

PARSHAS EMOR - A SUKKAH BUILT FOR TWO

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

A Sukkah Built For Two¹

In sukkos you shall dwell for seven days. Every citizen in Israel shall dwell in sukkos.

These two phrases, both housed in the same pasuk, seem to find different ways of expressing the same idea: everyone in Klal Yisrael is instructed to move from their usual dwellings into a sukkah. We understand, of course, the impossibility of such repetition in a Divinely authored Torah. We shall see that this seeming stylistic flourish really makes us aware of two themes of Sukkos, operating side by side.

Without question, the plain sense of the mitzvah of sukkah is that our lives are flimsy and impermanent. A landowner labors for months to coax a season's bounty out of his land. He can easily feel himself to be both bound to the land, as well as its master. This is especially true at harvest time, as he gathers in all that he produced through his labor. Precisely at this time, the Torah moves him to a temporary dwelling, a sukkah, reminding him that no earthly residence is permanent. We are all temporary residents, no matter how secure our material possessions suggest to the contrary. And we are therefore masters of nothing.

Based on this motif, we could easily conclude that Sukkos has meaning only for landowners who need a yearly dose of sobering reality. Sukkos' lesson simply does not apply to those who cannot even imagine security and stable livelihood. The impoverished itinerant does not need to be reminded about the flimsiness of the human condition! For this reason, the Torah underscores, "every citizen in Israel," i.e. without exception, needs to spend seven days in a sukkah.

The next pasuk explains why Sukkos is relevant to the pauper, even though its major theme is not relevant to his universe. "So that your generations will know that I placed the Bnei Yisrael in sukkos when I took them from the land of Egypt." The landless, struggling vagabond might despair of ever knowing the happiness that he sees others enjoy. The Torah addresses the second great theme of Sukkos to him. "Know that I placed the Bnei Yisrael in sukkos on their way out of Egypt. They, too, seemed to have little to celebrate. They had no time to prepare for their journey, and had no place they could call their own. Yet, their joy knew no limits. HKBH gifted them unimagined brachah, despite their rootlessness. He can do the same for you through His careful providence! Do not think

that happiness will never be your lot."

This two-tiered explanation of sukkah may make sense of most of our pasuk, but not all of it. Even though the drashah of "every citizen" extends the mitzvah to all Jews, regardless of social and material standing, it cannot be denied that the word "citizen" itself pushes us towards a narrower view of the mitzvah. It implies a Jewish mainstream, in contradistinction to those who stand or stood at its periphery. Somehow, however, both implications are true. There is a sukkah that includes everyone, but there is also another that is entered only by the established citizen.

Let's look a bit further. The mitzvos of the four minim and sukkah are juxtaposed in our parshah. We would have thought that sukkah ought to come first. It is, after all, the eponymous mitzvah of the holiday. Its theme must be regarded as central; the lulav and company must somehow deliver a secondary message. Placing the four minim first suggests that such a conclusion would be erroneous. In fact, their lessons coincide. Lulav and sukkah form one thematic unit. That theme, however, is quite different from the one we have considered till this point.

We have all heard of the midrash^[2] that sees the carrying of the four species as a kind of non-verbal declaration by soldiers returning from the front. The lulav acts in the manner of the victory laurels of soldiers in ancient times. The victory lies in the successful campaign of Klal Yisrael as a whole to acquit itself against the charges brought by the heavenly guardian angels of the other nations of the world, who try to find fatal flaws in the conduct of the Jewish people.

This same theme ties in to sukkah. An army in olden times pitched command tents near the front lines on the way to battle. If they prevailed, they returned with those same tents, now turned into centers of celebration. Our sukkos stand in place of those victory tents. The lulav and sukkah, therefore, are united - at least according to his theme.

Two strong themes thus emerge from our study of sukkos. The first, plain-meaning theme, has universal application. It is the theme of leaving our usual dwellings and entering a conspicuously temporary one. This brings home valuable lessons to everyone - whether the impermanence of temporal life that the rich need to understand, or Hashem's ability to shower people with blessing even when their lives are narrow and confined.

The second theme is that of Hashem's providential protection, whether from celestial enemies in the Heavenly courts, or enemies in the flesh.

It might very well be that the two opinions in the gemara^[3] about the nature of the Biblical sukkos are reflections of these two themes. Both are true. In the wilderness, the Bnei Yisrael lived in simple dwellings for forty years. Even then, however, a smaller vanguard of "officers" in Hashem's army enjoyed places in the martial victory tents. Those tents were areas protected by the Clouds of Glory. These areas were not co-extensive with the boundaries of the camp. They were places in which people gathered to win the victories over all enemies, by davening and learning Torah.

All of this is alluded to in a verse in Tehilim[4]. "His sukkah was in Shalem, and His residence in Tziyon." According to Chazal, this pasuk speaks of Chizkiyah's miraculous victory against Sancherev as he campaigned against Yerushalayim. Why is Hashem's place described here as a sukkah, and as me'onah? Why not "house," as in so many other places? Why is Yerushalayim called by its ancient name of Shalem, as it was in the times of Avraham?

We tend to think of kings as occupying a throne in a national palace. This is only part of the picture. One of the chief functions of a king is to lead his troops in battle. He did not do so from his distant palace, but accompanied his troops to the battle. For the duration of a campaign, the king occupied a royal tent, as he lived among his people.

This holds true of Hashem, kevayachol, as well. When the Bnei Yisrael live in peace and tranquility, the Shechinah dwells in Yerushalayim. This is the place from which, as it were, He directs His providence and sustains all His loyal subjects.

At other times, peace and tranquility are a memory of ancient times and a prayer for the future. When the Jewish people live in exile among the nations, Hashem as it were leaves His palace in Yerushalayim and lives among his people in a much simpler command tent. The locus of hashgachah moves from the bayis, the structure of avodah in Yerushalayim, to the simple four amos of halachah, symbolized by the sukkah/tent.

Even though it was in fact Yerushalayim that Sancheriv threatened, the impact of his campaign against the city was so great that its residents lived in straits equivalent to the experience of Jews in exile. It is therefore called "Shalem," harking back to the days of Avraham when the city was not yet the spiritual nerve-center of the Jewish people. Then, as now, the focal point of the city was the simple room that holds those who fight the wars by excellence in Torah study. Hashem's me'onah/ residence is called "Tziyon," in deference to the she'arim "metzuyonim"/ the gates that excel in halachah.

While one theme of Sukkos speaks of impermanence, the other speaks of the dwelling place we can share with the Shechinah, in all places and at all times.

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Vaykira 23:42
 2. Vayikra Rabbah 30:2
 3. Sukkah 11B
 4. Tehilim 76:3
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