

5781 - Sukkot

*Faith as a Journey*¹ (Emor [5773])

In its account of the festivals of the Jewish year, this week's *parsha* contains the following statement:

You shall dwell in thatched huts for seven days. Everyone included in Israel must live in such thatched huts. This is so that future generations will know that I caused the Israelites to live in *sukkot* when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d (Lev 23:42-43).

What precisely this means was the subject of disagreement between two great teachers of the Mishnaic era, Rabbi Eliezer² and Rabbi Akiva.³ According to the Talmud Bavli (Sukkah 11a), Rabbi Eliezer holds that the reference is to the clouds of glory that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the verse is to be understood literally (*sukkot mammash*). It means "huts"—no more, no less.

A similar difference of opinion exists between the great medieval Jewish commentators. Rashi⁴ and Ramban⁵ favour the "clouds of glory" interpretation. Ramban cites as proof the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the end of days:

Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter (*sukkah*) and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain. (Isa 4: 5-6)

Here the word *sukkah* clearly refers not to a natural but to a miraculous protection.

1 <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-emor-faith-as-a-journey/>

2 Eliezer ben Hurcanus or Hyrcanus was one of the most prominent Sages of the 1st and 2nd centuries in Judea, disciple of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and colleague of Gamaliel II, and of Joshua ben Hananiah. He is the sixth most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

3 Akiva ben Yosef (50–135) also known as Rabbi Akiva, was a leading Jewish scholar and sage, a tanna, of the latter part of the first century and the beginning of the second century. Rabbi Akiva was a leading contributor to the Mishnah and to Midrash halakha.

4 Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), today generally known by the acronym Rashi, was a medieval French rabbi and author of a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud and commentary on the Tanakh.

5 Moses ben Maimon (1138–1204), commonly known as Maimonides and also referred to by the acronym Rambam, was a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher who became one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages. In his time, he was also a preeminent astronomer and physician.

Ibn Ezra⁶ and Rashbam,⁷ however, favour the literal interpretation. Rashbam explains as follows: **the festival of Sukkot, when the harvest was complete and the people were surrounded by the blessings of the land, was the time to remind them of how they came to be there.** The Israelites would relive the wilderness years during which they had no permanent home. They would then feel a sense of gratitude to G-d for bringing them to the land. Rashbam's prooftext is Moses' speech in Devarim 8:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your G-d for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your G-d ... Otherwise, 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, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery ... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your G-d, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, confirming his covenant which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (8: 10-18)

According to Rashbam, Sukkot (like Pesach) is a reminder of the humble origins of the Jewish people, a powerful antidote to the risks of affluence. That is one of the overarching themes of Moses' speeches in the book of Devarim and a mark of his greatness as a leader. The real challenge to the Jewish people, he warned, was not the dangers they faced in the wilderness, but the opposite, the sense of wellbeing and security they would have once they settled the land. The irony—and it has happened many times in the history of nations—is that people remember G-d in times of distress but forget him in times of plenty. That is when cultures become decadent and begin to decline.

1. Matthew 19:16-22

²¹Yeshua answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, **because he had great wealth.**

a. Matthew 13:22—Parable of the Sower

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and **the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.**

6 Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) was one of the most distinguished Jewish biblical commentators and philosophers of the Middle Ages.

7 Samuel ben Meir (1085–1158), after his death known as "Rashbam," a Hebrew acronym for Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir, was a leading French Tosafist and grandson of Shlomo Yitzhaki, "Rashi."

b. Matthew 6:24 (cf., Luke 16:13)

“**No one can serve two masters.** Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and Money.

c. Acts 5:1-5

⁴Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, **wasn't the money at your disposal?** What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.” ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died ...

d. Hebrews 13:5

Keep your lives **free from the love of money** and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

A question, however, remains. According to the view that *sukkot* is to be understood literally, what miracle does the festival of Sukkot represent? Pesach celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people experienced an unmediated revelation of G-d. **On the “clouds of glory” interpretation, Sukkot fits this scheme. It recalls the miracles in the wilderness, the forty years during which they ate *mannah* from heaven, drank water from a rock, and were led by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night** (In 1776, Thomas Jefferson chose this image as his design for the Great Seal of the United States). But on the view that the *sukkah* is not a symbol but a fact—a hut, a booth, nothing more—what miracle does it represent? There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. Where then is the miracle?

A surprising and lovely answer is given by the prophet Jeremiah:

Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how, as a bride, you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown (Jer .2:2).

Throughout Tenakh, most of the references to the wilderness years focus on the graciousness of G-d and the ingratitude of the people: their quarrels and complaints, their constant inconstancy. Jeremiah does the opposite. To be sure, there were bad things about those years, but against them stands the simple fact that the Israelites had the faith and courage to embark on a journey through an unknown land, fraught with danger, and sustained only by their trust in G-d. They were like Sarah who accompanied Abraham on his journey, leaving “his land, birthplace and father’s house” behind. They were like Tziporah who went with Moses on his risk-laden mission to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. **There is a faith that is like**

love; there is a love that calls for faith. That is what the Israelites showed in leaving a land where they had lived for 210 years and travelling out into the desert, “a land not sown”, not knowing what would befall them on the way, but trusting in G-d to bring them to their destination.

Perhaps it took Rabbi Akiva, the great lover of Israel, to see that **what was truly remarkable about the wilderness years was not that the Israelites were surrounded by the clouds of glory but that they were an entire nation without a home or houses; they were like nomads without a place of refuge.** Exposed to the elements, at risk from any surprise attack, they none the less continued on their journey in the faith that G-d would not desert them.

To a remarkable degree Sukkot came to symbolise not just the forty years in the wilderness but also two thousand years of exile. Following the destruction of the second Temple, Jews were scattered throughout the world. Almost nowhere did they have rights. Nowhere could they consider themselves at home. Wherever they were, they were there on sufferance, dependent on a ruler’s whim. At any moment without forewarning they could be expelled, as they were from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, Cologne, 1424, Bavaria 1442, Perugia, Vicenza, Parma and Milan in the 1480s, and most famously from Spain in 1492. **These expulsions gave rise to the Christian myth of “the wandering Jew”—conveniently ignoring the fact that it was Christians who imposed this fate on them.** Yet even they were often awestruck at the fact that despite everything Jews did not give up their faith when (in Judah Halevi’s⁸ phrase) “with a word lightly spoken” they could have converted to the dominant faith and put an end to their sufferings.

2. Romans 2:1-6

¹You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things ... ³So when you, **a mere human being, pass judgment** on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? ⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that **God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?** ⁵But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath ...”

a. Psalm 86:5

⁵You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.

⁸ Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141) was a Spanish Jewish physician, poet and philosopher. He ... died shortly after arriving in the Holy Land in 1141, at that point the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.

b. Psalm 86:15

¹⁵But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

c. Nahum 1:7

⁷The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him ...

Sukkot is the festival of a people for whom, for twenty centuries, every house was a mere temporary dwelling, every stop no more than a pause in a long journey. **I find it deeply moving that Jewish tradition called this time *zeman simchatenu*, “the season of our joy.”** That, surely, is the greatness of the Jewish spirit that, with no protection other than their faith in G-d, Jews were able to celebrate in the midst of suffering and affirm life in the full knowledge of its risk and uncertainty. That is the faith of a remarkable nation.

R. Levi Yitzchak⁹ of Berditchev once explained why the festival of Nissan has two names, *Pesach* and *Chag haMatzot*. The name *Pesach* represents the greatness of G-d who “passed over” the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. The name *Chag haMatzot* represents the greatness of the Israelites who were willing to follow G-d into the wilderness without provisions. In the Torah, G-d calls the festival *Chag haMatzot* in praise of Israel. The Jewish people, however, called it *Pesach* to sing the praise of G-d. That, it seems, is the argument between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva about Sukkot. According to R. Eliezer, it represents G-d’s miracle, the clouds of glory. According to R. Akiva, however, it represents the miracle of Israel—their willingness to continue the long journey to freedom, vulnerable and at great risk, led only by the call of G-d.

Why then, according to Rabbi Akiva, is Sukkot celebrated at harvest time? The answer is in the very next verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah. After speaking of “the devotion of your youth, how, as a bride, you loved me,” the prophet adds:

Israel is holy to G-d, The **first fruit** of His harvest (Jer 2:3).

Just as, during Tishri, the Israelites celebrated their harvest, so G-d celebrates His—a people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to heaven’s call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

3. Romans 11:13-24

¹³I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle *among* the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to jealousy and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their

rejection brought reconciliation to the world, **what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** ¹⁶**If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.**

¹⁷If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, **have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root**, ¹⁸do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: **You do not support the root, but the root supports you.** ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²²Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, **provided that you continue in his kindness.** Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for **God is able to graft them in again.** ²⁴After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, **be grafted into their own olive tree!**

4. 1Corinthians 15:20-23

²³But each in turn: Messiah, **the firstfruits**; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

⁹ Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev (1740-1810), also known as the holy Berdichever, and the Kedushas Levi, was a Hasidic master and Jewish leader.