

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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Sukkot and the Attribute of Justice

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. "On Rosh Ha-shana it is written, and on the fast of Kippur it is sealed"

If we compare the way in which the festivals in the month of Tishrei are treated by the Torah and by Chazal (the Sages), we arrive at an interesting observation: the impression one gets from the Torah's description is of days of joy and happiness, in apparent contrast to the dimension of justice so strongly emphasized by Chazal. In last year's Rosh Ha-shana email package (1) we dealt with the fact that the day of "remembrance of blowing [the shofar]" mentioned in the Torah ([Vayikra 23:24](#)) refers principally to the promise of remembrance by God through the shofar blasts, and to our complete faith that this remembrance will be for the good: "Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages and send portions for those who have nothing, for it is a holy day to our Lord, and do not be saddened, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nechemia 8:10 - Nechemia's words to the nation at the conclusion of the assembly on the first day of the seventh month.) The same can be said of the unconditional promise in the Torah with regard to Yom Kippur: "For on this day He shall atone for you to purify you; you shall be purified of all your sins before God" ([Vayikra 16:30](#)), with no mention of the individual's obligation of teshuva (repentance) before this atonement takes place.

We explained, following in the footsteps of Rav Kook in his article entitled "The Development of Jewish Concepts," that this difference in approach originates in the fact that when the Shekhina (Divine Presence) departed from the nation following the destruction of the First Temple, exile "shattered and destroyed to its foundations the ruined national idea." As a result, Am Yisrael no longer stands before God as a single body. Rather, each person is judged on his own individual merits, and the days of Rosh Ha-shana have thus become - in a very real sense - the "Days of Awe," with fear and trepidation taking the place of our joy. The individual is no longer able to hide himself in the camouflage of the community - he stands alone, facing the King of Justice.

B. "And the Festival of the Gathering at the End of the Year"

It seems that a similar attitude exists with regard to the festival of Sukkot. According to the literal understanding of the Torah, Sukkot is the festival which represents the changeover from one year to the next, according to the agricultural calendar (as opposed to the historical calendar, which was instituted at the time of the Exodus from Egypt as the special calendar of Am Yisrael and which begins with the month of Nissan). (2) And, as we know, gathering is the final stage in the agricultural process. It is followed immediately by the activities of ploughing and sowing through the winter months until spring, the wheat and barley harvest during the Omer, figs and grapes in summer until the conclusion of the gathering on Sukkot.

For this reason the Torah refers to Sukkot thus: "And the festival of the gathering at the end of the year (be-tzet ha-shana)" ([Shemot 23:16](#)), and later, "the period of the year (tekufat ha-shana)" (3) (*ibid.* 34:22). We can also understand now why the "hak'hel" (assembly) ceremony takes place specifically "at the time of the Shemitta year, on the festival of Sukkot" ([Devarim 31:10](#)), as a conclusion to the seven-year cycle.

The timing of Sukkot at the end of the working year explains the dimension of joy, which is particularly emphasized on this festival - "the time of our rejoicing."

Already by the time we reach the festival of Shavu'ot, at the time of the harvest, there is a certain measure of joy - "And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God..." ([Devarim 16:11](#)), but this joy is experienced in double or even triple measure on Sukkot, when all the fruits of the year have finished being gathered (4), for the mitzva of rejoicing is mentioned three times in connection with Sukkot ([Vayikra 23:40](#), [Devarim 16:14-15](#)).

The centrality of this festival in the life of the nation is also revealed in King Yеровam's fear of the nation making its pilgrimage to the Temple on Sukkot. We may assume that Yеровam understood that the date of Pesach could not be "moved" because it is bound up with the memory of a singular, unique historical event. For this reason it was easier for him to "stretch" the date of the gathering, which is less well defined (changing from year to year depending on the solar year and the variegations of the weather), and to declare a different date for this central festival: "And Yеровam made a festival in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the festival that was in Yehuda" ([Melakhim I 12:32](#)). (5)

C. "And the rain shall not be upon them"

However, Sukkot is also influenced by the concept of reward and punishment which so strongly characterizes the two festivals which precede it. For there can be no festival celebrating the end of the year which does not at the same time begin a new year, and together with the joy and satisfaction over the fullness of the year that has passed, we experience doubt and concern as to the year that is to come. And first and foremost among our thoughts, both conscious and sub-conscious, one word rests on the Jew's mind as he sits in the sukka, one request dominates his prayer to God - rain!

The land of Israel, as we know, depends on Divine grace for its rainfall: "... (the land) drinks water from the rain of the heavens. It is a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are upon it always, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year" ([Devarim 11:11-12](#)). One of the most serious punishments with which Am Yisrael is threatened, should they turn away from God and serve other gods, is that "the anger of God will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens and you will have no rain" (*ibid.* 11:17), while if the nation listens to God's commandments, then "I shall give the rain of your land in its time; the early rain and the late rain" (11:14).

Here, too, while Am Yisrael dwells in its land and serves God, the joy of the festival of the gathering and the thanks to God for the year that has passed are complete, without the slightest shadow of worry haunting them. Without doubt, the remembrance of Am Yisrael for the good on Rosh Ha-shana, "Yom Ha-zikkaron" (the day of remembrance), and the atonement and forgiveness on Yom Kippur, ensure that "God will open for you His storehouse of goodness; the heavens to give rain to your land in its time, and to bless all the work of your hands" (*Devarim 28:12*). In the days to come, at the time when "on that day God will be one and His name One" (*Zekhariah 14:9*), this vision will become universal in its scope: "And it will be that all those who remain of all the nations who came against Jerusalem, will ascend each year to prostrate themselves before the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the festival of Sukkot" (*ibid. 14:16*).

However, "whoever does not come up of all the families of the earth to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, upon them shall be no rain!" (*ibid. 14:17*). And meanwhile, during the time of the destroyed national idea, when we view ourselves more on an individual basis than as integral parts of the Jewish Nation, there can be no such complete faith. The joy of the gathering is accompanied by fear in the face of the new year.

D. "O save the land from curse"

The prayers for rain on Sukkot have therefore become a central motif in the celebration of the festival. The two special mitzvot of Sukkot which are not mentioned in the Torah - the water libation (*nisukh ha-mayim*) and the waving of the willow branches (*arava*) - occupy an important position in the Sukkot ritual, and both are strongly connected to this particular festival: "God said: Pour water before Me on the festival [Sukkot], so that the rains of the year will be blessed for you" (*Rosh Ha-shana 16a*).

The mitzva of the four species, too, has also undergone a certain measure of change in character. Originally, this mitzva was connected with the essence of the festival: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day... and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God..." (*Vayikra 23:40*). The individual, satisfied with his lot, brings the finest of his produce before God, thanking Him for the strength which He has bestowed in order to perform all this work.

"And it seems to me that the four species which comprise the lulav symbolize the joy of their leaving the desert - which was a land devoid of seed, figs, grapes and pomegranates, with no water to drink - for a place with fruit-bearing trees and rivers. And in remembrance of this, we take the most beautiful of all fruit and the most pleasantly fragrant, and the most beautiful of all leaves and the best of the grasses - by which I refer to the willow of the brook." (*Rambam, Guide to the Perplexed III:43*)

But with the addition of the dimension of justice to the festival of Sukkot, even the nature of this mitzva changes: "Rabbi Eliezer said, 'Since the whole point of the four species is only to appease [God] for the sake of water, and just as these four species cannot exist without water, so the world cannot exist without water.'" (6)

E. "And where would they wave?"

We find a special expression for the various aspects of the festival in the mitzva of *na'anu'im* (wavings) on Sukkot. (7) The

mishna in *Sukka (37b)* says, "And where [i.e. at what points in the prayer] would they wave? In 'hodu la-Hashem' at the beginning and the end, and in 'ana Hashem hoshi'a na' - according to Beit Hillel..." The Amora'im were divided as to the procedure for these waving motions:

"Rabbi Yochanan said: 'One stretches out [the lulav] and then brings it back towards him - towards He who owns the four winds. [Then] He raises and lowers it - towards He who owns the heavens and the earth. In the west, they learned as follows: Rabbi Chamma son of Ukva said in the name of Yossi, son of Rabbi Chanina: he stretches it out and then brings it back - in order to stop the evil winds. He raises and lowers it - in order to stop bad rains.'

The two traditions of the Sages of Eretz Yisrael are not contradictory, but rather complement one another. The explanation of the wavings according to Rabbi Yochanan - who perceives in them an expression of joy and thanks to God, to whom the four directions and heaven and earth all belong - is appropriate for the biblical period. The second explanation - which embodies concern for the new year - reflects the dimension which was added to the content of the festival.

In effect, both aspects exist. We wave the lulav both during "hodu la-Hashem ki tov" - in praise of God and thanks for what has already come to pass - as well as in "ana Hashem hoshi'a na," in supplication and beseeching for the year to come.

This is not the place to expound further on the additional aspects of the attribute of justice (*middat ha-din*) on Sukkot, e.g. in the *hoshana'not*, on the Day of Judgement of Hoshana Rabba (when the issue of rain is particularly emphasized in the liturgy), and in the prayer for rain on *Shemini Atzeret*. Let us simply conclude with a prayer to He who makes the wind blow and the rain fall, that the coming year should be one of blessing and not of curse, of satiety and not of dearth, of life and not of death - for us and for all of Israel.

Footnotes:

(1) "From a Day of Joy to a Day of Judgement." This article appears on our webpage in the Holiday Archives section. It also appeared in Hebrew in "Daf Keshet" no. 301 (Elul 5751). This article is recommended reading in order to provide a complete picture.

(2) For more about the different dates for the New Year see Rav Mordechai Breuer's article, "Four New Years", in his book "Pirkei Mo'adot", vol. 2, pp. 492-502.

(3) The expression refers to the time when the cycle of the previous year comes to an end and the cycle of the new year begins. See *Yeshayahu 29:1* - "Add year to year, let the festivals come round (*yinkofu*)", and *Iyov 1:5* - "and when the days of their feasting were gone about (*hikifu*)".

(4) Rav Breuer (*ibid.*) in his article "The Festival of Sukkot", p. 570.

(5) The festivals of Sukkot and Pesach stand opposite one another, exactly half a year apart, with each of them representing a different concept: the joy of individual labor on

one hand, and the guarding of the national memory on the other. Many conceptual and halakhic links connect these festivals and what they represent, but that subject is beyond the scope of this essay. It should merely be noted that each of these two festivals falls in the seventh month, counting from the other festival. We might even dare say, learning out from this fact, that it is no coincidence that God created the world in such a way that the year divides into twelve months, for it is only thus that a festival could be placed at the beginning of each half-year, such that it also falls in the seventh month from the other festival...

(6) See also Vayikra Rabba, Parashat Emor, parsha 30: "Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said, 'Hear, my son, and take heed' - I have commanded you many things in order to increase your merits... I told you, 'and you shall take for yourselves on the first day' etc. - in order to increase their merits, IN ORDER THAT I SHALL PROVIDE RAIN FOR YOU."

(7) Dr. Nachum Wahrman expounds on this in his book, "Chagei Yisrael U-mo'adav", pp. 68-69.

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