that a sukkah is a metaphor for peaceful protection deserves some critical attention. Rav Avraham Kook reflects on the unusual metaphor and suggests that indeed the hope for peace might be better served by a metaphor for a fortress of peace. In his commentary on the verse “You protect them in a sukkah from the strife of tongues” (Ps. 31:21), Rav Kook highlights the special features of a sukkah as a flimsy and temporary structure.¹⁸ The notion of a *sukkat shalom* raises very reasonable questions: In what way does the sukkah, a temporary and often flimsy dwelling, reflect our hopes for an enduring and permanent peace? How do we understand the paradigms of peace that this holiday offers? What type of peace are we invoking in this formulation?

Rav Kook explains:

Jewish law validates a sukkah even when it has gaping holes, when it is built from little more than two walls, or has large spaces between the walls and the roof. Even such a fragile structure still qualifies as a kosher sukkah. The same is true regarding peace. Peace is so precious, so vital, that even if we are unable to attain complete peace, we should still pursue a partial measure of peace. Even an imperfect peace between neighbors, or between an individual and the community, is worthwhile. "How great is peace!" proclaimed the Sages (VaYikra Rabbah 9:9). The value of peace is so great that we pray for it even if it will be like a sukkah—flimsy and temporary, rendered fit only by special laws.

מצינו בסוכה שנשנו בה הלכות מיוחדות
שהן מכשירות אותה, לא רק כשאיננה
בשלמותה, אלא גם כשחסרים בה חלקים
גדולים- "שתיים (מחיצות) כהלכתן
ושלישית אפילו טפח," "דופן עקומה עד
ארבע אמות" לבוד, גוד אחית וכו'
והוא הדין- מידת השלום, השלום הוא כל כך
יקר, וכל כך חיוני, שגם הוא לא ניתן
להשיגו בשלימותו, ראוי להשתדל להשיגו
גם בצורה חלקית, גם בצורה מקוטעת,
ובלבד שיהיה שלום בין איש לרעהו, ובין
יחיד לצבור וכו'.
"גדול השלום," ואנו מבקשים ומתפללים על
השלום, גם אם יהיה רק בבחינת סוכה, שרק

¹⁸ Adapted from *Ma'amarei HaRa'ayah* vol. I, pp. 149-150.

The very vulnerability of the sukkot that we build demonstrates our faith in man and in Hashem that peace is more valuable than assurances, and that in valuing even partial peace we become deserving of Hashem's blessing for a fuller peace.

Alternatively, I would like to suggest that the sukkah is an apt paradigm of the type of peace that reflects not a minimalist peace but rather a maximal approach. The sukkah can be seen as the apex of our aspirations for peace. On Sukkot we connect our personal hopes present in the nightly *Haskiveinu* with our communal aspirations and experiences of the Shabbat *Haskiveinu*. On an individual level, we show our personal security by placing ourselves in the sukkah, a semi-vulnerable place. On a communal level, Sukkot unites all Jews in the peace of Yerushalayim for the festival celebrations. While the description of the requirement to sit in sukkot seems to include only current members of Bnei Yisrael, there is a reference to the implication for the future saliency of the Jewish people's mission.

You shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in booths so that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Vayikra 23:42-43²⁰

בַּסֹּפֶת תִּשְׁבּוּ, שְׁבַע יָמִים; כָּל-הָאֶזְרָח,
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, יִשְׁבּוּ, בַּסֹּפֶת. לְמַעַן, יֵדְעוּ
דֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בַסֹּפֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
אֲנִי, ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.
ויקרא כג:מב-מג

Additionally, Sukkot's unifying force is also reflected in the Hakhel ceremony, which describes a national experience of great significance:

When all of Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law.

Devarim 31:11-12²¹

בָּבוֹא כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְרֹאֹת אֶת-פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ,
בַּמָּקוֹם, אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר: תִּקְרָא אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת,
נֶגֶד כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל--בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם. הִקְהֵל אֶת-הָעָם,
הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַטַּף, וְגֵרְךָ, אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ--
לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלְמַעַן יִלְמְדוּ, וְיָרְאוּ אֶת-ה'
אֱלֹהֶיכֶם, וְשָׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת, אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה
הַזֹּאת.
דברים לא:יא-יב

Furthermore, Sukkot also highlights our national destiny to bring about universal peace. The *korbanot* of Sukkot unite the 70 nations of the world in the recognition of the glory of Hashem's benevolence in this world. In describing the effects of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, the Gemara describes the loss of the Beit HaMikdash as a loss to the Nations of the world as well; *Rabbi Elazar said: The 70 bulls—to what do they correspond? They correspond to the 70 nations ... Rabbi Yochanan said: Woe to the heathens who have lost out, but*

א"ר (אליעזר) הני שבעים פרים כנגד מי
כנגד שבעים אומות ... א"ר יוחנן אוי
להם לעובדי כוכבים שאבדו ואין יודעין

¹⁹ <http://www.ravkooktorah.org/SUKKOT62.htm>.

²⁰ Adapted from JPS translation.

²¹ Adapted from JPS translation.

know not what they have lost. During the time of the Temple, the altar atoned for them, but now what atones for them?

Sukkah 55b

מה שאבדו בזמן שבהמ"ק קיים מזבח
מכפר עליהן ועכשיו מי מכפר עליהן.
סוכה נה:

Furthermore, Zecharia describes a time when peace among all nations is exemplified by their participation in the festival of Sukkot:

And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of Tabernacles.

Zecharia 14:16

וְהָיָה, כָּל-הַגּוֹתֵר מִכָּל-הַגּוֹיִם, הַבָּאִים,
עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם; וְעָלוּ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה,
לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְמֶלֶךְ ה' צָב-אוֹת, וְלַחֹג, אֶת-
חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת.
זכריה יד:טז

Without the Sukkot offerings that united the fate of the 70 nations with the destiny of the Jewish People, we are a fractured world. The ultimate “sukkah of peace” has the promise of a universal peace embedded within it.

Thus the sukkot we build today are symbolic of both the booths that the Jews of the desert lived in and the clouds of Divine Glory and Providence that guided them through their travails.²² As a nation in the desert, the need for shelter and protection was defensive and reflected our vulnerability. On the festival of Sukkot, we reflect on our bounty and remind ourselves of the source of all this blessing by leaving the “real” shelters and “real” luxuries and instead becoming vulnerable to nature, open to our community and inviting the other nations of the world to join our celebration of the ultimate form of peace—united in celebrating the bounty we have been granted in this majestic world of Hashem.

Therefore, it is specifically with these shelters, in our sukkot, that we publically demonstrate a measure of our meager efforts to construct a representation of what it means to be a people with a grand destination and to confront the many many obstacles we face along the way. Our sukkot by design must be something between permanent and temporary, must be durable but without assurances, must be able to offer shelter and still open to the elements. In this way, our sukkot reflect our practical initiatives and our theological commitments while they recognize our dependence on Hashem and interdependence on each other. In this way, when we invoke the notion of *ufros aleinu sukkat shelomekha*, the peace of Sukkot, we beseech Hashem to grant us a peace that connects to each of these elements: the personal, the communal and the universal, all of which are present on the festival of Sukkot. This offers up the promise of a world in which each of us experiences the fulfillment of peace in its fullest sense.

²² TB: *Sukkah* 11b.