

The Uniqueness of the Sukkah: The Presence of Hashem

Each Jewish holiday is shaped largely by its distinct mitzvot. Sukkot is represented most notably by a pair of biblical mitzvot: sukkah and four species. These two observances are similar in many ways. For example, they entail the use of organic and natural materials, require a Shehechyanu blessing and invoke a sense of joy. However, upon closer examination of these mitzvot, we notice a subtle, yet significant distinction between them.

All the mitzvot we perform throughout our lives connect us with Hashem. Each of these actions, whether biblical or rabbinic, raises our soul and moves us one step further in our lifelong spiritual journey. It is well understood, therefore, that the practical elements of mitzvot — the matzah cracker, the tzitzit strings, the Shabbat candles — each has a special status and must be treated with respect. The Ritva (*Megillah* 25b) explains this notion based on a passage in *Masechet Shabbat*:

אסור להרצות מעות כנגד נר חנוכה ואקשו עלה וכי נר חנוכה קדושה יש בו ואסיקנא דאסור ודאי משום ביזוי מצוה שאסור לנהוג בתשמישי מצוה מנהג בזיון בעוד שראוין ועומדין למצותן, ואמרינן נמי התם דנוי סוכה אסור להסתפק מהם כל שבעה משום ביזוי מצוה.

It is prohibited to count money opposite the Chanukah light. They asked: Does the Chanukah light have sanctity? The conclusion is that it is prohibited because it denigrates the mitzvah. It is prohibited to treat mitzvah items with disrespect



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while they are still usable for the mitzvah they were intended for. It also states there that one may not benefit from sukkah decorations all seven days because it is a denigration of the mitzvah.

We learn that while they are actually serving in their mitzvah capacity, mitzvah items may not be used for any other purpose. In addition, once they are no longer a vehicle for a mitzvah, they should not be treated with disrespect even though they technically do not maintain any sanctity. The *Chayei Adam* (11: 37) writes regarding a worn garment with tzitzit:

טלית שבלה אסור לעשות בו תשמיש מגונה.
If a talit is worn out, one may not use it for an activity which degrades it.

This notion of respect for mitzvah articles is a rabbinic institution. Yet there is one notable exception to this halachic structure: sukkah. Conspicuously, the Talmud (*Beitzah* 30b) finds a biblical precedent to maintain the sanctity of a sukkah during its use:

האמר רב ששת משום רבי עקיבא: מנין לעצי סוכה שאסורין כל שבעה - שנאמר חג הסוכות שבעת ימים לה', ותניא, רבי יהודה בן בתירא אומר: מנין שכשם שחל שם שמים על החגיגה כך חל שם שמים על הסוכה - תלמוד לומר

חג הסוכות שבעת ימים לה', מה חג לה' - אף סוכה לה'.

Didn't Rav Sheshet say in the name of Rabbi Akiva: How do we know that the beams of the sukkah are prohibited all seven days? Because it states [in the verse] "The holiday of Sukkot is seven days for G-d," and it states in a beraita, Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira says: How do we know that just as the name of G-d is applied to the chagigah offering (it is sanctified), so too, the name of G-d is applied to the sukkah? The verse states "The holiday of Sukkot is seven days for G-d," just as the holiday offering is for G-d, so too, the sukkah itself is for G-d.

Early authorities debate whether this ruling applies only to the roof of the sukkah or also to the walls.¹ Either way, we may wonder: Why do we require a special rule to teach us the sanctity of a sukkah? Why is the status with respect to the sanctity of the sukkah derived from a biblical source, while the sanctity of other items with which we perform mitzvot is based on rabbinic decree? Perhaps this halacha manifests a uniqueness of the mitzvah of sukkah. Even though it shares a similar sanctity to that of the four species and other mitzvot, there is something special about the mitzvah of sukkah that sets it

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apart. We can suggest an explanation based on a related discussion about the sanctity of holy objects once they are no longer in service.

There is a central distinction in halacha between the status of items used for a mitzvah as we described above and those that are used for *kedusha*, such as a sefer Torah or tefillin. The Gemara (*Megillah* 26b) rules:

תנו רבנן: תשמישי מצוה - נזרקין, תשמישי קדושה - נגנזין. ואלו הן תשמישי מצוה: סוכה, לולב, שופר, ציצית. ואלו הן תשמישי קדושה: דלוסקמי ספרים, תפילין ומזוזות, ותיק של ספר תורה, ונרתיק של תפילין ורצועותיהן.

Our rabbis taught: Mitzvah items may be discarded. Kedusha items must be buried. These are mitzvah items: a sukkah, a lulav, a shofar and tzitzit. These are kedusha items: cases for Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzahs, the cover for a Torah scroll and the pouch for tefillin and their straps.

The difference between the two lies in their essence, not just their function. Items used for mitzvot are themselves not holy articles but vehicles to fulfill mitzvot, which bring holiness into our lives. By contrast, items of *kedusha* contain or are associated with the written name of Hashem, which means that they themselves are holy — they contain a transcendent Divine spark in physical form. Their endowment of direct Godliness, in the form of the Divine name, means they are forever transformed to carry a spiritual sensitivity. While the act of eating matzah brings us closer to Hashem, the Torah scroll itself is suffused with the presence of Hashem.²

Perhaps the Talmud, in its ruling regarding the sanctity of the sukkah, is sharing an insight into the essence of the mitzvah and experience of sukkah. The *Zohar* (*Parshat Emor*) teaches that when we sit in the Sukkah we sit in the shade of the Divine presence:

כל האזרח בישראל ישבו בסכות כל מאן
דיהו משרשא וגועא קדישא דישראל ישבו
בסכות תחות צלא דמהימנותא.

[The verse states] “All citizens of Israel shall sit in sukkot,” anyone who is from the holy root of Israel will sit in the sukkot under the shade of faith.

We see that the sukkah is not just a vehicle to connect us to Hashem through an action; rather it is itself a resting place for the Shechinah. Although technically a sukkah is classified as *tashmishei mitzvah*, and after its use, it is no longer endowed with sanctity; nonetheless, while it is in service, it maintains a higher level of Divine presence similar to that of *tashmishei kedusha*. One expression of this heightened status concerns a case in which one expressly stipulates that they would like to retain the right to use the item for personal purposes. There is significant, nuanced halachic discussion as to when a stipulation may be acceptable in other mitzvah items; however, no such possibility exists for a sukkah. Therefore, the Talmud teaches that even if one stipulates to allow use of the sukkah when one is not sitting in it, this condition is not effective, and the sukkah may not be used for any other purpose aside from the mitzvah.³

While our four species are beautiful manifestations of this holiday, full of

deep meaning and significance, our mitzvah of sukkah has even greater significance. When we build our sukkah we are not just constructing a *tashmish mitzvah* but the equivalent of a *tashmish kedusha*. When we reside in the sukkah for this weeklong holiday, we are not just using this temporary dwelling as a vehicle to connect with Hashem. We are actually residing with Hashem in our sukkah. Perhaps now we can further appreciate why we live in the sukkah specifically during the holiday most associated with happiness. It is our personal and intimate connection with Hashem that generates the ultimate joy — the true *zman simchateinu* — that we celebrate as we feel the Divine presence with us in the sukkah.

Notes

1. For the full halachic discussion of the parameters and particulars of the restriction against using a sukkah for personal use, see *Orach Chaim* 638.
2. A similar distinction may be found in the Beit Hamikdash — the ultimate home of *kedusha*. There are two types of items that are consecrated in the Beit Hamikdash: *kedushat damim* (sanctity of value) and *kedushat haguf* (sanctity of an item). When one donates an item to the treasury of the Beit Hamikdash with *kedushat damim*, it is a vehicle to further the service of Hashem, as it will be sold by the custodians of the Mikdash and its funds will be used for service in the Mikdash. By contrast, an item endowed with *kedushat haguf* is one that will itself be offered as a sacrifice. It will become *ishe laHashem* — consumed directly by Hashem through the fire of the Mizbeach and, therefore, it has the sanctity of direct contact with the Almighty.
3. For a discussion regarding the use of a stipulation to benefit from the four species, see *Shulchan Aruch* O.C. 664:9 and *Beur Halacha* s.v. *Im*.



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