

Gazing Heavenward on Earth

Sukkot I 5779

I.

I SPOKE LAST YEAR of Sukkot's strangeness: how, unlike any other festival, we publicly do some very strange things. We build huts in our back gardens in full view of our neighbors; we carry our *arba minim* through the streets to *shul*. But the weirdest thing we do – weirder, I think, than any other Jewish ritual – was done just a short while ago after Hallel, *Hoshanot*. The men, holding *their arba minim* paced around the *bimah* upon which someone was holding a Torah, as everyone recited pleas to God. Imagine if someone unfamiliar with Judaism walked in as we were doing *Hoshanot*! What would they think? There is nothing weirder in Judaism than this!

But the reason we do it is codified in the Shulchan Arukh (660:1):

נוהגים להעלות ספר תורה על [הבימה] ולהקיפה פעם א' בכל יום זכר למקדש ...
שהיו מקיפים את המזבח...

The custom is to bring a Torah to the *bimah* and to circle it once every day [of Sukkot], in remembrance of the Temple ... for they would circle it the altar in the Temple.

It's done *zecher le-mikdash*: in order to recall the service in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, where people would circle the altar on Sukkot, *arba minim* – or just *aravot* – in hand, we circle our *bimah*. And while this is not the only thing we do *zecher le-mikdash*, to re-enact something done in the Temple, I think it is by far the strangest and least believable. It's one thing to do a *mitzvah* so that it remains fresh in our minds for the day, hopefully soon, in which it will again be relevant – such as *netilat yadayim*, washing our hand. But it's another thing to claim that our *mikdash me'at*, our miniature Temple, has truly transformed into the real deal, enough for us to act as though the altar stands before us in place of our *bimah*!

II.

A couple of days ago we read Parashat Haazinu, which opened with Moshe's declaration (Deut. 32:1):

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֲדַבְרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי־פִי:

Listen, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

But, as has been noted, the prophet Yeshayahu opens his prophecy with the exact opposite expression:

שְׁמַעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהָאֲרֶזְבֵּי אֶרֶץ כִּי ה' דִּבֶּר

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, For the LORD has spoken!

Why the difference? Rabbi Akiva, in a midrash (*Tanchuma Haazinu* 2:1), answers:

אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא, מְלִמַּד, בֵּינָן שְׁאָמַר מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, בְּשָׁמַיִם הָיָה, וְהָיָה מְדַבֵּר עִם הַשָּׁמַיִם כְּאִדָּם שֶׁמְדַבֵּר עִם חֲבֵרוֹ, שְׁאָמַר, "הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם." וְרָאָה אֶת הָאֶרֶץ רְחוֹקָה מִמֶּנּוּ, וְאָמַר, "וְתִשְׁמַע הָאֶרֶץ." אָבָל יִשְׁעִיָּה שֶׁהָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ וְרָאָה שָׁמַיִם רְחוֹקִים מִמֶּנּוּ, הִתְחִיל לֵאמֹר, "שְׁמַעוּ שָׁמַיִם," וְאַחַר כֵּן, "וְהָאֲזִינוּ אֶרֶץ," שֶׁהָיְתָה קְרוֹבָה אֵלָיו.

As Moshe spoke the Torah he was in Heaven, and so it spoke to it as one would speak to a friend, hence why he said "listen, heaven." But he saw the land from a distance, and so he said, "let the earth hear." But Isaiah, who was on the land and saw the heaven from a distance, began by saying "let the heaven hear," and afterwards "listen, earth," for he was closer to it.

Moshe was more heavenly being than man, barely aware of his earthly self. Yeshayahu, though a prophet gazing heavenward, was a mortal man.

III.

Can we truly believe that our shul is the *Beit ha-Mikdash*? Yes, but only on Sukkot – because we just finished Yom Kippur. Not only did we ascend spiritual heights we otherwise cannot reach, but we re-enacted the Yom Kippur *avodah* just a few days ago. We prostrated ourselves as though we were in the *Beit ha-Mikdash* hearing the ineffable name of God! This shul became the Temple! And so, of course today we continue that. We continue to treat the shul as though it is actually the Temple. We are Moshe's, more in heaven than on earth. And our *bimah* is the *mizbeach*, the altar, and we worship around it accordingly.

But, as wonderful as spiritual highs are, they are not sustainable forever. We need rehabilitating back into our routines. And so, Sukkot, with its emphasis on the physical – worship with tangible objects, dwelling in *sukkot* – also exists to give us time to adjust. To realize that our *mizbeach* for the rest of the year, as I mentioned several months ago, is our dining room table. The goal of Sukkot is for us to enter it as Moshe and leave it as Yeshayahu: as earthly beings turned towards heaven, with a focus on our spiritual growth.

But for us there is still one more challenge that I will leave you with: while Yeshayahu asked heaven to hear, we must decide if we will hear heaven. We spent a lot of the *Yamim Noraim* claiming we would, but now becomes our true test.