

Celebrating Our Efforts

The Torah explains that we celebrate Sukkot due to the fact that Hashem enabled the Jewish People to dwell in sukkot while in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. As it says in Vayikra 23:43:

“In order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the LORD your God.”

The Talmud in Sukkah records a dispute about the makeup of this sukkot (Sukkah 11):

“These booths were clouds of glory, this is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva says: They established for themselves actual sukkot.”

According to Rabbi Eliezer we understand why we established a joyous holiday commemorating those original sukkot. Those sukkot were comprised of miraculous Clouds of Glory. They were a clear indication- to the Jewish People and the entire world- of God’s care and protection of Bnai Yisrael. Recalling this miraculous event allows us to remember that even during less miraculous times, God is with us and He protects the Jewish People. This is clearly a good reason to celebrate and to establish an annual holiday. But what about according to Rabbi Akiva? He holds that the sukkot in the wilderness were built by human hands. In this account, it seems that the booths were an act of necessity, not a miraculous event. Why should the construction of booths by human hands be a source of celebration and be worthy of an annual holiday?

Even according to Rabbi Akiva, the holiday of Sukkot commemorates Hashem’s protection and care for the Jewish People during their years in the wilderness. However Rabbi Akiva wants us to focus not just on what God did/ does for us, but also on what we did/ do for ourselves- with God’s help.

In terms of the progression of Tishrei holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur focus primarily on the mind, the heart and the mouth. We reflect upon the past year, we resolve in our minds and hearts to grow from our past missteps. We use our mouths to pray, to confess, and to seek forgiveness. Sukkot is a holiday of action. We build a sukkah. We wave the lulav and etrog. We circuit around the shul during Hoshanot throughout Sukkot and during Hakafot on Simchat Torah. We sukkah hop. Sukkot marks the moment when we begin to put our plans, our hopes and our resolutions into action. The formal mitzvot of the holiday are meant to jumpstart that “can do” attitude. As Newton taught us, a body in motion tends to stay in motion. Once we are engaged and active in the mitzvot of Sukkot we are meant to continue to be active and engaged in other areas of meaningful spiritual growth after the holidays.

The pasuk states (Vayikra 23:43) that we sit in sukkot “in order that your [ensuing] generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt.” The Tur writes that the mitzvah of sukkah is unique in that we need to think about the reason for the mitzvah while we are sitting in the sukkah. By (most) other mitzvot, the act itself suffices, and one’s intention during the action, while nice, is not necessary. However by sukkah we need to have special intention while sitting in the sukkah. Which begs the question: are we supposed to think about the Clouds of Glory (like Rabbi Eliezer) or about the actual booths (like Rabbi Akiva)? The Tur suggests that we have both opinions in mind (I quickly think about this while reciting the bracha of “leishev basukkah”). The Tur’s recommendation is a good one for life in general. We celebrate God’s protection and Presence in our lives, while at the same time demonstrating with our actions that we are active partners with God in our own lives and in the ultimate redemption of the Jewish People.