

Sukkot- The Celebration of Reconciliation

When it comes to most Jewish holidays, we remember an historic event. Passover marks the Exodus, Shavuot revelation at Mount Sinai, Chanukah the battles of the Hasmoneans. Sukkot is no different. According to Leviticus 23:42, we sit in the *sukkah* “in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I led them out of the land of Egypt.”¹

However, if this is true why does the festival of Sukkot fall on the 15th of Tishrei, in the middle of the fall? If the holiday celebrates an historical event, the holiday should have been celebrated in Nissan, the Jewish month in which Passover is celebrated. The Exodus occurred on the 15th of Nissan, and the Revelation at Mount Sinai, commemorated on Shavuot, occurred seven weeks later. If so, the holiday of *sukkot* should have been celebrated immediately after Passover, as that was the time when the desert journey began!

Now it is certainly true that the timing of the holiday has agricultural significance, as Sukkot is the last of the Jewish agricultural festivals occurring at the end of the harvest season, exactly six months after the beginning of the harvest season, i.e. Passover. The Jewish calendar has a symmetrical elegance about it, reflected in Passover’s and Sukkot’s respective dates. Still, Jewish tradition has associated these harvest festivals with events in Jewish memory. The journey of the Jew through the agricultural year is imprinted with the memory and narratives of the past. To put it in modern terms, the cycles of our lives become models for us to think about our collective stories. If so, the holiday’s timing should be an anchor for a certain event or memory. *What exactly is that event or memory?*

Furthermore, as we will see below, there is a debate among the rabbis as to what the *sukkot* mentioned above refer. (*Sifra* 10:2) While one opinion states that it refers to the literal structures we build today, another opinion understands *sukkot* metaphorically, as the Hebrew root means ‘to cover’. The rabbis therefore state that the *sukkot* allude to the ‘coverings in the desert’, which were the clouds of glory enveloping and protecting the Jews during their sojourn. Interestingly, the clouds first began covering the Jewish people immediately following the Exodus, in a place the Torah identifies as *Sukkot!* Whether the *sukkah* is literal or refers to the clouds of glory, either way the date of the 15th of Tishrei seems to bear no relationship to these events!

Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Spain, 1270- c. 1340), asks this very question in his Jewish legal work the *Arba’ah Turim*. In the beginning of his laws of Sukkot (O.H., Siman 725) he states that ultimately Sukkot *should* have been celebrated in the summer months following Passover. However, as that time of year is pleasant, people sit on porches anyway, and therefore the deeper message would have been lost. However, when the season becomes cold and rainy and people return to their homes, sitting in the *sukkah* is a statement of faith. In other words, the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* is strange in that there is no real act, but rather a non-act; the *mitzvah* is *to be* in the *sukkah*. This non-event would only be recognized as unique in certain situations and times of year.

¹ Another reason the rabbis opine that Sukkot refer to clouds is the fact that the Torah commands us to sit in a *sukkah* to remember the Jews ‘sitting in the *sukkot*’. Given this fact, one would expect to find a narrative to this effect in our Torah, but none exists! That there could be a debate about the very definition of *sukkot* is simply bizarre. Not only are these two images very different, but they are in fact antithetical to one another. One symbol- a rickety structure threatening to fall at any moments- represents the fragile and tenuous nature, indeed vulnerability, of our lives. The other, a sublime revelation of God’s protecting presence as they walked through the desert. What can be the connection between these two symbols? I leave this question for you to consider.

However, this explanation leaves one unsatisfied, as while it argues why *it is not* in the summer, it does not explain why *it is* celebrated on this specific date.²

The Gaon of Vilna (known as GR”A) asks the same question in his commentary of the Song of Songs, and formulates a brilliant answer. In his commentary he shows a direct relationship between Sukkot and Yom Kippur, only days earlier.³

In the Jewish calendar, there is a reason why Yom Kippur is the day of forgiveness, for it is the day God forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf, and on Yom Kippur Moses descended the mountain with a second set of tablets. Actually, according to the Torah, Moses went up on Mount Sinai *three times*, each time for forty days and with a different purpose. The first time is the one most remember. Moses received the Torah and the first set of tablets, the “Ten Commandments”. However, immediately upon descending the mountain his hopes were dashed, as the people worshipped the golden calf. Moses broke these tablets and God promised to destroy the Jewish people and make a new nation from the progeny of Moses. (In Jewish tradition this event is marked through the minor fast day, the 17th of Tammuz, forty days after Shavuot.) Moses then went up a second time for forty days and asked God for forgiveness. Initially God did forgive in the sense that he would not destroy Israel, but not in the sense that his Divine presence would actually dwell within the people. The clouds of glory, indicating the Divine presence, were nowhere to be found.⁴

This was not enough for Moses, and on the first of the month of Elul, he went up again to argue for a full pardon. He achieves this, for on Yom Kippur he brings down the second set of tablets. However, as of yet there still is no indwelling of the Divine. The intimate relationship is still absent.

According to the Gaon of Vilna, the Jews begin building the tabernacle again on the fifteenth of Tishrei, and the clouds of Glory once again rest upon Israel. Thus on this date the Jews begin building anew, a dwelling place for God as it were, God responds through dwelling again with the people. After alienation, there is forgiveness, and finally ultimate reconciliation, a sense that things can be as they were before.

Let us now return to the two explanations of the meaning of a sukkah. The first opinion argued that the *sukkah* is literal, a temporal structure. Consider the parallels between the tabernacle in the desert and building a *sukkah*. Both are impermanent structure where the Divine presence dwells! In fact, in Jewish liturgy, the Temple is often referred to as a “sukkah of peace”, and in the grace after meals, a request is included to reestablish the ‘fallen Sukkah of David’, and allusion to the Temple in Jerusalem.⁵ Thus our act of building a *sukkah* would reenact the building of the Tabernacle following Yom Kippur. According to the second opinion, the parallel is explicit. The *sukkah* refers to the clouds of glory, but not the ones that descended the first time, but the second time. *Thus, in essence sukkot marks the event of the appearance of the clouds of glory following the sin of the golden calf and the subsequent forgiveness of the Jewish people.*

² Maimonides, Guide III:43 argues the exact opposite. Maimonides argues the time is ideal, for in the land of Israel it is very pleasant to sit in the sukkah, unlike the hot summer. I thank Ms. Dena Knoll for pointing out this source. (Yeshiva University, Sukkot-to-Go, Tishrei, 5770)

³ His exegetical development and proof can be found in his commentary on the Song of Songs. 1:4.

⁴ See the closing verses of Exodus, where the connection between the clouds of glory and the Divine presence is absolutely clear.

⁵ The number of parallels is extensive and would require an essay on its own. However, the fabricated nature of both the tabernacle and the *sukkah*, the fact that they are constructed and then deconstructed, point to this correspondence.

While interesting, why is this event so important to mark it on the calendar, and what can it teach us about life? If one considers the moment of the golden calf, one will understand. The moment of the giving of the Torah was a moment of exhilaration for the Jewish people, as they were entering into a special relationship with God. In fact, the moment was so seminal that the rabbis and later Jewish tradition compared it to a wedding day. So much anticipation, excitement, and love! This is a passionate love, but still an immature love, for it has not been tested.

However, disillusionment is sudden and jarring. The people worship the golden calf. Idolatry is often seen in the Torah and the books of the prophets as ‘whoring’ after others. Promises are broken, expectations unfulfilled, and deep alienation sets in. Each begins to see the others through colored glasses. This was not the deal. This was not supposed to happen. Both turn away in anger and disgust.

Yes, Moses can ask for forgiveness, and it can be granted. However, if one considers one’s relationships, one can often let go of anger and resentment. However, can one trust again, can one look at the other as if nothing has happened? One would do well to keep a certain distance. If expectations were not met the first time, they might not be once again. God will not destroy the people, but neither will God dwell within Israel. Forgiveness does not mean true reconciliation. In our broken relationships, when trust and confidence is compromised, can we ultimately see past it, even if the person has promised to change? Indeed, to do so may even be naïve.

However, ultimately Moses understood that this state of affairs could not be the basis for a renewed relationship between God and Israel. Israel and God needed to be fully invested with one another, and Moses appealed to God. God assured Moses that indeed, God would reinvest in the broken relationship. Moses comes down with the new tablets, the ‘second wedding’ as it were, and the people begin to build the house once again. They immediately invest in building the Tabernacle, and ‘home’ for the Divine presence. They create the possibility for things to be the way they were. In turn, God responds to the gesture. One act of love begets another and the cycle begins anew.

Throughout the High Holidays, we invoke the thirteen attributes of God’s mercy, calling out the words “Adonai, Adonai, *el rachu, v’chanun* (Lord, O’Lord, merciful and gracious)”. The rabbis note the repetition of the words *Adonai*, and state *Adonai lifnei ha-chet, Adonai acharei ha-chet*, God is present before sin, and after sin. Even if we have do not deserve to be taken back, God loves us and offers us the opportunity to make things the way they were, before the crisis. We can always come home, and we will be received like nothing has happened. As we read daily during this period, “My father and mother have forsaken me, but God will gather me in” (Psalms 27:10). Even if our own parents send us a way, God will wait for us to return and gather us in again.

In our relationships, we seek wholeness and reconciliation- with our partners, our friends, our families, and our colleagues. We ultimately do not want forgiveness. That’s not enough. We want to rebuild; we want things to be the way they were. This is what the Jewish people and God begin to do on *Sukkot*. They have been forgiven fully, but now together they will work to seek the wholeness each one wants and needs. Can we do this with one another?

In the end, *Sukkot* is called the “Time of our Happiness”, *zeman simchateinu*. Why? *Sukkot* holds out the possibility that for each of us, reconciliation in some way is possible. After the ultimate betrayal of the Golden Calf, God rebuilds a brighter future, which will be built upon the scars of the past, but not be defined by them. It inspires us to seek that same level of wholeness and integration in all aspects of our lives.

