

The Real Meaning of Sukkot

Introduction

It is generally believed that the holiday of Sukkot recalls the time when God ordered the Israelites to dwell in flimsy booths in the desert, during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Torah says:

חֲקֹת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם--בְּסֻכֹּת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרַח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בְּסֻכֹּת:
לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בְּסֻכֹּת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם
אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

[This is] a law for all your generations, throughout the ages. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All citizens of Israel shall dwell in booths, so that your generations might know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. [Lev. 23:41-43]

Difficulties

-The stated reason seems strange: I am making them do this so that future generations will know that I made them do this. It almost sounds like circular reasoning.

-It is the *only* reference in the Torah to the Israelites actually living in booths. Other references just mention the holiday and the four species.

-Where would the people have found the materials to build the booths in the middle of the desert? All other relevant Torah quotes tell us they dwelt in tents.

-What is the purpose of the booths, if they already had tents?

-God did not say "Build booths". God only said "You shall dwell in booths" and "I caused the Israelites to dwell in booths". Implies God will provide the booths for them.

-Regardless, why would this be so significant that we have to remember it "forever"?

So, did God really order that we dwell in booths during the holiday?

What does the passage really mean?

The word "Sukkah" is frequently used in a figurative sense in Judaism.

-Job asks: Can one contemplate God's expanse of clouds and thundering from His sukkah? [Job 36:29]

-Isaiah says: God will create a cloud over Mount Zion which will serve as a sukkah for shade from heat by day and shelter for protection against drenching rain. [Is. 4:5-6]

-The psalmist says: God's thunderheads and dense clouds were His sukkah around Him. [Psalm 18:12]

-In the *Hashkivenu* evening prayer we ask God:

וּפְרֹשׁ עָלֵינוּ סִכַּת שְׁלוֹמֶךָ

Ufros alenu sukkat shlomecha

Spread over us Your sukkah of peace.

Guide us, save us, shield us, shelter us, guard us, and grant us life and peace, now and forever. Blessed are You, O God, who spreads the sukkah of peace over us, over Israel and over Jerusalem.

All talk about "God's sukkah". Perhaps this type of sukkah is what God had in mind in our verses?

Most commentators in Talmud, Midrashim and later exegeses say that the booths in which the Israelites dwelt were really the pillars of clouds God used to guide and shelter the people in the desert for 40 years -- the clouds of glory, or *ananei ha-kavod*.

Indeed, it says in Exodus:

The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night. [These pillars] did not depart from before the people. [Exodus 13:21-22]

In fact, these clouds first appeared at a place called Sukkot. The previous verse reads:

[The Israelites] set out from Sukkot, and encamped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness. [Exodus 13:20]

We are told earlier in Genesis why the place is called Sukkot:

And Jacob journeyed to Sukkot ... and made booths for his cattle.

Therefore the name of the place is called Sukkot. [Genesis 33:17]

-Some attribute this view to Rabbi Akiva [Sifra, Emor 17:11; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:35], others to Rabbi Eliezer [Sukkah 11b].

Remember the miracles

Why? Because God wanted all future generations of Jews to remember all the miracles He did for them during the exodus from Egypt *on all three pilgrimage festivals*:

- On Pessah – liberation from slavery in Egypt

- On Shavuot – giving of Torah

- On Sukkot – guidance, protection and sustenance during trek in desert

On the last one, the Torah is actually explicit:

Remember the entire long path through the desert along which the Lord your God made you travel these past forty years. [Deut. 8:2]

The sukkot we build and dwell in *today* merely symbolize those clouds, and reflects these three reassuring facts:

- God's presence;

- God's love;

- God's protection.

Rabbi Epstein (19th-century Russia), in his influential *Arukh haShulchan*, puts it this way:

On Yom Kippur, when we repent, God forgives our sins. The proof of this is that immediately after Yom Kippur He commands us to make a sukkah, so that we can dwell in the shade of the Holy Blessed One, as it says in Song of Songs: "I love to sit in His shade". [Song of Songs 2:3]

This is the commandment of the sukkah... This teaches that, despite our sins, God still loves us and watches over us to protect us from all sorrow and harm. [Arukh haShulchan, Orach Hayyim 695:5]

It is a very simple mitzvah: Go in the sukkah and you have fulfilled it.

What else does the sukkah symbolize?

2-Unity: The Jews are one people. The Torah tells us to wave the four species held tightly together. [Leviticus 23:40-41] The Midrash says that the *lulav* represents people who have scholarly knowledge but do not perform good deeds; the *hadass* those who are not scholarly but perform good deeds; the *aravah* those who are neither scholarly nor perform good deeds; and the *etrog*, those who are both scholarly and perform good deeds. [Leviticus Rabbah 30:12]

We want them *all* there because we refuse to give up on anyone. By holding all four species tightly together, everybody gets a chance to absorb what he lacks from everyone else around him. As the Talmud says:

Kol Yisrael 'aravim zeh bazzeh

All Jews are responsible for one another. [Shevuot 39a]

No one must be left behind. Everyone has value in the scheme of things, whether we perceive that value or not.

3-Hospitality:

- Zohar: Each of the seven days, “exalted guests” (*Ushpizin*) are welcomed in the sukkah:

When a person sits in his sukkah, the Divine Presence (the shechinah) spreads its wings over it from above and then Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David dwell together with him. [Zohar, Emor 103a]

Each of the seven corresponds to a sefirah, a pathway through which the world is spiritually nourished [Derech Hashem 3:2:5, Zohar Chadash, Toldot 26c; Zohar 2:256a]. Abraham represents lovingkindness; Isaac strength; Jacob truth; Moses Torah; Aaron empathy; Joseph holiness; and David the kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

-Guests are always welcome in Jewish celebrations, but more so on Sukkot, the festival of Jewish unity. Talmud:

All Jews are fit to sit in a single sukkah. [Sukkah 27b]

Doors and roof of sukkah are open by design.

4-Rejoicing: Sukkot is also called *Z'man Simchatenu* – the season of our rejoicing. We are actually commanded to rejoice:

וְשִׂמְחַת בְּחַגְּךָ ... וְהָיִיתָ אֶף שִׂמֵּחַ

You shall rejoice in your festival... You shall *only* rejoice. [Deut. 16:14-15]

How can you be commanded to rejoice if you don't feel like it? Our Sages gave us six ways:

- First, go through the motions required by the holiday.
- Second, think of something special you can get for yourself.
- Third, do something different.
- Fourth, surround yourself with family, friends and community.
- Fifth, consider it your duty to make sure *they* rejoice.
- Sixth, try to focus on only *one* source of rejoicing at a time.

5-Appreciation: Tough it out for a while, so you appreciate the shelter and amenities of home. Be conscious of your vulnerability.

Do not become overconfident because of affluence. Torah:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God ... When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, be careful lest your heart becomes proud and you forget the Lord your God, [who brought you out of the land of slavery, who led you, protected you and fed you], and say to yourself, "My own power and the strength of my own hand have won this wealth for me." [Deut. 8:11-17]

Remember history: Jews are always insecure. Today you may be in your comfortable house, but tomorrow you may find yourself in a hut in the desert.

Chag Sukkot sameach.