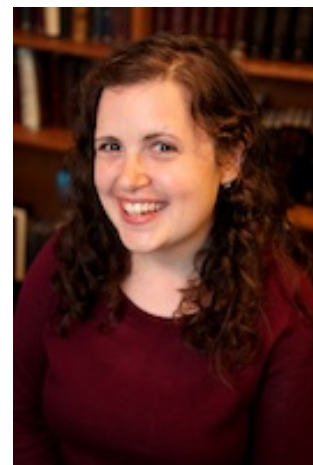




## The Holiday of Our Joy and the Aesthetic Dimensions of the Torah

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In my experience, Sukkot truly earns its status as *Hag Simhateinu*, the holiday of our joy. This is not only because Sukkot is my favorite holiday, but also due to the way that the *mitzvot* associated with it are designed to be attractive, pleasant, and comfortable. For example, there are a number of people who are categorically exempt from living in the *sukkah* over the festival, such as those who are ill or those who are en route and can't be expected to find



or construct a *sukkah* as they travel. However, the category that I find to be most interesting in this context is the category of the *mitzta'er*, the person who finds sitting in the *sukkah* extremely uncomfortable or bothersome. If it's too hot or too cold in the *sukkah*, if it's buggy or smelly we are no longer obligated to remain in the *sukkah*. Moving into the *sukkah* is supposed to be a manifestation of our joy, not of our distress.

Sukkot is full of sensory pleasures—the deliciousness of the meals we eat, the fine quality of the furnishings that we bring into the *sukkah*, the freshness of the *Arba Minim*—how beautiful they look and how wonderful they smell. Though we would never invalidate a piece of *matzah* on the basis of its being stale or unattractive or partially eaten, these components are all evaluated when we are trying to achieve the minimum standard of *hiddur*, beauty associated with all of the *Arba Minim*, and especially the *Pri Etz Hadar*, the *etrog*.



Included in the conversation about the *lulav* and *etrog* is not only how they look, but also how they feel. On (Babylonian Talmud) Massekhet Sukkah 32a Ravina engages his colleagues in a rather technical conversation about different palm trees which should be theoretically eligible for “*lulav*” status. One of the candidates that Ravina suggests is the *kufra*, a prickly species of palm or prickly stage of the tree’s growth. Abaye rejects the *kufra* as a satisfactory option by quoting a verse in Mishlei/Proverbs (3:17), דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום, “its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace”. As Rashi explains that since the *kufra* is sharp and painful to hold it cannot be used, since the Torah, whose ways are pleasant, would not ask a person to do something that would be painful or harmful.

The true cleverness of Abaye’s proof-text becomes even more clear when you realize that the verse following this in Mishlei is עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותמכיה מאשר “it is a *tree* of life to all who hold on to it and those who support it are happy” (note that the verses are in reverse order and verse 18 precedes verse 17 in our Siddur). Abaye is capitalizing on the association of the Torah with trees to make his own botanical argument!

I’d like to suggest that even more wisdom is embedded in this choice of verses. Abaye is arguing that the tree of the *lulav* which we have to take in our hands on Sukkot is of the same nature as the Torah, which is a tree of life that one holds on to. His is not a narrow claim about the *lulav*, but a broader claim about the Torah. Perhaps Abaye’s reading suggests that the reason why we experience the Torah as a tree of life is because its ways are pleasant. Torah values and Torah laws are meant to engage not only our abstract moral principles, but also our lived sensory experience. We’re so privileged to have a beautiful Torah and it’s our



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obligation to keep in mind that the beauty of the Torah is an essential, not an incidental, component of it.

Sukkot is a manifestation of the kind of joy and pleasure that should always permeate our relationship with Torah. Torah should be something that we want to experience fully, that we want to hold. The *mitzvot* associated with Sukkot should provide us with a template of how to maximize our positive associations with the Torah, and to acknowledge the mutually supportive relationship between aesthetic and moral beauty.

Wishing you a Sukkot of sweetness and joy.

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