



Simḥat Beit HaShoeva

Sukkot Rituals that Spillover

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T*efillat HaGeshem*, the prayer for rain, is recited on Shemini Atzeret, literally the eighth day of gathering, that caps off Sukkot.¹ After so many long days in synagogue (and missed work days), one might wonder, why couldn't we just pray for rain during Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur? What change occurs over the course of Sukkot to ready us to ask for rain only on Shemini Atezert?

The rituals of Sukkot enable a significant shift in our relationship

with God. We cannot live all year long with the intensity of the High Holiday consciousness, a constant awareness of our vulnerability, God's judgment, or even God's direct mercy. The transition back to everyday life, into the rainy season, invites us to seek hints of God within nature and to forge a softer, more immanent relationship.

During Sukkot, we move our focus from the words on the pages of the *siddur* and the innermost chambers of our souls to the outdoors:

¹ In the diaspora there is a 9th day due to the historic addition of an extra day to ensure no calendrical mistake. In Israel, the 8th day is both Shemini Atzeret and Simḥat Torah, while in the diaspora the 8th day is the day we ask for rain and Simḥat Torah is celebrated on the 9th. Simḥat Torah is a Geonic tradition.

We collect the *arba'a minim*, the four species – *etrog*, *lulav*, *arava*, and *hadass* (citron, palm, willow, and myrtle); we parade around with this greenery in the synagogue during *hosha'anot* and shake them for seven days; so too, we spill out of our homes, building our *sukkot* under the stars, using natural branches to create shelter and decoration. After the insular and introspective holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot is light and celebratory. But transition takes time. The ability to ask for rain on Shemini Atzeret is the fruit of a process we began on Rosh Hashanah.

As we will see, the rabbinic descriptions of the special festivities of this week—especially the celebration of the water drawing and water libation offered in the Temple during Sukkot—highlight the development of an intimate, immanent, sometimes ecstatic, relationship with God, which might not have been possible at the beginning of the High Holiday season.

Building Up to the Request for Rain

Many rituals of Sukkot are related to rain: *Lulav*, *hosha'anot*, *sukkah* and the water libation, *nisukh ha-mayim*, all engage with plants and water, symbolizing our

thanksgiving for the previous year's harvest and the request for rain during the coming planting season. This was an intense period of celebration in the Temple, as described by Mishnah Sukkah, chapter 4: *nisukh ha-mayim* was accompanied by a wild musical celebration called *Simhat Beit HaShoeva*. Every night, people would gather in the Temple courtyard to dance and sing; at dawn the celebrants would accompany the priest to the Shiloah spring, to draw water for the daily water libation. Amidst shofar blowing and dancing they would return to the Temple for the libation itself.

These rituals and the accompanying celebration, as we will see, are the key to understanding the psychological process that unfolds during Sukkot. The timing of the rituals themselves suggest a progression or a period of preparation. The *hosha'anot* reach a fevered pitch on the seventh day of Sukkot, also known as Hosha'anah Rabbah, when the priests would circle the altar (and we the *bima* and *sefer Torah* in our synagogue) seven times. When Shemini Atzeret arrives, all of the rituals of preparation cease, except for the final water libation.

What change do these rituals engender in our relationship with

God over the course of Sukkot? Why are we finally ready to ask for rain on Shemini Atzeret?

According to Mishnah Ta'anit 1:1, we say *Tefillat HaGeshem* on the last day of the holiday simply because it is closest to the actual rainy season; moreover, the Mishnah adds, rainfall before its time is a *סימן קללה*, a sign of a curse. Mishnah Sukkah 2:9 explains that early rain is a bad omen because it would interfere with our ability to sit in the *sukkah*.

משנה סוכה ב:ט

מִשְׁלֹו מִשְׁלֹו, לְמָה הַדֶּבֶר דּוֹמֶה,
לְעֶבֶד שֶׁבָּא לְמִזּוֹג כּוֹס לְרַבּוֹ,
וְשָׁפַךְ לוֹ קִיתוֹן עַל פָּנָיו:

Mishnah Sukkah 2:9

They made a parable. To what can this be compared? To a servant who comes to fill the cup for his master, and he poured a pitcher over his face.

In this analogy, we are likened to a servant and our attempts to appease our master by sitting in the *sukkah* are rebuffed with a splash of rain in our collective face. The relationship depicted here is fraught, and certainly hierarchical; we are still, as during the High Holidays, begging for mercy and at the mercy of the all powerful, judging God.

The transcendent God of the High Holidays is also reflected in Yerushalmi Ta'anit 1a, during its discussion of the insertion of the words משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם—He causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall—into our daily Amidah. (This is not the direct plea for rain, but a praise of God as the rain-giver.) Rabbi Eliezer says we begin to mention this appellation for God on the first day of Sukkot along with the shaking of the *lulav*; the *lulav* needs water and so it is the perfect “פרקליט” attorney or mediator to ask for rain on our behalf. We, too, might as well begin calling God the rain-maker. But, at this time, Rabbi Yehoshua says, we don’t broach the topic before the time is right.

Their debate is also couched in terms of the servant master model:

תלמוד ירושלמי תענית א:א
טעמיה דר' אליעזר... בשעה
שהעבד משמש את רבו כל צורכו
הוא תובע פרסו ממנו. אמר לו
ר' יהושע והלא משעה שהעבד
משמש את רבו כל צורכו ורוח
רבו נוחה הימניו, הוא תובע
פרנסתו ממנו.

Talmud Yerushalmi Ta'anit 1a

The reason for Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion... when a servant completes his work for his master, he

demands his payment. Rabbi Yehoshua answers him, indeed from the time that the servant completes his work and the master’s spirit is pleased with him, then he demands his payment from him.

We are still begging for mercy and at the mercy of the all powerful, judging God.

Both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua characterize the request for rain in terms of payment. For Rabbi Eliezer, the job is done at the end of the High Holidays, and we may ask for our due. But for Rabbi

Yehoshua, the relationship with God is more than tit for tat, and the master must be relaxed, happy, at peace in order for the timing to be right.

At the beginning of Sukkot, our relationship with God still resembles the mood of the High Holidays: On Rosh Hashanah we crown God as king; on Yom Kippur we ask for forgiveness from God the judge or father. All of these images are hierarchical; we pose as humble servants or young (wayward) children seeking the All Powerful’s forgiveness. At the beginning of Sukkot we may still approach God as transcendent; He holds the keys to the rain, and we don’t want Him to splash us in the face. Something must change over the course of Sukkot to enable us to safely make this request for rain and ease into daily life for the rest of the year.

Rituals that Overflow

The embodied rituals of Sukkot help us deconstruct this hierarchical relationship with God by connecting us to God in nature. *Nisukh ha-mayim*, the water libation that spans the entire week of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, most starkly marks and creates this change. The location and process of the water drawing alone is quite revolutionary: The priest leaves the walls of the Temple, with a band

of lay merry-makers in tow. If the center of action during the High Holidays had been the priest in the Holy of Holies (or the *hazzan* in the synagogue), now the ritual shifts towards the community and a natural spring.² The boundaries between class and holy spaces are blurred, preparing the way for a more immanent sense of God.

The Rabbis attribute a metaphysical, almost theurgic, power to *nisukh ha-mayim* in a manner that evokes a mutual and non-hierarchical relationship.

תלמוד בבלי תענית כה:

אמר רבי אלעזר: כשמנסכין את המים בחג, תהום אומר לחבירו: אבע מימך, קול שני ריעים אני שומע, שנאמר "תהום אל תהום קורא לקול צנוריד וגו'" (תהילים מב:ח).

Talmud Bavli Taanit 25b

Rabbi Elazar said: When they pour the water as a libation on the holiday (of Sukkot), the Depths say to its fellow: Let your waters spring forth; I hear the voice

of two friends. As scripture states: "Deep calls to deep in the voice of your pipes, etc." (Psalms 42:8).

According to this *midrash*, the libation arouses the waters of the abyss, the waters of creation, waking them up, as it were, for the upcoming season of rain. There is an intimacy in this overheard conversation between רעים friends or lovers: 'I will bring my waters, you bring yours,' they lovingly call to each other.

Similarly, chapter 42 of Psalms, which is evoked in the *midrash*, begins with the speaker longing for God and recalling a moment of closeness that they want to recapture. This next verse evokes the communal celebrations of Sukkot:

תהילים מב:ה

אֵלֶּה אֲזַכֵּרָה וְאֶשְׁכַּח עָלַי נִפְשִׁי
כִּי אֶעֱבֹר בְּסֶף אֲדָמָה עַד־בֵּית
אֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל־רִנָּה וְתוֹדָה הִמּוֹן חוֹגֵג:

Psalms 42:5

When I think of this, I pour out my soul: How I walked

with the crowd, moved with them, the festive throng, to the House of God with joyous shouts of praise.

The speaker recalls a celebration, one of joy and gathering in multitudes, walking to the House of God. Continuing to use language evocative of water, the speaker says, "I pour out my soul," while walking with the crowds *flowing* like streams towards the Temple.³

Indeed, this description evokes *Simhat Beit HaShoeva* as it is described in the Mishnah, a one-of-a-kind massive community celebration. The priests would erect viewing stands in the courtyard of the Temple and candelabras that were bright enough to light all of Jerusalem. The Levites played music and the community (even rabbis) danced and juggled fire.⁴ One rabbi performed an impossible one-finger push-up and never once touched the ground.⁵ It is a time of reduced inhibition and ecstatic joy in God's presence. (Tosefta Sukkah 4:1 reports that the partying was so wild, it

2 The Mishnah actually details the location where they would pick the *aravot* (myrtle) to decorate the altar. It is not particularly sanctified as a ritual, but it is striking that the Mishnah takes the time to describe how they would pick them.

3 Commentators are split on the exact meaning of בָּסָף as this word is a *hapax legomenon*. It is often translated as crowd, parallel to הִמּוֹן throngs. I suggest that it evokes people flowing through the streets like water. Throughout this Psalm spiritual connection is described in terms of water: The speaker is thirsty for God (v. 2-3); he pours out his soul (v. 5); and describes an intense, close relationship with God as waves washing over the speaker (v.8).

4 Mishnah Sukkah 5:2-4.

5 Tosefta Sukkah 4:3.

eventually caused the need for a *mehitzah* between the men and women.)

Rather than the demure quiet of a coronation or the bent over penitential stance, we see movement, dance, singing, lights, and splashing water at dawn.

Emotions of love and intimacy with God are at the forefront during these celebrations. The Tosefta reports one of the songs that the revealers would sing on their way to the water drawing:

תוספתא סוכה ד:ב
הלל הזקן אומר: למקום שלבי
אוהב לשם רגלי מוליכות אותי,
אם אתה תבוא לביתי אני אבוא
לביתך.
אם אתה לא תבוא לביתי אני לא
אבוא לביתך.
שנאמר "בכל המקום אשר אזכיר
את שמי אבא אליך וברכתיך"
(שמות כ:כא).

Tosefta Sukkah 4:2

Hillel the Elder used to say:

To the place which my
heart loves, there my feet
lead me.

If you come to my house, I
will go to your house.

If you do not come to My
house, then I will not go to
yours.

For it is said, "In every place
where I record My name,

I will come unto you, and
I will bless you" (Exodus
20:21).

We move our focus from the innermost chambers of our souls to the outdoors.

Love is the first cause for movement. Unconsciously our feet take us to God's Temple and God finds the way to our synagogues. Like the waters that call one to the other, here God seems to call to us or we call to God. *Where you go, I will follow.* There is a parallel mutuality expressed in this song that is different from most of our High Holiday liturgy. Even the threat "if you don't come to my house, I won't

come to yours," is pronounced on equal footing—like the jealousy of a lover, not the judgment of a transcendent God.

And if we can't figure out whose house to meet at (or if we can't meet indoors this year), perhaps we will meet in the middle, at the natural spring.

The movement from indoors to out, from language and liturgy to physically embodied *mitzvot*, offer a huge sigh of relief at the conclusion of the Days of Awe. We celebrate our membership in the natural world and craft an intimate and immanent relationship with God following the intensity of judgement of the High Holidays. This development takes time. We can only enter into the rainy season from a place of trust and love, after a week of building intimacy with God. ◇

