

**THE SUKKOT CELEBRATED BY THOSE WHO RETURNED TO ZION
FROM THE BABYLONIAN EXILE**
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THE FIRST SUKKOT FOLLOWING THE REDEMPTION

Scripture describes how those who returned from Babylonia to *Eretz Yisrael* celebrated the festival of Sukkot shortly after their return to Zion:

And on the second day were gathered together the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, the Priests and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, to give attention to the words of the Law. And they found written in the Law how the Lord had commanded by Moshe that the children of Israel should dwell in booths [*sukkot*] in the feast of the seventh month; and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying: Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written. So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the broad place of the water gate, and in the broad place of the gate of Efrayim. And all the congregation of them that were come back out of the captivity made booths and dwelt in the booths; for since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun to that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read in the book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance. (*Nechemya* 8:13-17)

There are two important novelties in the festival of Sukkot celebrated by those who returned from the Babylonian exile.¹

First, it seems from Scripture that it was then that they heard for the first time in their lives of the *mitzva* of the festival of Sukkot, which is stated explicitly in the Torah.² This suggests that during the period of their exile, the

¹ We will not deal here with another novelty appearing in this prophecy – the fact that those who returned to Zion from Babylon covered their *sukkot* with the four species, as it is stated: "Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written." Regarding this matter, see *Sukka* 36a.

² The *gemara* (*Arakhin* 32a) explains that the verse refers not to the festival of Sukkot, but to the sanctity of the land – that in the days of Nechemya, it was like in

people of Israel forgot most of the *mitzvot* written in the Torah and did not fulfill them. This is what the Ramban writes about the people who lived during the Second Temple period in the days of Ezra, referring to the verses cited above (*Bamidbar* 15:22):

According to the plain sense, this refers to the offering of one who transgressed the entire Torah unintentionally... For example, if they thought that the time of the Torah had passed and was not for all generations... This already happened to us in our sins in the days of the wicked kings of Israel, such as Yerovam, when most of the people completely forgot the Torah and the *mitzvot*, as is stated in the book of Ezra regarding the people of the Second Temple.

The second novelty: Scripture attests to the fact that since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun the festival of Sukkot had not been celebrated in such a grand manner. Is it true that the people of Israel did not celebrate the festival of Sukkot in such an embellished way during the days of David, Shelomo, and the other righteous kings? What was special about the *sukkot* that were erected in the days of Ezra and Nechemya?³

THE JOY OF BUILDING A SUKKA

It may be suggested that the novelty in the celebration of Sukkot in the days of Nechemya lies not in the very marking of the day, or in the very building of *sukkot*, but in the unique intensity of the way the festival was celebrated. We find something similar in the way that Pesach was celebrated in the days of Chizkiyahu: "So there was great joy in Jerusalem; for since the time of Shelomo the son of David, king of Israel, there was not the like in Jerusalem" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 30:26). We find a similar expression in the description of the way that Pesach was celebrated in the days of Yoshiyahu: "For there was not kept such a Pesach from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Yehuda" (II *Melakhim* 23:22). Thus, we may propose that Scripture does not wish to say that Sukkot was not celebrated at all the entire length of the period of the judges and the First Temple, but rather that when the people of Israel returned from the captivity in Babylon, the joy with which Sukkot was celebrated in the days of Nechemya was as great as the joy with which the first Sukkot observed in *Eretz Yisrael* was celebrated in the days of Yehoshua.

The other explanations offered by the commentators relate to the manner in which the festival was celebrated. Some commentators explain that throughout the years, each individual built a *sukka* in his home, whereas in

the days of Yehoshua bin Nun. The plain meaning of the verse, however, still requires explanation.

³ It cannot be that the festival of Sukkot was unknown until that time, as there is an explicit verse that attests to the offering of sacrifices on the festival of Sukkot in the days of King Shelomo (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 8:12-13).

the days of Nechemya, *sukkot* were erected in the public domain.⁴ R. Goren suggests in the name of R. Kook that throughout the generations, people dwelt in *sukkot*, but they did not attach importance to the building of a *sukka* – in other words, to the preparation for the *mitzva* of dwelling in a *sukka*. In the days of Nechemya, on the other hand, a proclamation was made to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem that they should go out and cut down trees for the sake of building a *sukka*. It is about the preparations for fulfilling the *mitzva* of *sukka*, which were also conducted in public, that Scripture says that nothing was done like this since Israel's initial entry into the land.⁵

SUKKOT AND THE MITZVA OF HAKHEL

The reason for dwelling in a *sukka* is stated explicitly in the Torah: "That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God" (*Vayikra* 23:43). It seems, however, that there is also another reason for the *mitzva*, although it is not mentioned by the *Tanna'im* or *Amora'im*.

The Torah commands that the *mitzva* of *hakhel* be observed on the *Sukkot* that follows the Sabbatical year:

And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of Sukkot, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose, you shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law. (*Devarim* 31:10-12)

Once every seven years, all of Israel assembles to reenact their receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai. The king of Israel, who substitutes for

⁴ Different formulations of this explanation can be found in the words of the Malbim (*Nechemya* 8:14) and the *Chatam Sofer* (*Sukka* 31a, s.v. *hamesakhekh*). See also the remarks of R. Kook in R. Moshe Zvi Nerya, *Mo'adei Ha-Ra'aya*, p. 97.

⁵ See R. Shelomo Goren, *Mo'adei Yisrael*, pp. 107-108; R. Shelomo Goren, *Torat Ha-Shabbat Ve-HaMo'ed*, p. 228. R. Goren himself explains that in the future Israel will be exempt from the *mitzva* of dwelling in a *sukka*, as it is meant to serve as a reminder of the exodus from Egypt, and in the future the following verses will apply: "Therefore, behold, the days come, says the Lord, that they shall no more say: As the Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but: As the Lord lives, that brought up and that led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all the countries to which I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land" (*Yirmeyahu* 23:7-8). Those who returned to Zion from Babylonia thought that Yirmeyahu's prophecy would be fulfilled in them and that this would be the last celebration of the festival of Sukkot. Therefore, the verse compares the festival of Sukkot in their day to the first Sukkot that was observed in the land in the days of Yehoshua bin Nun. However, owing to the sins of those who returned to Zion, Yirmeyahu's prophecy was not fulfilled in them, and their return to *Eretz Yisrael* did not overshadow the memory of the exodus from Egypt.

Moshe, reads the Torah to the people, and the people accept it upon themselves anew. Indeed, the wording used in connection with the *mitzva* of *hakhel* is very similar to the wording used in connection with the revelation at Mount Sinai:

The day that you stood before the Lord your God in Chorev, when the Lord said to me: Assemble to Me the people, and I will make them hear My words that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. (*Devarim* 4:10)

The festival of Sukkot that was celebrated in Jerusalem following the Sabbatical year was exceptional in its size and presented a complicated logistical challenge. The massive assembly in Jerusalem required temporary housing for the people – men, women, children, and infants. We are commanded to go up to Jerusalem on all three of the pilgrimage festivals, but the *mitzva* does not apply to many members of Israel. Women are exempt from the *mitzva*, small children certainly did not come, and the men could sleep in the streets. A massive pilgrimage that includes all of the people, including the women and children, necessitates the building of real structures, even if only temporary ones, which can be used for sleeping. This might explain the building of so many *sukkot* in the courtyards of Jerusalem. The building of *sukkot* was necessary for the fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *hakhel*.

It is possible that every year, and not only after the Sabbatical year, the pilgrimage undertaken to Jerusalem on the festival of Sukkot was particularly massive. On the festival of Sukkot, an unusually large number of sacrifices were offered, the rejoicing that accompanied the taking of the four species was at the highest intensity in Jerusalem, the *Beit Ha-Sho'eva* celebration certainly attracted many celebrants, and special assemblies of Torah study in Jerusalem may perhaps have been conducted in other years as well. It also stands to reason that many of the pilgrims would bring the first-fruits that they had just picked in their orchards and vineyards, as the primary *mitzva* of first-fruits is from the festival of Shavuot to the festival of Sukkot (*Bikkurim* 1:10), and it is almost certain that those who brought their first-fruits to Jerusalem took advantage of their pilgrimage on the festival in order to fulfill the *mitzva*. Thus, the many people who gathered in Jerusalem on the festival of Sukkot needed a great number of *sukkot* in order to properly rejoice on the festival.

THE HAKHEL OF EZRA AND NECHEMYA

The verses that precede the verses cited earlier dealing with the festival of Sukkot that was celebrated by those who returned to Zion from Babylonia describe a great assembly in Jerusalem at the beginning of the seventh month, on Rosh Hashana. The people gathered there to accept the Torah once again:

All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the broad place that was before the water gate; and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moshe, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation,

both men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the broad place that was before the water gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women, and of those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the Law... And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed their heads, and fell down before the Lord with their faces to the ground... And they read in the book, in the Law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. And Nechemya... and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; neither be you grieved; for the joy of the Lord is your strength..." And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (*Nechemya* 8:1-12)

Ezra read from the Torah before all the people, who were shocked to the point of weeping when they realized that until that day they had not fulfilled that which was written therein, and a general decision was reached to reaccept the Torah upon themselves. On that same festival of Sukkot, they all dwelt in their *sukkot* in Jerusalem, studied Torah and accepted it upon themselves anew. Immediately after Sukkot, they entered into a new covenant by way of which they accepted upon themselves all of the *mitzvot* in the Torah, and added to them the rabbinic *mitzvot* ordained by the Men of the Great Assembly. There is no proof that that year was the year after the Sabbatical year, but nevertheless they observed on that festival of Sukkot something very similar to the *mitzva* of *hakhel*.⁶

This, then, was the uniqueness of the festival of Sukkot that was celebrated that year. From the time of Yehoshua bin Nun, in the years that passed since Israel had entered the land, the people of Israel dwelt many times in *sukkot*. But during all those years they dwelt in *sukkot* that were erected in their courtyards, and not in the streets of Jerusalem. They fulfilled the *mitzva*, "That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord

⁶ It is possible that unconnected to the count of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, the people of that generation saw themselves as celebrating the festival of Sukkot of the year following the Sabbatical year, since the seventy years of exile corresponded to the seventy Sabbatical years that had not been properly observed. As the verse states: "And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon... to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Yirmeyahu, until the land had been paid her sabbaths; for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 36:20-21). The first Sukkot that was observed after the return from exile felt to them like the year after the Sabbatical year.

your God." But they never fulfilled the *mitzva* of *hakhel* on Sukkot in the streets of Jerusalem, as they did in the days of Nechemya. The acceptance of the Torah that took place at that time heralded a process similar to the assembly at Mount Sinai, as *Chazal* say about that event conducted by Ezra, Nechemya, and the Men of the Great Assembly:

It was taught: R. Yose said: Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel, had Moshe not preceded him. (*Sanhedrin* 21b)

SUKKOT – THE CLOUDS OF GLORY

The *Tanna'im* disagree regarding the *sukkot* in which the people of Israel dwelt in the wilderness. R. Eliezer understands that "they were the clouds of glory," whereas R. Akiva maintains that they were "real booths" (*Sukka* 11b). According to R. Eliezer, the *sukkot* are meant to serve as a reminder of God's acts of lovingkindness towards the people who left Egypt, when He spread the clouds of glory above them. Dwelling in a *sukka* signifies freedom, and the *sukka* of the clouds of glory express Israel's release from the servitude of Egypt. R. Akiva, on the other hand, argues that the *sukkot* are meant to remind us of how difficult it was for Israel in the wilderness, when the people sat in the scorching sun in simple booths. This should be remembered so that when a person returns to his house after Sukkot he will appreciate the good that God has bestowed upon him, giving him a land, a house, and property.

When the people of Israel dwell in their *sukkot*, each person on his own property, throughout the Holy Land, they fulfill the *mitzva* of *sukka* as "real booths." At that time, one needs to be reminded of the difficult times that the Israelites had in the wilderness, in order to thank God for the good land that He gave them and in order to remember that we did not take possession of it by way of our own strength. This is the way Sukkot was celebrated from the days of Yehoshua bin Nun until today – in accordance with the opinion of R. Akiva.

When the people of Israel dwell in Jerusalem across from the Temple, when they occupy themselves with the Torah and accept it upon themselves anew – as they had done at Mount Sinai – the *Shekhina* rests around them and upon them. At that time, dwelling in the *sukka* serves as a reminder of the clouds of glory that were in the wilderness, of the *Shekhina* that rested upon Israel during their journeys in the wilderness, in accordance with the view of R. Eliezer. This is the way the *mitzva* of *sukka* was observed in the days of Ezra, in a way that they had not fulfilled it since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun.

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