

Sukkot Dvar Torah ~ Josh Nason, October 2012

Last week, I found myself explaining Yom Kippur to some of my non-Jewish classmates. While Yom Kippur may not be the most fun holiday, it is certainly easy to explain. Then they asked me if there were any upcoming holidays, to which I quickly responded “sukkot” before realizing that I had no clue how I would explain this one to them. “Um, we build huts” was about the best I could do before the conversation thankfully got cut off.

Jon Stewart once joked that Sukkot was Hebrew for “how many holidays can Jews fit in one month?” Some of our Sukkot customs are so ridiculous that the Transportation Security Administration has been issuing the following statement annually:

“Observant Jewish travelers may carry four plants – a palm branch, myrtle twigs, willow twigs, and a citron – in airports and through security checkpoints. These plants are religious articles and may be carried either separately or as a bundle. Jewish travelers may be observed in prayer, shaking the bundle of plants in six directions.”

All joking aside, I think that our inability to give a concise yet meaningful response is actually indicative of a holiday that has a conflicted identity. I'd like to bring forward two of these identity crises related to Sukkot. The first is a Talmudic debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer over what the Sukkah represents. Rabbi Eliezer asserts that the Sukkah is representative of the Ananei Kavod, the “clouds of glory” which protected the Israelites during the 40 years in the desert. Under Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation, the sukkah is in fact a reminder that God will always provide. That so long as we have faith in God, we are secure. In his vision, the 40 years in the dessert were not ones of wandering and homelessness, but ones in which the Israelites were fully protected.

Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, asserts that the Sukkah represents the actual huts that the Israelites built in the dessert. For Rabbi Akiva, the sukkah then represents the ultimate sense of insecurity and fragility. Compared to the bricks and mortar of Egypt, the 40 years in the desert were ones of great insecurity. The sukkah, therefore, reminds us of a time in our history in which we were not as protected as we are now.

Let's put those concepts aside for a moment and look at another potential point of tension related to understanding Sukkot. At a first glance Sukkot is the most “this-worldly” of all our holidays. It is a holiday that brings us in contact with nature, as we build our sukkah, and spend the holiday outside. It commemorates the fall harvest, thanking God for what the farmers were able to reap. Again, a very tangible idea.

At the same time Sukkot is our most explicitly eschatological holiday. We Jews don't particularly like talking about the End of Days. It is especially uncommon to talk about topics like the messianic age in non-Orthodox Jewish communities. In fact a google search of words related to sukot, eschatology, messianic age, end of days, etc. brought up significantly more hits from Christian sources than Jewish ones. I would guess that many of the people in this room have very strong questions about the notion of a messianic age. Whether it exists? Whether it's the type of thing that we should actually yearn for?

I don't intend to answer any of those questions. However, this morning, as we read our Haftorah from Zechariah 14, one cannot help but think about the topic. Zechariah is describing the war that will take place in Jerusalem at the End of Days. After God defeats the enemies of Israel, all of the nations of the world will celebrate Sukkot. As if to further reinforce the connection between Sukkot and the End of Days, on Shabbat Chol Hamoed we will read from Ezekiel about Gog and Magog, another explicitly eschatological text.

While the connection between Sukkot and eschatology is undeniable, the reasons for it are somewhat more obscure. There are a number of Talmudic statements on the subject. The Talmud discusses a giant sukkah that will be built out of the skin of a Leviathan. Another story discusses the notion that in order to merit redemption, non-Jews will be offered the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah as a sign of faith (again harkening back to the notion of a sukkah as a symbol of insecurity).

I don't know about you, but neither of these explanations really leave me satisfied, but perhaps that is the point. Sukkot is a holiday at a crossroads. It can remind us of our own insecurity, as we step into temporary huts. Or it can remind us of our security, as we envision the sukkah reminding us of God's protection. It can be a holiday about this world, and an appreciation of the nature and beauty around us. Or it can be a holiday about the next world, as we picture Zechariah's vision of celebrating Sukkot in the messianic age. I certainly have no intention of delving any deeper into these deep questions of theology, lest I run well past my 5 minutes. However, I hope that in highlighting these questions of faith it will help us think about moving beyond Sukkot as simply a holiday about "huts" and remember that it is also a holiday about deep questions: security and insecurity, faith in god, this world, and the next.

Chag Sameach!