Covenantal Joy
What Sukkot Can Teach Us

Rabbi Shai Held – held@hadar.org

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The Torah insistently connects the festival of Sukkot with the obligation to rejoice, and later Jewish tradition calls Sukkot *z'man simhateinu*, the time of our joy. Why is Sukkot of all holidays singled out as the time of happiness and delight? Understanding the joy associated with Sukkot helps us gain crucial insight into the nature and dynamics of God's covenant with the Jewish people.[1]

Leviticus' description of Sukkot offers both an agricultural and a historical explanation for the holiday. First, it speaks of agriculture: "Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the Lord to last seven days" (23:39). Then, a few verses later, the Torah ties the commandment to spend a week living in booths (*sukkot*) to a historical experience: The Israelites are to dwell in booths "in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God" (23:43). The Torah entwines agricultural blessings and God's acts in history in its presentation of Sukkot, reminding us that God is present in both nature and history.[2]

[1] That is why it is useful to explore the meaning of Sukkot so soon after Pesah has passed: Having just re-enacted the Exodus from Egypt, we now learn about the nature of the covenantal journey that follows.
[2] Cf. Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *Leviticus: Divine Presence and Community* (1997), p. 131.

When Leviticus 23 offers its portrait of the holiday cycle, it attaches a special mandate to Sukkot: "You shall rejoice (*usmahtem*) before the Lord your God seven days" (Leviticus 23:40). Of all the sacred days of the year, Sukkot alone is explicitly linked to joy. Deuteronomy's description of the holidays is different in this regard: Both Sukkot and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) are connected to joy (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14-15). Yet even Deuteronomy accentuates the joy of Sukkot. The call to be joyous is mentioned twice, and the presentation of the holiday ends with the vigorous charge, "You shall have nothing but joy" (*vehayita akh samei'ah*) (16:15).

So Sukkot comes to be known in Jewish liturgy (in the *Amidah* and in *Kiddush*) simply as the time of our joy. But what is the meaning of the deep joy associated with Sukkot?

In terms of the holiday's agricultural dimension, the link is obvious: During this fall festival the harvest is being gathered, and Israel is thankful for its bounty. As a *midrash* notes, the contrast with Pesah, a spring festival, is striking: "The expression of rejoicing occurs three times in connection with Sukkot… but no such expression occurs even once with regard to Pesah. Why? Because the fate of one's crops is still in balance on Pesah, and one does not know whether there will be a yield or not" (Yalkut Shimoni, 654). The experience of Sukkot must have been exhilarating: A people who had been slaves in Egypt were redeemed by their God and brought to the land they had been promised, and now the land was bringing forth blessing in abundance. And so they "rejoiced before their Lord" in gratitude for the fullness of what they had received.

But what about the historical dimension? What historical event is the source of Sukkot joy? As we've already seen, Sukkot recalls a time of intense divine-human intimacy, a moment when God shielded the Israelites under God's protective presence. Kabbalistic sources offer a beautiful image of this communion between God and Israel. The minimum requirement of Jewish law is that a Sukkah have two complete walls and one partial one, even as small as a

handbreadth (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 6b). The shape formed by these obligatory walls is like the arm, the forearm, and the hand, constituting a divine embrace. In entering the Sukkah, then, we are held in God's arms.[3] In a similar vein, the book of Exodus refers to Sukkot as "The Feast of Ingathering (*hag ha'asif*), when you gather in the results of your work from the field" (Exodus 23:16). The Hasidic Master R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905) comments: "This is an important time to remember that we and everything we have belong to God... God, too, gathers us into God's home, which is the *sukkah*" (Sefas Emes, Sukkot, 1875).

Covenant is not just about obedience; it is also about intimacy, tenderness, and love. Sukkot embodies that covenantal reality. All of this reaches its climax on Shemini Atzeret, which follows on the heels of Sukkot. On that day, we put away the four species associated with Sukkot. Rituals are kept to a minimum in order to remind us what is really at stake on Sukkot: Relational closeness to God. Rashi (1040-1105) cites a *midrash* that evokes God's gentle affection for Israel: "It is like a king who invited his children to a banquet for a number of days. When they came for parting, he said, 'Please, my children, stay with me for one more day. Your departure is difficult for me'" (Rashi to Leviticus 23:36).

Let's probe even deeper. Pesah recalls and reenacts the Exodus from Egypt. Shavuot, in the Rabbinic imagination, recalls and reenacts the revelation at Mount Sinai. Each of these two spring festivals marks one of Judaism's foundational events. Which orienting moment does Sukkot recall? The striking answer is that Sukkot harkens back to… no particular event at all. Instead, it recalls and reenacts the long and difficult journey through the desert in the wake of the Exodus. As R. Yitz Greenberg nicely puts it, "On Passover, Jews restage the great *event* of liberation. Sukkot celebrates the *way* of liberation—the march across a barren desert to freedom and the Promised Land."[4]

[3] See, for example, R. Hayyim Vital (1543-1620), *Sha'ar HaKavvanot*, Sha'ar Hag HaSukkot, chapter 4; and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), *Likkutei Torah*, Devarim, p. 79b.
[4] Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (1988), p. 96.

There is something profoundly surprising here: The festivals focused on the two defining events in Jewish history and theology—Exodus and Sinai—are not the ones Judaism most powerfully connects with joy. The most joyous days of the year do not commemorate earth-shattering, world-transforming events, but rather the arduous and protracted journey from Exodus to destination. To be sure, in the biblical account, God is radically present with Israel in the desert—and memories of God's providential care lie at the heart of the holiday. And yet Judaism does not primarily connect joy to the great moments when God interrupts history and turns things upside down, but rather to something far more sober: to the attempt to live with God in the day-to-day march through the desert, through history, and through life. Greenberg writes: "It is relatively easy to rise to one peak moment of… courageous commitment. It is more taxing and more heroic to wrestle with everyday obstacles without highs or diversions. True maturity means learning to appreciate the finite rewards of every day along the way."[5] Some traditions associate Sukkot with ecstatic joy (cf. Mishnah Sukkah 5:1), but at least as crucial is a calmer covenantal joy: The delight of living with God, of obeying God's will, and of trying to build God's world in the midst of a stubborn, often recalcitrant reality.

This is the joy of the quotidian and the pedestrian—the utterly non-ecstatic; it is the joy of commitment and responsibility rather than of uplift and exhilaration. Covenant is not just about intimacy; it is also, and fundamentally, about faithfulness. Note the wonderful paradox here: Sukkot is the holiday that celebrates the non-holiday (the *yontef* that delights in *hol*), the sacred time that celebrates regular time, the festival that celebrates not the high points but the morning after—and the morning after that as well. Like a good marriage, the covenant between God and Israel requires moments of excitement and jubilation. But it ultimately depends on the joy of simply waking up on a less-than-eventful morning and going about the business of life.

[5] Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 97.

There is more. Sukkot takes place mere days after Yom Kippur, and that too, I think, adds to the intense joy of the holiday. In the course of moving through the world, we all too often fall short of both God's expectations and our own aspirations. We lose sight of God and we cause pain and disappointment to others. Imagine living in a world where forgiveness—from God and from others—was not available; imagine living in a universe of "one strike and you're out." Friendship would be impossible, parenting would be inconceivable, and marriage would last days at most; an enduring covenant with God would be unimaginable. *Teshuvah* (repentance), *mehilah* (forgiveness), and *kapparah* (atonement) are what make life and relationships possible. This is what the Talmud means when it suggests that *teshuvah* was created even before the world itself (Pesahim 54a). Without human repentance and divine forgiveness, life would be little more than a series of irredeemably broken relationships. *With* human repentance and divine forgiveness, the almost miraculous possibility of healing and renewal emerges. Part of what we experience on Sukkot is the joy of living in a world where forgiveness is possible. Covenant depends on—and celebrates—the possibility of restoring relationships.

Extreme as it may sound, on Yom Kippur Jews enact their own death. The *kittel*, or white garment, worn by many Jews on Yom Kippur is in fact a burial shroud; and fasting itself is meant to mimic death. Having just endured a dress rehearsal for death, we emerge ready to more fully embrace life. Greenberg writes, "Only those who know the fragility of life can truly appreciate the full preciousness of every moment." Sukkot invites us to embrace the kind of joy that is deepened by a clear-eyed awareness of our own fragility and mortality. "The release from Yom Kippur leads to the extraordinary outburst of life that is Sukkot."[6] Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), about whom, not coincidentally, we read during Sukkot, instructs his readers: "Even if a person lives many years, let him take pleasure in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be" (Ecclesiastes 11:8). In other words, we will be dead for a very long time, so best to find joy now in the time we are allotted.[7] "Whatever is in

[6] Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 112.
[7] In fact, I am not sure that what Kohelet advocates is joy so much as pleasure. But an exploration of this question is obviously far beyond the scope of this essay.

your power to do," he adds, "do to the best of your abilities, for there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, and no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going" (9:10). Really live now, the festival of Sukkot and the book of Ecclesiastes advise us. Yom Kippur has reminded you that your time is limited, so now, on Sukkot, live accordingly, with all the joy of embracing a gift you will not possess forever.

Sukkot is a time of joy; for Judaism, as we've seen, it is really *the* time of joy. Sukkot joy is covenantal joy—the joy of closeness with God; of faithfulness to God and Torah in the midst of the mundane; of gratitude for living in a world where forgiveness and renewal are possible; and of commitment to savoring life while we still have it.