

# Sukkot in the First Temple Period

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The obligations of Sukkot are prominently presented in *Parashat Emor* (Vayikra ch. 23), and are publicly read as part of our Sukkot *laining*.

39 Howbeit on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruits of the land, ye shall keep the feast of the LORD seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. 40 And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. 41 And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year; it is a statute forever in your generations; ye shall keep it in the seventh month. 42 Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in booths; 43 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.

לֹט אֶף בְּחֻמְשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ  
הַשְּׁבִיעִי, בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת-תְּבוּאֹת הָאָרֶץ,  
תַּחֲגוּ אֶת-חַג-ה', שִׁבְעַת יָמִים; בְּיוֹם  
הָרֵאשׁוֹן שִׁבְתוֹן, וּבְיוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שִׁבְתוֹן.  
מִוּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בְּיוֹם הָרֵאשׁוֹן, פְּרֵי עֵץ  
הָדָר פֶּתַת תְּמָרִים, וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עֵבֶת,  
וְעֵרְבֵי-נָחַל; וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם, לִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-  
לֹקֵיכֶם--שִׁבְעַת יָמִים. מֵא וְחַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חַג  
לַיהוָה, שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּשָׁנָה: חֻקַּת עוֹלָם  
לְדוֹרֹתֵיכֶם, בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי תַחֲגוּ אֹתוֹ. מִב.  
בַּסֹּכֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ, שִׁבְעַת יָמִים; כָּל-הָאִזְרָח,  
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, יֵשְׁבוּ, בַּסֹּכֹת. מִג לְמַעַן, יִדְעוּ  
דוֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בַסֹּכֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:  
אֲנִי, ה' אֱ-לֹקֵיכֶם

As is well established, once the mitzvot were transmitted to Moshe at Sinai, they were to be maintained in their entirety, for all time. This is explicitly conveyed in the *Torah Shebichtav* (written Torah) and expounded within the *Torah She'Bal peh* (oral tradition). [For a thorough exposition of this idea, see Rambam's *Introduction to the Mishnah*].

An unusual source that bolsters our commitment to the eternity of mitzva observance is found in *Sefer Melachim* 1 ch. 8. The inaugural celebrations of the opening of the First Bet Hamikdash are recorded in this chapter, and they seem to override the communal mitzva to observe Yom Kippur. The commentaries are troubled that the observance of Yom Kippur can be overridden in this instance (see Redak ad. loc. for an explanation), thus showing that even during the unique historical moment of inaugurating the First Bet Hamikdash, an explanation is required for the changing of mitzva observance. In context of this and many other sources, it is fair to conclude

that the Biblical mitzvot are eternal in their nature and thus were always being observed from the days of Moshe onwards.

This axiom of belief is challenged by the following verses found in the Book of Nechemiah (ch.8 v.17-18):

17 And all the congregation of them that were come back out of the captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness. 18 Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the ordinance.

יז וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כָל-הַקְהָל הַשְּׁבִיִּים מִן-הַשָּׁבִי סוכות, וַיָּשְׁבוּ בְסֻכּוֹת--כִּי לֹא-עָשׂוּ מִיָּמֵי יֵשׁוּעַ בֶּן-נּוּן כֵּן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַד הַיּוֹם הַהוּא; וַתְּהִי שִׁמְחָה, גְּדוֹלָה מְאֹד. יח וַיִּקְרָא בְּסֻפֵּר תּוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים, יוֹם בְּיוֹם--מִן-הַיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, עַד הַיּוֹם הָאַחֲרֹן; וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-הֵם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים, וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצֻרַת כַּמְשָׁפֵט.

In describing the renewal of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael at the beginning of the Second Bet HaMikdash period, Nechemiah seems to indicate that Sukkot observance was renewed because it had not been observed "from the days of Yehoshua until now." Does this mean that the festival of Sukkot was not celebrated during the whole of the First Bet Hamikdash time period? Did David Hamelech not sit in a sukka? How do we understand this difficult statement of Nechemiah?

There are many approaches in explaining the pesukim in Sefer Nechemiah, and we will examine a number of them, from ancient to modern sources.

#### A. Talmud Bavli: Erchin 32b

"What is the rationale to say that the 'first sanctity' of the land was only for its time and not for the future? It says in the book of Nechemiah: 'And all the congregation of them that were come back out of the captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.' Is it possible that (as this verse implies) David Hamelech did not celebrate Sukkot and it was only kept properly now at the return of the Jews to Eretz Yisrael (with Ezra)? The verse is actually to be understood as follows: The verse is comparing the return of the Jews in the time of Ezra to the arrival in the times of Yehoshua: Just as in the time of Yehoshua they established certain mitzvot which are dependent on the land (e.g. shemittah) so too in the times of Ezra were these laws reestablished in Eretz Yisrael."

מאי טעמא דמ"ד קדושה ראשונה קידשה לשעתה ולא קידשה לעתיד לבא דכתיב (נחמיה ח) ויעשו בני הגולה השבים מן השבי סוכות וישבו בסוכות כי לא עשו מימי יהושע בן נון כן בני ישראל וגו' ותהי שמחה גדולה מאד אפשר בא דוד ולא עשו סוכות עד שבא עזרא אלא מקיש ביאתם בימי עזרא לביאתם בימי יהושע מה ביאתם בימי יהושע מנו שמיטין ויובלות וקדשו ערי חומה אף ביאתן בימי עזרא מנו שמיטין ויובלות וקדשו ערי חומה.

The Talmud is clearly dividing the verse in Sefer Nechemiah into two distinct parts.

- 1) "All the congregation that came back out of captivity made sukkot and dwelt in them" (referring to the festival of Sukkot, which was now renewed after the exile and which had been practiced in Israel during the First Bet Hamikdash period prior to the *Churban Habayit* in 586 BCE).

- 2) ... "For since the days of Yehoshua . . . the children of Israel had not done so" (referring to the renewal of the *mitzvot ha'teluyot ba'aretz* (agricultural mitzvot such as *shemittah* etc.), which had not been celebrated with such joy during the whole of the First Bet Hamikdash period.

The Talmud creates a division in the verse that is not evidently there. This methodology is commonly utilized in Talmudic exegesis to explain difficult juxtapositions found in various verses. For our purposes this does not explain the verse in its entirety, especially within the terms of our question. We must seek other interpretations for a more complete explanation of our original problem in terms of the actual text itself.

### B. Malbim (1809-1879) on Sefer Nechemiah (ch 8 v.14-17)

"This verse is very strange (as pointed out by the Talmud in Masechet Erchin). . . . I would suggest an explanation based on the halachic ruling of Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rema) in Orach Chaim ch.637, that one should not construct a sukka in a public thoroughfare. Furthermore, Jerusalem was not divided up amongst the tribes and there was no status of a private thoroughfare anywhere in Jerusalem. Consequently a sukka could not be built in Jerusalem during the First Bet Hamikdash period. This changed when Ezra gathered in the exiles and a new condition was established that a sukka could be erected in a public domain (Tosefta Bava Kama ch.6). This now enabled sukkot to be built in Jerusalem. This allowance was only in Eretz Yisrael and not in the Diaspora where gentiles use the public domain (Magen Avraham on the Rema ad loc). This condition was not enacted by Yehoshua and was only put into place later by Ezra. Therefore, one can suggest that David Hamelech and Shlomo Hamelech did NOT have sukkot in Yerushalayim, and this is true to the literal meaning of the verse in Sefer Nechemiah. . . ."

זה דבר זר מאד שישראל לא עשו סכות מימי יהושע ועד עתה כמ"ש לקמן כי לא עשו מימי יהושע בן נון כן, וכמו שהתפלאו ע"ז בערכין (דף ל"ב). ונראה לפמ"ש הרמ"א בא"ח סי' תרל"ז שאין לעשות סוכה ברה"ר, א"כ כיון דקיי"ל שירושלים לא נתחלקה לשבטים, לא נמצא שם רה"י כמו דאין משכירים בתים בירושלים מפני שאינו שלהם, א"כ לא יכלו לעשות שם סוכה, ובאשר בימי עזרא קנו שנית את א"י בחזקה וקדשוה התנו הב"ד שיעשו סכות בירושלים ובשאר רה"ר, וכמ"ש בתוספתא (דב"ק פ"ו) שתנאי ב"ד שיהיו מסככים ברה"ר, ור"ל שזה התנו ב"ד של עזרא באותו זמן שאל"כ לא היו יכולים לעשות סכות בירושלים, ומבואר בפ"י שעשאוהו בחצרות בית האלהים וברחוב שער המים שהוא רה"ר, ממש, והתוספתא מדברת בא"י ששם היה תנאי ב"ד של עזרא בעת שקדשו את הארץ, אבל בחו"ל לא הותנה, בפרט במקום עכו"ם. וכמו שחקר בזה במג"א שם, והנה גם יהושע היה יכול לתקן תקנה זו בעת שקדש את הארץ בפעם הראשון שאז היה ביד ב"ד להנחיל את הארץ ע"מ כן שמקום הסוכה תהיה רה"י תמיד, ויהושע לא עשה כן ומימי עד עזרא לא עשו כן בני ישראל היינו לא ישבו בסוכה הנעשית ברה"ר, וכן בימי דוד ושלמה לא נעשו סכות בירושלים מטעם הנ"ל ...

This is a very novel approach and certainly disturbs our sensibilities regarding the observance of this mitzva by David Hamelech and others during the First Bet Hamikdash period. The Malbim does not offer an explanation as to why Yehoshua did not make the *takana*/enactment regarding the building of sukkot in public domains. One could argue that this would not have been a priority for Yehoshua, who was absorbed in fighting against the prevailing tribes in Canaan in order to subjugate them and drive them out of Eretz Yisrael.

Maybe we can also suggest that the image of the "*sukkat David Hanofalet*," the fallen sukka of David (Sefer Amos ch.9 v.11), which we mention in the *bentsching* on Sukkot, is to be taken

literally as “fallen.” According to the Malbim, David HaMelech never had the opportunity to erect a sukka in Yerushalayim and this mitzva was “fallen” at that time.

**C. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook (d.1935), as presented by Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who heard this explanation in a *drasha* given by Rav Kook in the late 1920's:**

Rav Kook noted that we must understand the verses in Nechemiah in the context of the previous verses:

15 and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying: “Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.” 16 So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the broad place of the water gate, and in the broad place of the gate of Ephraim.

טו וְאָשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּ, וַיַּעֲבִירוּ קוֹל  
בְּכָל-עָרֵיהֶם וּבִירוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר--צֵאוּ  
הַהָרַ וְהָבִיאוּ עָלַי-זֵית וְעָלַי-עֵץ שִׁטָּה,  
וְעָלַי הַדָּס וְעָלַי תְּמָרִים וְעָלַי עֵץ  
עֵבֶת: לַעֲשׂוֹת סֹכוֹת, כַּכָּתוּב. טז וַיֵּצְאוּ  
הָעָם, וַיָּבִיאוּ, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם סֹכוֹת  
אִישׁ עַל-גַּגּוֹ וּבְחִצְרוֹתֵיהֶם, וּבְחִצְרוֹת  
בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים--וּבְרַחֲבוֹ שַׁעַר הַמַּיִם,  
וּבְרַחֲבוֹ שַׁעַר אֶפְרַיִם.

Rav Kook, as quoted by Rav Goren, suggests the following:

*This verse does not mean that Sukkot was not observed during the whole of the First Bet Hamikdash period, but it is referring to the preparation for the mitzva . . . such as chopping the wood or putting up the sukka and not just sitting in the sukka . . . and in the days of Ezra this element of preparation was restored to its proper place in terms of the performance of the mitzva. This is seen from verses in the book of Nechemiah which state: and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities . . . It is with reference to this concept of preparation that the verse continues by saying: “for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so.”*

אין הכוונה שעם ישראל לא קיים מצות סוכה מאז יהושע בן נון עד ימי עזרא ונחמיה, אלא שבמשך כל הדורות לא החשיבו את ההכנה של האדם לקיים מצוה, ולא ידעו את החשיבות שהועידה התורה גם להכנת המצוה כגון לכרות את עצי הסוכה ולהקימה, ולא רק לשבת בה בהג כפי שעשו זאת ברוב עם ובהדרת מלך בימי עזרא ונחמיה. ככתוב שם "ואשר ישמעו ויעבירו קול בכל עריהם . . ." ועל זה כתוב "כי לא עשו מימי ישוע בן נון . . ."

The joy described here is that of “*hachanat hamitzva*,” preparation for the mitzva, which had not been carried out in this way during the entire First Bet Hamikdash period. Rav Kook examines the context of the pesukim in Sefer Nechemiah and illustrates that the verses refer to a different focal point in the description of the mitzva. As we shall see, other modern commentaries take Rav Kook's approach and try to explain the verse in a similar way.

**d) Rav Shlomo Goren (d.1993) *Sefer Moadei Yisrael* (republished in 1997)**

The reason given in the Torah for Sukkot is:

43 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.

מג לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בַסֹּכוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי  
אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם: אֲנִי, ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

This implies that in future days there will be an exemption from this mitzva, as the verses state in Sefer Yirmiyahu (ch. 23:7-8):

7 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say: "As the LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt"; 8 but: "As the LORD liveth, that brought up and that led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all the countries whither I had driven them"; and they shall dwell in their own land. The exodus from Egypt will be superseded by the future exodus, and this will override the reason for observing Sukkot as a remembrance for the dwelling in sukkot, which we did when leaving Egypt.

ז לְכֹן הִנֵּה-יָמִים בָּאִים, נְאֻם-  
ה'; וְלֹא-יֵאמְרוּ עוֹד חַי-ה',  
אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. ח כִּי אִם-חַי-  
ה', אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה וְאֲשֶׁר הִבִּיא  
אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ  
צִפּוֹנָה, וּמְכֹל הָאָרְצוֹת, אֲשֶׁר  
הִדְחִיתִים שָׁם; וְיָשְׁבוּ, עַל-  
אֲדָמָתָם.

However, we are then challenged by the prophecy of Zechariah (14:16), which states:

16 And it shall come to pass, that everyone 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.

טז וְהָיָה, כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם מְכַל-הַגּוֹיִם, הַבָּאִים,  
עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַיִם; וְעָלוּ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה,  
לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לַמֶּלֶךְ ה' צְבָאוֹת, וְלַחֹג, אֶת-חַג  
הַסֻּכּוֹת.

This is referring to messianic days when the festival of Sukkot will be celebrated by all nations in Yerushalayim. Zechariah is not referring to the original festival of Sukkot but to a future international celebration of this festival.

When Ezra returned with the exiled Jews to Israel, this was meant to be a "messianic" time, as explained in Talmud Bavli (*Berachot*: 4a); but their "sin" caused this not to happen.

In Sefer Nechemiah (9:1-2) this "sin" is explained further. The Jews had indulged in intermarriages to an alarming degree and this future prophecy of Yirmiyahu was not to be fulfilled with that generation, and the complete redemption, as prophesied by Yirmiyahu, was not going to happen. Therefore Sukkot reverted to its original designation as found in the Torah as explained above.

It is this failure to elevate the festival to a new spiritual dimension that Nechemiah is referring to in the enigmatic verse with which we began this analysis.

is referring to the dismal lack of response to the call to return to Israel at the time of Ezra (only 40,000 Jews returned with Ezra). This pasuk is not stating that the people did something positive in Ezra's days but, in fact, did not do then what they had done originally in the time of Yehoshua, to enter/return to Israel in such a way as to bring about a new existence for the Jewish people and the world. This reality is yet to come, and is what is referred to in this enigmatic verse. The question of the observance of Sukkot in the First Bet HaMikdash time is not the subject of this verse at all, and of course it was observed by David Hamelech during the First Bet Hamikdash period.

**E. A final example of modern interpretation can be found in the writings of Rabbi Z.H. Ferber (d.1966) (*Sefer Hamoadim* pp. 116-117).**

Rabbi Ferber was a Lithuanian *gaon* who came to England in 1910 and was the Rav in London's West End district for nearly 50 years. He suggested an array of interpretations, and one in particular offers tremendous insight.

There are two types of *simcha* in life: 1) Natural joy such as at the birth of a child, and 2) an obligatory joy, such as at the time of yom tov as expressed by the Torah, with a heightened emphasis on *simcha* at Sukkot time.

The joy on Sukkot in fact becomes challenging because there is also the “natural” joy of having secured the harvest and all the benefits this brings with it. In order to maintain the spiritual dimension of the *simcha* we leave our homes to enter temporary dwellings. This will ensure that we do not dwell on our material gains but on the deeper spiritual joy that this festival represents. In the days of Shlomo Hamelech the ability to rejoice was easier, as we were living in the land in complete peace and prosperity and our joy may not have been fully for the “sake of heaven” as it was supposed to be. However, when we entered Eretz Yisrael with Yehoshua, the land was exposed to war and devastation and our rejoicing at Sukkot time was purely on a spiritual level, as the land was not yet producing the wonderful crops that it would do in later years.

When Ezra returned with the exiled Jews to Israel the land was again desolate, so therefore any joy at Sukkot time was purely spiritual. As this was a time of uncertainty and difficulty, especially in rebuilding the Bet Hamikdash, which was hampered for many years by negative voices from within and without, material *simcha* could not be achieved.

This is now the explanation of the pasuk in Sefer Nechemiah. Our celebration of Sukkot at the time of Ezra was so great (on such a spiritual level) that it had not been experienced on this level since the days of Yehoshua. We entered a desolate land and rejoiced in a pure form without any material motivation, during both the times of Yehoshua and Ezra.

Rabbi Ferber adds that: “Following the Holocaust, when so many nations turned their backs on the Jewish people and we found ourselves again in Eretz Yisrael in a situation of material difficulty, the observance of Sukkot as an act of pure joy should be a true merit for us so that we will arrive at the future observance of Sukkot as referred to by the prophet Zechariah. Our joy should be totally for the sake of heaven to bring about the final messianic redemption speedily in our days.”

In attempting to explain the enigmatic verse in Sefer Nechemiah, we have undergone an exegetical journey from the Talmud to the present day. The consensus of opinions is that the verse does not rule out actual dwelling in sukkot in the days of the First Bet Hamikdash (except for the approach of the Malbim), but see in the verse a longing for a higher level of mitzva observance and connection to God as initiated by Ezra.

In our days, when over seven million Jews now live in Israel, let us hope that the fullest expression of joy on Sukkot will take place to usher in the final redemption and the future celebration of Sukkot as seen in Sefer Zechariah (which we read in the haftara *on* Sukkot), and may we soon see the true realization of the “raising of the fallen sukka of David” for which we pray every year on Sukkot.