

Symbolism and Rationale of Sukkot

Five days after the solemnity and intensity of Yom Kippur, Sukkot, the festival of joy and happiness, begins. The Torah describes the festival as follows:

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לֵה'. בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ כָּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ ... אַךְ בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶסְפְּכֶם אֶת תְּבוּאֵת הָאָרֶץ תַּחֲגוּ אֶת חַג ה' שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן שְׁבַתוֹן וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שְׁבַתוֹן.

Speak to the Jewish people saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot, a seven-day period for G-d. On the first day shall be a sacred holy day when you shall not do any laborious work ... On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather in the harvest of the land, you shall celebrate G-d's festival for a seven-day period; the first day is a rest day and the eighth day is a rest day:

Leviticus 23:34-39

A Time to Appreciate G-d's Benevolence

This festival is also known in the Torah as "*Chag HaAsif*," the Festival of Gathering,¹ because it is celebrated at the time of year when the harvested produce is brought from the fields into storehouses and homes. When a person gathers in the bounty of his land, he is naturally filled with tremendous joy and happiness. This happiness could easily turn into arrogance; it could make a person full



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of himself and his accomplishments and distance him from G-d and from others.² As Rashbam³ comments:

למען ידעו דורותיכם [וגו'] - פשוטו כדברי האומרים במסכת סוכה סוכה ממש. וזה טעמו של דבר. חג הסוכות תעשה לך באוספך מגרנך ומיקבך באוספך את תבואת הארץ ובתיכם מלאים כל טוב דגן ותירוש ויצהר, למען תזכרו כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל במדבר ארבעים שנה בלא יישוב ובלא נחלה, ומתוך כך תתנו הודאה למי שנתן לכם נחלה ובתיכם מלאים כל טוב, ואל תאמרו בלבבכם כחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה.

In order that your generations shall know — The simple explanation is in accordance with those in Tractate Sukkah who say that the sukkot were actual booths (and not the clouds of glory) and this is the reasoning behind this matter. You shall make the festival of Sukkot when you gather in from your granaries and your winepresses and when you gather in the produce of your land and your houses are full of all good things, grain, wine and olive oil, so that you shall remember that I (G-d) sustained Israel in sukkot in the desert for forty years without civilization or a permanent residence. And as a result of remembering this you will give thanks to He who gave you an inheritance and houses full of all manner of goodness.

And don't say in your hearts, "It was my strength and the power of my hands that provided me with all these possessions."⁴

Rashbam points out a similarity to the verses in the Torah that obligate us to bless G-d after eating, where the context clearly indicates that this blessing is designed to introduce some humility when there is a strong chance of pride and arrogance. Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk⁵ explains that this is why the Torah only obligates a blessing *after* eating but not *before* eating (a rabbinic obligation). There is a greater chance of someone feeling independent of G-d when that person is full, satiated and content, than when someone is feeling hungry, weak and unsatisfied. Since the primary purpose of the blessing is to counteract the feeling of independence from G-d, the Torah obligated the blessing at the moment of greatest risk, after eating. Similarly, the festival of Sukkot, according to the Rashbam, is very much like a Grace after Meals for the entire year and all its produce.

These ideas may lead one to think that the appropriate antidote would be a period of fasting and repentance, however that would

directly contradict a person's natural inclinations. It is a time of year when people are full of joy and Judaism, generally, does not seek to deny or suppress human nature and instincts, but rather seeks to apply them in positive directions. The Torah wants us to celebrate and be happy and to channel that joy toward our relationship with the Creator and with other people. We should use this opportunity to appreciate G-d's benevolence as well as to share our good fortune with others. Through the sukkah, the lulav and the other species, the Torah directs us to use the products of the harvest in the fulfillment of *mitzvot*. Thus we neither deny the physical world nor wallow in it; rather we elevate it toward a higher purpose.⁶ This is similar to an idea mentioned by the Maharal in explaining why Yaakov was, according to Rashi, saying the Shema while embracing Yosef: "This is characteristic of the pious, that when something good happens to them, they cleave to the Holy One, blessed be He, for the good and the truth that He has done for them."⁷ Sukkot is a time when the Jewish people are naturally "in a good mood." The Torah does not want to dampen that mood, but seeks to utilize it so that the Jewish

people as a whole "cleave to G-d for the good that He has done for them."

A Time to Harvest our Inspiration

The gathering of the agricultural harvest also serves as a metaphor for the spiritual harvest. The Jewish people have just been through an intense period of introspection, repentance and prayer; the month of repentance, Ellul, followed by the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. During this time, we labor in the fields of spiritual growth. On Sukkot, we harvest the inspiration, the joy and the closeness to G-d that is produced by this period of repentance. The intense feeling of joy on Sukkot is the feeling of one who hears good news — forgiveness — when he was expecting the worst — punishment; of one who has been given a fresh start in life after making many serious mistakes. Sukkot thus reflects the joy of completing a difficult job and celebrates both the conclusion of the physical harvest and the culmination of the spiritual harvest.

Traditionally, Sukkot is associated with happiness more than any other

festival. In our prayers, it is called "the time of our happiness" while in the Mishnah, it is referred to simply as "the festival."⁸ Rav Yitzchak Hutner understands this joy as part of the cycle of the creation of the Jewish people. On Pesach, when we were taken out of Egypt, we were designated as G-d's agents. On Shavuot, when we were given the Torah, we were told exactly what He wanted us to do. On Sukkot we come back to G-d and declare, "We have accomplished our task; we have brought in the harvest from the fields."⁹

Maimonides offers the following rationale in his *Guide for the Perplexed*:¹⁰

ושני המועדים האלה, רוצה לומר, סוכות, ופסח, מלמדים דעות ומדות, אמנם הדעת בפסח, הזכרת אותות מצרים והתמדתם לדורות, אמנם הדעת בסוכות, להתמיד זכר אותות המדבר לדורות, אמנם המדות הוא שיהיה האדם זוכר ימי הרעה בימי הטובה, בעבור שירבה להודות להשם ושילמוד מדת ענוה ושפלות, יאכל מצה ומרור בפסח לזכור מה שאירע לנו, וכן יצא מן הבתים לשכון בסכות כמו שיעשו השרויים בצער שוכני המדברות, לזכור שכן היה עניננו בתחלה, כי בסכות הושבתי את בני ישראל וגו', ונעתקנו מן הענין ההוא לשכון בבתי המצוריים במקום הטוב שבארץ והשמן שבה בחסד

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השם וביעדיו לאבותינו, בעבור שהיו אנשים שלמים בדעותם ומדותם, ר"ל אברהם יצחק ויעקב, שזה ג"כ הוא ממה שהתורה תלויה עליו, ר"ל שכל טוב שהטיב השם לנו וייטיב, אמנם הוא בזכות אברהם יצחק ויעקב אבותינו, מפני ששמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט, אבל צאתנו מסכות למועד שני ר"ל שמיני חג העצרת, הוא להשלים בו מן השמחות מה שאי אפשר לעשות בסכות אלא בבתי הרחבים ובבנינים ... והנראה לי בארבעת מינים שבלולב, שהם שמחה בצאתם מן המדבר אשר היה לא מקום זרע ותאנה וגפן ורמון ומים אין לשתות, אל מקום האילנות נותני פרי והנהרות, ולקח לזכרון זה הנאה שבפירות האדמה, והטוב שבריוח, והיפה שבעליו, והטוב שבעשבים ג"כ, ר"ל ערבי נחל, ואלו הארבעה מינין הם אשר קבצו שלשת הדברים האלה, האחד מהם, רוב מציאותם בארץ ישראל בעת ההיא והיה כל אדם יכול למצאם, והענין השני, טוב מראה ורעננותם ויש מהם טובים בריחם והם אתרוג והדס, אבל לולב וערבה אין להם ריח לא טוב ולא רע, והענין השלישי, עמדם על לחותם ורעננותם בשבעה ימים, מה שאי אפשר זה באפרסקים ורמונים ובאספרגל ובאגס וכיוצא בהן.

*The two festivals, Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, imply also the teaching of certain truths and certain moral lessons. Passover teaches us to remember the miracles which G-d wrought in Egypt, and to perpetuate their memory; the Feast of Tabernacles reminds us of the miracles wrought in the wilderness. **The moral lesson derived from these feasts is this: man ought to remember his evil days in his days of prosperity. He will thereby be induced to thank G-d repeatedly, and to lead a modest and humble life.** We eat, therefore, unleavened bread and bitter herbs on Passover in memory of what has happened unto us, and leave [on Succoth] our houses in order to dwell in tabernacles, as inhabitants of deserts do that are in want of comfort. We shall thereby remember that this has once been our condition; "I made*

*the children of Israel to dwell in booths" (Lev. xxiii. 43); although we dwell now in elegant houses, in the best and most fertile land, by the kindness of G-d, and because of His promises to our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were perfect in their opinions and in their conduct. **This idea is likewise an important element in our religion; that whatever good we have received and ever will receive of G-d, is owing to the merits of the Patriarchs, who "kept the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment"** (Gen. xviii. 19). We join to the Feast of Tabernacles the Feast of the Eighth Day, in order to complete our rejoicings, which cannot be perfect in booths, but in comfortable and well-built houses ... I believe that the four species are a symbolical expression of our rejoicing that the Israelites exchanged the wilderness, "a place of no seed, nor of figs, or vines, or of pomegranates, or of water to drink" (Num. xx. 5), with a country full of fruit-trees and rivers. In order to remember this we take the fruit which is the most pleasant of the fruit of the land, branches which smell best, most beautiful leaves, and also the best of herbs, i.e., the willows of the brook. These four kinds have also those three purposes: First, they were plentiful in those days in Palestine, so that everyone could easily get them. Secondly, they have a good appearance, they are green; some of them, viz., the citron and the myrtle, are also excellent as regards their smell, the branches of the palm-tree and the willow having neither good nor bad smell. Thirdly, they keep fresh and green for seven days,¹¹ which is not the case with peaches, pomegranates, asparagus, nuts, and the like.*

G-d's Relationship with the Jewish People

Maimonides emphasizes gratitude to G-d for our present good fortune by contrasting it with our

condition in Egypt and later in the desert. In this way, he continues, we will be encouraged to thank G-d continuously and to lead a modest and humble life. In addition, the festival reminds us of our connection and debt to our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and also directs us to appreciate the beautiful gift of the Land of Israel.

On the simplest level, this mitzvah reminds us that G-d protected and preserved the Jewish people in the desert after He took them out of Egypt. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch¹² sees Sukkot and the other festivals as reflecting a broader historical perspective, and understands the "desert" as a metaphor for exile. Passover celebrates the Exodus, which was the *physical creation* of the Jewish people. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah, our *spiritual creation*. Sukkot celebrates the remarkable *physical survival and continuity* of the Jewish people, the result of ongoing and all-encompassing Divine Providence. Considering Sukkot in this light, we can understand the opinion in the Talmud¹³ that the booths represent not the Jews' physical dwellings in the desert, but rather, G-d's clouds of glory,¹⁴ which surrounded and protected the Jewish people from the time of the Exodus until they reached the Land of Israel. Sukkot is thus understood not simply as a reminder of a specific historical period, but rather as an experience that renews our awareness of G-d's relationship to the Jewish people throughout history. The desert symbolizes our exile, diaspora and wandering, while the clouds represent G-d's unceasing protection, care and Divine providence. Similarly, the *Zohar* calls the sukkah "the shade of faith"¹⁵ because sitting under the

The Importance of Knowing the Reason for Sitting in the Sukkah

R. Yaakov ben Asher, *Tur, Orach Chaim* no. 625, has a lengthy discourse about the reason why we sit in the sukkah on Sukkot. R. Yoel Sirkes, *Bach ad loc.*, a commentary on *Tur*, points out that this is highly unusual. The *Tur* is a halachic work and doesn't generally discuss the reasons behind various mitzvot. R. Sirkes suggests the following:

איכא למידק בדברי רבינו שאין זה מדרכו בחיבורו זה לבאר הכונה לשום מקרא שבתורה כי לא בא רק לפסוק הוראה או להורות מנהג ופה האריך לבאר ולדרוש המקרא דבסכת תשבו ויראה לי לומר בזה שסובר דכיון דכתיב למען ידעו וגו' לא קיים המצוה כתיקונה אם לא ידע כוונת מצות הסוכה כפי פשטה ולכן ביאר לפי הפשט דעיקר הכוונה בישיבת הסוכה שיזכור יציאת מצרים.

One should investigate the words of our teacher who does not generally provide the explanation of verses in this work. His purpose is to provide halachic rulings or inform us about customs. Yet here, he gives a lengthy explanation of the verse "You shall sit in the sukkah etc." It seems to me that [Tur] is teaching us that since the verse states, "In order that your future generations should know [that I placed you in tabernacles when I took you out of Egypt.]," if one does not know the purpose of sitting in the sukkah, as described by the verse, one does not fulfill the mitzvah properly. For this reason, he explained that the primary purpose of sitting in the sukkah is to remember the Exodus from Egypt.

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shade of the sukkah, the Jewish people understand that they must not place their faith solely in the walls and roofs of their houses, or in any physical protection they might construct, but rather in G-d. We have learned through many years of bitter exile that although we are obligated to pursue material efforts for our protection — medicine, self-defense, political lobbying and so on — it is only when they are accompanied and blessed by G-d's Divine Providence that they are able to protect us. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook writes that one lesson of Sukkot is that in building our national home "we must recognize the absolute truth that the spiritual law of nature, which is the word of G-d, Who decreed that the house of Israel will be built,¹⁶ that is our primary wall of fortification, despite the fact that the feeble human eye cannot discern its

impenetrability and its power."¹⁷

The Gaon of Vilna notes that the clouds of glory left the Jewish people when they sinned at Mt. Sinai and built the Golden Calf. They did not return until after the Jews repented and were forgiven on Yom Kippur. The date on which the clouds of glory once again encircled the nation was the fifteenth day of the month of Tishrei, which is the first day of Sukkot.¹⁸ This explains why Sukkot is celebrated right after Yom Kippur even though it is related to the Exodus and might be expected to occur soon after Passover. Sukkot demonstrates that G-d's love for the Jewish people is just as strong after they have sinned as it was before the sin.¹⁹ The clouds of glory were returned to us, even though our own actions had caused them to be removed, because the bond

between G-d and the Jewish people is eternal.²⁰ The Gaon saw this idea hinted at in the verse in the Song of Songs, "His left hand is under my head and His right arm embraces me."²¹ "His left hand," which symbolizes justice and judgement, "is under my head" — the head of the year, Rosh Hashanah. "His right arm," which symbolizes lovingkindness, "embraces me" on Sukkot. The minimal sukkah according to halachic guidelines consists of two complete walls and the third wall, which only has to be a hand's-breadth (*tefach*) long.²² The Gaon of Vilna points out that the two walls and the hand's-breadth are suggestive of an embracing arm and hand, symbolizing G-d's embrace of the Jews.

In a similar vein, Rav Moshe DiTrani (*Mabit*), author of the book *Beit Elokim*, sees the sukkah as a symbol of G-d's love for the Jewish people. He asks why the Torah does not designate a festival in commemoration of the miracles of the manna and of the miraculous well of Miriam, and only celebrates the miracle of the clouds of glory (*ananei hakavod*)?²³ My revered teacher, Rav Shlomo Fischer, maintains that indeed the well of Miriam is commemorated by the ceremony of water libation (*nisuch hamayim*) on Sukkot and the manna is commemorated by the mitzvot of challah and omer.²⁴ However, the question of the *Mabit* still stands, since neither of these miracles has an entire festival dedicated to them, as does the miracle of the clouds of glory. The *Mabit* explains that supplying the Jews with food and water was a necessity, and for G-d to take them into the desert without those supplies would be tantamount to mass murder. In a sense, G-d had to perform the miracles of the manna and the water

out of sheer necessity. However, the climate-controlled embrace of the clouds of glory was a luxury, not a necessity, and therefore an expression of G-d's love for His people. It is that Divine love that we are celebrating on Sukkot. According to Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner (the Ishbitzer),²⁵ it is this embrace of G-d, the feeling of security, and His promise that He will never abandon us, that gives us such a special feeling of joy on Sukkot, so that this festival alone is known as “the time of our joy.”

Sukkah as a Temporary Space

Rav Eliyahu Dessler, in a classical *musar* perspective on Sukkot, notes that Jewish law describes the Sukkah as a temporary dwelling,²⁶ a status which informs many of the legal specifications for the Sukkah's construction.²⁷ Leaving our permanent houses with solid walls and roofs to live in a flimsy booth with a roof of branches is a dramatic and unequivocal statement that the material world is not what life is all about. By living in the sukkah, we are declaring that the entire physical world is really temporary, and that the only things we truly possess forever are the soul and its spiritual accomplishments. It was certainly within G-d's power to build five-star hotels and villas for the Jews in the Sinai Desert; why then did he put them in thatched huts? Because he wanted them, and us, to understand that there is no permanence to the physical world, and that focusing all aspirations and hopes on material attainments — a house, a car, another house, another car — is pointless. By living in the sukkah, we are bringing this message home to ourselves, not

just as intellectual knowledge, but as a transformative experience that will impact our lives.²⁸

Rav Moshe Sofer, the Chatam Sofer,²⁹ relates the festivals to the different realms of existence that are discussed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*:³⁰ *olam* — space, *shannah* — time and *nefesh* — life or soul.³¹ Pesach is the sanctity of life; *nefesh*, symbolized by the *mitzvot* of eating (*matzah*, *maror*, *korban Pesach*), sustains the soul and life. Shavuot, preceded by and dependent upon a *mitzvah* of counting time (Sefirat HaOmer), and named for that *mitzvah* (*shavuot* means “weeks”), is the sanctity of time; and Sukkot is the sanctity of place (*olam*), sanctifying the very space in which we live. This is why the Beit HaMikdash is called *Sukkat David*, the Sukkah of David, because it also is the sanctification of place, and like the sukkah, is a *mitzvah* into which one can immerse oneself entirely. It is our hope and prayer that, as we fulfill the *mitzvah* of sukkah with all its beautiful lessons and rationale, we all merit seeing the ultimate sukkah of the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem.

Endnotes

1 Exodus 34:22.

2 Deuteronomy 8:12-18.

3 Rashbam, Commentary on Leviticus 23:43.

4 Deuteronomy 5:17.

5 Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, *Meshech Hochmah*, Commentary on Deuteronomy 8:10.

6 Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, II Edot, Chapter 31, Par. 223.

7 Rav Yehudah Loewe, Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, Commentary on Genesis 45:29.

8 Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:2.

9 Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rosh Hashanah (*Hemshech Tishrei*), 9.

10 Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:43, M. Friedlander translation.

11 This statement of Maimonides is always particularly painful to me as I regularly witness my *hadassim* and *aravot* drying up, shriveling and otherwise deteriorating by the second or third day of Sukkot.

12 Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, II Edoth, Chapter 23, Par. 169-170.

13 B. *Sukkah* 11b.

14 Exodus 13:21.

15 *Zohar*, *Parshat Emor*, 103a.

16 Based on Job 22:28.

17 Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, *Ma'amarei Ha-Reiyah*, 1:149-150.

18 Rav Eliyahu Kramer, GRA, *Commentary on Song of Songs* 2:6, (in *Kol Eliyahu*) cf. *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:19 where “His left hand” refers to Sukkot.

19 Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rosh Hashanah (*Hemshech Tishrei*), 10:8.

20 Ibid.

21 Song of Songs 2:6.

22 B. *Sukkah* 6b.

23 Rav Moshe ben Yosef DiTrani, *Sefer Beit Elokim*, *Sha'ar HaYesodot*, Ch. 36.

24 Rav Shlomo Fischer, *Drushei Beit Yishai*, *Drush* 23, p. 181 Footnote 5.

25 Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Ishbitz, *Mei Ha-Shiloah*, Vol. 1, *Parshat Emor*.

26 B. *Sukkah* 2a.

27 Ibid 2a, 21b.

28 Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 2, p. 106.

29 Rav Moshe Sofer, *Torat Moshe*, Shavuot. For a different interpretation of the cycle of the festivals as they relate to these categories, see Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak of Alexander, *Yismach Yisrael*, Vol 2, Sukkot, Paragraph 7.

30 *Sefer Yetzirah*, Ch. 3, Mishnah 7.

31 Forming the acronym of *ash"n* — smoke, as these are the smokescreens through which we see existence — commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*.