

# FOCUS

No. 4 Fall 2005

*A Sukkot Reader*

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<b>Preface</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Essays:</i>	
<b>Life in a Sukkah:</b>	
<b>Turning the Mundane into Mitzvah</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen</i>	
<b>The Four Species and</b>	
<b>the Making of a Jewish Community</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Rabbis Joey Felsen &amp; Menachem Spira</i>	
<b>Quashing the Rebellion of the Trees</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Rabbi Yisroel Gordon</i>	
<b>Beyond Sukkot: Shemini Atzeret,</b>	
<b>Simchat Torah and the Long, Hard Winter</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>Rabbi Moshe Adatto</i>	
<i>Appendix:</i>	
<b>Building a Sukkah: A Halachic Guide</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Rabbi Avi Lebowitz, Rosh Kollel</i>	

# FOCUS

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## Preface

This fourth volume of Focus is a milestone for our journal. Having already covered Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur in previous editions of Focus, we have finally arrived at Sukkot, the fifth and last of the biblical holidays.

It is strange that the most joyous holiday on the Jewish calendar is not more widely celebrated. But this is probably due to the difficulty in understanding what Sukkot is truly about. Sukkot does not reveal its secrets easily. People can comprehend a Day of Judgment or a Festival of Freedom without difficulty, but there is no comparable description for Sukkot. When it comes to this holiday, sound-bites fail. Even a rudimentary understanding of Sukkot requires deeper study.

Earlier volumes of Focus helped deepen our appreciation of the more well-known Jewish holidays. This volume, in contrast, will serve as an introduction to the wisdom and spirituality that lay at the heart of Sukkot. From Berkeley to Santa Cruz, Bay Area Jews are embracing their faith by building their own Sukkot and experiencing the joy of this festival. The Jewish Study Network is proud to support this resurgence with Torah-true learning and inspiration—a hallmark of the Focus series.

But we could not do this without the support of our sponsors. On behalf of the Jewish community of the Bay Area, we express our heartfelt appreciation to Dennis & Daphne Teifeld, Bobby & Fran Lent, Stella & Lenny Katz, Anna & Leo Hmelnitsky and the Butrimovitz family for their help in turning the vision of Focus into a reality. As partners of the JSN, they are raising the level of Jewish literacy in Northern California. A special thank you goes to our technical assistant, Ryan Wessels.

May the spirit of their efforts, embodied in this issue of Focus, illuminate your way toward a joyous and meaningful Sukkot.

Sincerely,  
Rabbi Joey Felsen  
Founder, Jewish Study Network



# Introduction

The holiday of Sukkot begins this year with sundown on October 17<sup>th</sup> and continues for nine days until the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>. After the awe and judgment of Rosh Hashanah and the atonement and cleansing of Yom Kippur, we come home and realize that some basic changes are in order. This is what Sukkot is all about.

On Sukkot we are starting over with a clean slate, and we want to begin the New Year with simplicity. Our High Holiday prayers for inscription in the Book of Life have given us a new appreciation for the blessing of life. When we recognize how beautiful and precious life is, many of our supposed “needs” vanish. And the more we appreciate the gift of life, the more we appreciate the Giver of that gift.

After Yom Kippur, G-d and the Jews move in together to celebrate their revitalized relationship. “During [these] seven days you must live in huts [*sukkot*]... This is so that future generations will know that I had the Jews live in huts when I brought them out of Egypt. I am G-d your Lord” (Leviticus 23:42,43). In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer explains that the Torah does not speak about ordinary huts for which we would not need a yearly festival. The Torah refers to the *A’nanay Ha’Kavod*, the Clouds of Glory that escorted the Jews across the desert from Egypt to Israel (Talmud, *Sukkah* 11b). These protective clouds symbolized G-d’s presence. “G-d went before them by day with a pillar of cloud, to guide them along the way” (Exodus 13:21). That was the Sukkah of then, and that is the Sukkah of today. Our Sukkah represents G-d’s manifest presence living with the Jew, protecting him from the desert-like dangers of a hostile world. The only difference is that this time we have to build the Clouds of Glory ourselves.

That sounds very nice, but how do we build Clouds of Glory? All it takes is a collapsible hut. A hut that simultaneously demonstrates our appreciation for life in its simplest form, free of materialistic indulgences, and our unshakable faith that come what may, we are in G-d's hands. In such a hut, our sense of security comes not from the strength of the shelter, but from our relationship with G-d. To live with that mindset is to live within divine Clouds of Glory.

Clearly then, one who builds an external Sukkah without constructing an internal one misses the point. As the New Year begins, we begin again the work of developing ourselves into a home for the Divine Presence. When the external construction of the Sukkah is accompanied by a matching internal construction of the self, the Jew and his Sukkah merge into a virtual Mishkan (Tabernacle). It should thus come as no surprise to learn that not only did construction on the actual Mishkan begin on the first day of Sukkot, but the first and second Temples were inaugurated on Sukkot as well.

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Sukkot is the culmination of multiple cycles. Most obviously, Sukkot marks the end of the High Holy Days. First Rosh Hashanah, then Yom Kippur, and finally Sukkot. But Sukkot is also the end of the yearly cycle of festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. This is for good reason. On Pesach we left Egypt, on Shavuot we received the Torah, and on Sukkot G-d escorted us through the desert to Israel. Sukkot thus completes the national project that began with the Exodus. Historically, this takes us to the very end of the Torah's narrative – the Jews now stand on the shores of the Jordan River, prepared to enter the Promised Land. Appropriately, we complete the yearly cycle of Torah

reading on Simchat Torah, the last day of Sukkot. But that is not all. The agricultural cycle also concludes on Sukkot.

“Three pilgrimage festivals shall you celebrate for me during the year. You shall observe the Festival of Matzot... at the appointed time of the month of springtime (Pesach)...and the Festival of Reaping (Shavuot)...and the Festival of the Ingathering...when you gather your produce from the field (Sukkot)” (Exodus 23:14-16). Pesach is in the spring when things begin to grow and blossom, by Shavuot the produce has reached maturity and is ready for reaping, and on Sukkot the grain is collected from the field and brought home. So Sukkot is also the end of the agricultural cycle.

Physical realities are mere reflections of deeper spiritual realities. The Maharal of Prague (1525-1609) points out that what is happening out in the field matches quite perfectly with what is happening on the Jewish calendar. Pesach is the time of blossoming. This reflects the birth of the Jewish nation at the Exodus. On Shavuot, produce reaches maturity and completion. This reflects our receiving the Torah and reaching our fulfillment. On Sukkot, we gather our produce into our homes. This reflects G-d’s gathering us into His home, the Sukkah, our private Mishkan.

In the liturgy of the holiday service, we find succinct descriptions of the three festivals. Pesach is described as *Z’man Cherutainu*, the Time of Our Freedom. Shavuot is described as *Z’man Matan Toratenu*, the Time of the Giving of Our Torah. But it is only Sukkot that is described as *Z’man Simchatenu*, the Time of our Joy. There can be no greater joy for man other than to live with G-d. In its fullest sense, this is only possible on Sukkot, the climax of the High Holiday and festival cycles. And it is only possible in a Sukkah, the Clouds of Glory of our own making.

# Life in a Sukkah:

## Turning the Mundane into Mitzvah

*Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen*

A Sukkah is much more than a great place to camp out. It's a place where the biblical past comes to life and the inherent holiness of all things shines forth. Living in a Sukkah after the High Holidays actualizes the spiritual greatness that resides within us all and sanctifies the mundane physicality of ordinary life. Understanding the mysterious power of the Sukkah is the first step towards taking full advantage of all that it offers. But before we can understand the Sukkah we need to review a little history.

### **The Clouds of Glory**

During these seven days you must live in huts (“*Sukkot*”). Everyone native in Israel must live in huts. This is so that future generations will know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of Egypt. I am G-d your Lord.

Leviticus 23:42-43

According to one opinion in the Talmud, this verse isn't really talking about huts at all, at least not as we understand



them. Rabbi Eliezer teaches that this use of the word “*Sukkot*” refers to the “Clouds of Glory” that accompanied and protected the Jewish People as they wandered across the Sinai Desert.<sup>1</sup> According to the Midrash, these clouds surrounded them on all sides, providing total protection from the dangers and discomforts of the long desert expedition.

How many clouds of glory surrounded the Jewish People in the desert? ... Rabbi Hoshaya says, “Seven – four for the [four] sides, one above them, one beneath them and one that traveled three *mil*<sup>2</sup> ahead of them. This last cloud would smite the snakes, scorpions... and the stones in their way... If there was a depression ahead, it would raise the ground and if there was an elevation that they would need to climb, it would flatten it to level the path ahead of them.

*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:2

These miraculous clouds are obviously quite different from our simple Sukkot. Why then does the Torah tell us to commemorate the Clouds of Glory with a Sukkah? What do they have in common?

### **Defining the Mitzvah**

For the answer to this question, let us explore this mitzvah a little more closely.

The Talmud tells us that the mitzvah of the Sukkah is to truly make it our home for the holiday. “For seven days leave a permanent dwelling and live in a temporary dwelling” (Talmud, *Sukkah* 2a). For seven days, we do in the Sukkah whatever we

would normally do at home. In the words of the *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>3</sup>:

How [does one perform] the mitzvah of dwelling in the Sukkah? One should eat, drink, sleep, spend time and live in the Sukkah for all seven days [of the holiday], both during the day and during the night, just as he lives in his home the rest of the year. For seven days a person makes his home a temporary dwelling and his Sukkah a permanent one. How so? One should bring into the Sukkah their fine utensils and mats... pitchers and glasses.

*Orach Chaim* 639:1

The mitzvah is to live in a Sukkah just as you live in your home. This includes more than eating, drinking and sleeping. Even merely “spending time” i.e. doing nothing in particular, should be “done” in a Sukkah, for that too is a home-based activity!<sup>4</sup> As the Talmud said, the point of this mitzvah is to move in. We will see that this idea explains several surprising leniencies in the mitzvah of Sukkah.

The Talmud teaches that a person who experiences distress in the Sukkah is exempt from dwelling in it (*Sukkah* 26a). For example, if flies or bees suddenly invade the Sukkah, making it an uncomfortable place to eat or sleep, one may leave the Sukkah and continue their meal or rest in the house. Similarly, if it rains into the Sukkah, making it an uncomfortable place to be, one may return to their home until the rain stops. This is quite unusual. Nowhere else do we find that distress—as opposed to health or safety—is sufficient grounds for exempting ourselves from mitzvot.

## LIFE IN A SUKKAH

In light of what we have learned, the logic of this law is clearer. The mitzvah of Sukkah is to live in it as if it were our home. If a home were infested with bees or flooded, it would also be evacuated! Living in distress is not living at home; and therefore, living in the Sukkah under such conditions does not constitute dwelling in a Sukkah as a home. Any discomfort that would make one leave home thus nullifies the mitzvah of Sukkah.

There is another application of this same principle. One who travels on Sukkot is exempt from eating in a Sukkah.<sup>5</sup> This is surprising. Traveling does not normally exempt one from performing mitzvot. However, since a person commonly leaves his home on trips, eating and sleeping elsewhere, his eating and sleeping out of the Sukkah does not challenge the function of the Sukkah as one's home for these seven days. Therefore, the traveler has no obligation to dwell in a Sukkah.

This definition of the mitzvah results in yet another leniency, this one even more surprising. The mitzvah of Sukkah does not really obligate us to be in the Sukkah at all!<sup>6</sup> All it says is that if we want to eat or sleep, we must do it in a Sukkah.

Beit Shammai rules that a person must eat [a total of] fourteen meals in the Sukkah [over the seven day holiday]; one each day and one each night. Beit Hillel rules that only on the first night of Sukkot is there an obligation to eat a meal. Beyond that, if one wants to eat then one must eat in a Sukkah, but one may choose not to eat at all.

Mishnah, *Sukkah* 2:6

The Talmud explains that although both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel agree as to the fundamental definition of the

mitzvah, they still arrive at quite different rulings. The Torah states, “You shall dwell in the Sukkah for seven days” and that means Jews must dwell in the Sukkah just as they would in their home. Beit Shammai maintains that since people normally eat two meals a day in their homes, they must also eat two meals a day in the Sukkah. Beit Hillel argues that nobody *has to* eat at home – people have the freedom to choose not to eat; thus there is no *obligation* to eat in a Sukkah. However, if one does eat, then the mitzvah is to eat in the Sukkah. According to Beit Hillel, it follows that there is also no obligation to sleep in a Sukkah; a person may choose not to sleep. In the end, technically there is no obligation to be in the Sukkah at all. Although there may not be any obligation to eat or sleep, any time a person does eat or sleep in the Sukkah it is a mitzvah.<sup>7</sup>

It has become abundantly clear that the mitzvah is to make the Sukkah our home for the holiday, and to live in it just as we would live in our homes. This is one strange mitzvah! Any time we spend in the Sukkah and everything we do there is a mitzvah? How does this happen? Why is everything done in a Sukkah transformed into a mitzvah?

Before we can answer this question, we need to understand the nature of the Sukkah structure. How do we distinguish a Sukkah from a house?

The answer is as simple as it is profound. According to the Talmud, a Sukkah must be a temporary dwelling place (*Sukkah* 2a).<sup>8</sup> This is the essential difference between our ordinary homes and our Sukkah homes, and therein lies the key to answering our question.

### **Setting Our Priorities Straight**

Eating, drinking, sleeping, and relaxing are not ordinarily considered mitzvot simply because they are not ends in and of

## LIFE IN A SUKKAH

themselves. Their function is to provide the energy we need to perform the truly important things in life. Eating and sleeping are the means to an end and to pursue them for their own sake is to lose sight of life's purpose.

Although taken alone they may not be mitzvot, if we understand their role in the greater scheme of things and we utilize them for this purpose, then our mundane eating and sleeping is transformed. If we eat and sleep not for their own temporal pleasure, but for the higher goal of satisfying our physical needs and providing us with the energy for the eternal goal of fulfilling mitzvot, then the eating and sleeping are themselves elevated into the realm of mitzvah. This is what happens in a Sukkah. In a Sukkah, the basic needs of life are performed in a temporary dwelling, defining their function as secondary and temporal. As a result, the physical pleasures of life become mitzvot in their own right, because their performance includes tacit knowledge of their secondary nature. Now that we understand the lesson of Sukkot, other elements of the holiday will start to come into focus.

The *Chidah*<sup>9</sup> uses this idea to explain why Sukkot is celebrated immediately after the High Holidays:

It is known that one of the basic functions of the mitzvah of Sukkah is to internalize the idea that our existence in this world is temporary, like our dwelling in a Sukkah. After pleading to G-d from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur for His mercy and forgiveness... it is appropriate to return to all that our Creator wants from us. To inspire ourselves, we build a Sukkah to internalize our recognition that our physical existence in this world is transitory, that most of our interests are vain, and our time here is

limited. This understanding suffices to save us from the influence of the evil inclination. Since this world is vain, and no lust is of permanent relevance, what is the purpose of running after those things?

According to the *Chidah*, dwelling in the Sukkah helps internalize our High Holiday clarity of what is important and what is vain, and it helps strengthen our New Year's resolutions too. The temporary Sukkah teaches us not to turn a means into an end. Materialism is vain, physical pleasures are fleeting, but when they are partaken of for the right reasons, when they serve the higher priorities in life, they are mitzvot.

This idea also explains why we read the Megillah of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) on Sukkot. *Kohelet* tells of King Salomon's exploration of, and conclusions about, life and its vanities – perfect reading material at a time when we strive to concretize our High Holiday priorities.

### **The Sukkah Temple**

We have offered one explanation for how the basic necessities of life become mitzvot in the Sukkah; but there is another, deeper understanding of this experience. This insight comes with a fuller appreciation of the divine Clouds of Glory that the Sukkah represents.

The Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Jewish People in the desert had a profound impact on them. This cloud-like manifestation of G-d's presence created a holy space, a sanctuary, and living within that space elevated the nation to great spiritual heights. Protected from external influences and separated from the pursuit of the mundane, the Jews were able to occupy themselves constantly with Torah, mitzvot and

character development. The Clouds of Glory not only enabled their physical existence in the desert, it provided ideal conditions for their spiritual life as well.<sup>10</sup> Life within the clouds was a life of pure *kedusha*, holiness.

In the Talmud we find a teaching that delineates twelve basic steps of spiritual growth, beginning from the lowest rung all the way up to the highest levels attainable by man (*Avoda Zara* 20b). Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his masterpiece “The Path of the Just,” describes each one of these levels and explains how they differ from each other. Two advanced levels on this spiritual ladder are *taharah*, “purity,” and *kedusha*, “holiness.” Rabbi Luzzatto writes that a *tahor*, a person who has achieved the level of purity, has already refined his conduct to serve his Creator in all ways. His engagement in mundane activities is limited to that which is absolutely necessary. “In this way, they are released from the ingredient of evil that exists within all corporeality and they are pure. However, they have not yet entered the domain of the holy, for if he could manage without [his physical needs] he would be better off.”<sup>11</sup>

Pure is great, but it’s not holy. The *kadosh* is greater than the *tahor*. A *kadosh* is so intimately connected to G-d that he is a walking Temple. In the words of R. Luzzatto:

The divine presence dwells with [the *kadosh*] as it dwelt in the Holy Temple. Consequently, the food that they eat is likened to a sacrificial offering that is placed on the fires of the altar.<sup>12</sup>

This is most extraordinary. Man can attain such an ethereal level of spirituality that the divine presence rests within him as it rested in the Temple, and as a result, his very eating is comparable to the sacrifices on the Temple’s altar. At this level of refinement every physical act a person does becomes a

## LIFE IN A SUKKAH

mitzvah, not just because it is a means for other mitzvot, but because it is a mitzvah in its own right.

The divine shelter of the Clouds of Glory elevated the Jews to this level of *kedusha*, and the Sukkah does the same. During Sukkot we are not merely reminded of the Clouds of Glory and our potential to attain *kedusha*, we are temporarily elevated to that very same level. To live in a Sukkah is to live the life of a *kadosh*. We cut back on our involvement with physical pursuits, we do not work more than we must and we live within a holy space, a home built of mitzvah. We set our priorities straight and live in the presence of G-d. During the seven days of Sukkot, our eating, drinking, and sleeping become mitzvot, for these are now acts of divine service performed within the Sukkah Temple. Although they may look very different, the clouds and the Sukkah serve the same function. This is what the Torah means when it says that the Sukkah reminds us of the Clouds of Glory.

Dwelling in a Sukkah underscores the distinction between the temporal and permanent, the material and the eternal. It defines the role of mundane activities in our spiritual life and it thus unites all the elements of our existence. It is an opportunity to live a week of *kedusha*, holiness and spirituality, recreating our ancestors' experience within divine Clouds of Glory. This is why everything done in a Sukkah is transformed into a mitzvah.

The message of Sukkot is not limited to the days of the holiday – the Sukkah carries a lesson for the whole year.<sup>13</sup> After all, we are supposed to live in the Sukkah the same way we live in our homes! This mitzvah teaches us that even the material elements of our everyday lives can be elevated to serve our spiritual growth. We can aim to live for a higher purpose, to design our lives around the service of G-d and allow our souls



to shine. When that happens, all of life becomes one long string of mitzvot.

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud, *Sukkah* 11b. Rabbi Akiva argues, maintaining that the verse refers to literal *Sukkot*, huts. The *Tur* and the *Shulchan Aruch* rule in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer.

<sup>2</sup> A “*mil*” is an ancient measure of distance of approximately 1000 meters.

<sup>3</sup> Definitive code of Jewish law authored by Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575).

<sup>4</sup> However, since “spending time” is not exclusively a home based “activity,” it does not have the same mitzvah status as eating and sleeping in a Sukkah.

<sup>5</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Ramah* and *Mishnah Berurah* 640:8.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is besides the obligation to eat bread in the Sukkah on the first night of the holiday in Israel and the first two nights outside of Israel.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, the “*Vilna Gaon*.”

<sup>8</sup> The Mishna states that a Sukkah must be lower than 20 cubits (approx. 30 ft.) high. The Talmud explains that to build the Sukkah any higher would indicate a permanent structure. (This is Rava’s explanation of the Mishnah, but the Talmud does offer two alternative explanations.) We thus see that the Talmud defines a Sukkah as a temporary type of structure. It is important to note that the Talmud does not require the structure itself to be temporary, or even that it be built with temporary materials. As long as its height is consistent with the measurements of temporary dwellings, the structure can be a kosher Sukkah.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806) in his work on the holidays, “*Simchat HaRegel*.”

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746) in his classic work “*The Way of G-d*.”

<sup>11</sup> *The Path of the Just*, Chap. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> This is indicated by the fact that the holiday is seven days long. Seven days span our entire weekly life, symbolizing the extension of the effects of Sukkot beyond the week of the holiday, into every week of the year.

# The Four Species and the Making of a Jewish Community

*Rabbis Joey Felsen & Menachem Spira*

The High Holidays are only the beginning of a Jewish month packed with opportunities for spiritual growth. After Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we find traditional Jews all over the world passionately preparing for two more spiritual practices—living in a Sukkah and waving the “Four Species.” A closer look at these activities reveals important lessons about Jewish identity and the joys and challenges of Jewish community.

The Torah has many commandments that would turn the head of the uninitiated, but nothing compares to the strange sight of a Jew waving around the Four Species. It never fails to attract attention and provoke questions. What is the meaning behind this act? What could the Four Species possibly symbolize?

Perhaps there is a clue in the verses of Leviticus that introduce us to Sukkot:

## THE FOUR SPECIES

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather in the crop of the land, you shall celebrate G-d's festival for a seven-day period; the first day is a day of rest and the eighth-day is a day of rest. You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a splendorous tree (Etrog), the branches of date palms (Lulav), twigs of a braided tree (Hadas), and brook willows (Aravot), and you shall rejoice before God your Lord for a seven-day period. You shall celebrate it as a festival for G-d, a seven-day period in the year, an eternal decree for your generations; in the seventh month shall you celebrate it.

Leviticus 23:39-41

The Torah's introduction shows us that the festival of Sukkot is a time to celebrate and rejoice before G-d. The verses also imply that the Four Species help us achieve that state of joy, though it is unclear how. Merely collecting the four species mentioned certainly does not automatically trigger a feeling of happiness in people. True, the Four Species may bring to mind the symbiotic relationship between people and the earth, but that does not necessarily result in our actually feeling anything special when we lift this little bundle of plant life. It turns out that important clues to this enigmatic source of joy can be found in the Midrash.

The Midrash begins by revealing fundamental differences between these species, focusing on the symbolism of each species possessing taste or aroma. The Midrash teaches that taste represents Torah learning. The soul imbibes Torah knowledge, giving each person a unique 'flavor.' Aroma represents the wonderful perfume of good deeds that lingers on a person who performs a mitzvah.

## THE FOUR SPECIES

How does this symbolic system apply to the individual species? Well, the willow branch (*Arava*) has neither taste nor smell, symbolizing an individual who lacks both Torah learning and good deeds. The date palm (*Lulav*) is blessed with taste but it has no smell. It thus represents a person who has studied Torah but lacks good deeds. The myrtle branch (*Hadas*) is the opposite of the date palm. It has a pleasant fragrance but lacks flavor. It represents a person who has performed good deeds, but lacks Torah education. Only the citron (*Etrog*) has both smell and taste and is therefore likened to an individual who is infused with both Torah and good deeds. (*Vayikrah Raba* chap. 30) The Four Species thus represent the gathering together of four very different types of people.

Another Midrash sheds an altogether different light on the mystery of the Four Species. Each one of the four can be compared to a human body part. The *Lulav* is straight and tall like a spine. The *Etrog* is round like a heart. The leaves of the myrtle are oval like eyes and the willow leaves are shaped like lips. The message of this Midrash is clear – G-d should be served with one’s entire being. This idea is based on the verse, “All my bones will say, ‘G-d who is like you’” (Psalms 35:10).

Unfortunately, these Midrashic sources leave us with more questions than answers. What does the comparison of different personality types have to do with the Festival of Sukkot? The same can be asked about the second analogy. What does the idea of serving G-d with your different body parts have to do with Sukkot?

Complicating matters further is the holiday service in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Before the Temple was destroyed, the *Kohanim* (Priests) would march in a procession around the Altar holding only a willow branch, the *Arava*. This service created a minor festival within the holiday of Sukkot called the

## THE FOUR SPECIES

Day of the Arava, otherwise known as *Hoshana Raba*. If the willow branches do in fact reflect one who is empty of both Torah and good deeds, why would the priests celebrate with that one species more than any other?

The answer to our questions can be found by bringing our two Midrashic teachings together. But first we need to understand our state of mind at the beginning of Sukkot.

On Sukkot we celebrate having survived the Day of Judgment on Rosh Hashanah and having had the opportunity to wipe our slate clean on Yom Kippur. Our joy comes from a confidence that G-d has been compassionate and we strive to express that joy using all of our limbs and organs. But the Jewish individual is not an island and Jewish celebrations must take place within the context of a Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> On Sukkot we are thus very conscious of both our collective responsibility to create community and our personal need to fit into a community.

Of course, a community brings with it all sorts of individuals. We will undoubtedly enjoy the company of some of them, but others will lack any pleasant flavor or aroma. Yet the latter individuals are no less members of our community than those whom we take pleasure in. It is our responsibility to bind everyone together, for only together can we fulfill our national destiny. How can we bind a group of very different individuals into one unified *kehillah*? There's only one way – by throwing everything we've got into the project. Creating a warm and welcoming community takes a heart, a spine, ears and eyes. If we muster all of our energy and talents we will successfully build a *kehillah* where all Jews feel that they belong.

## THE FOUR SPECIES

On Sukkot we leave our permanent homes and move into temporary dwellings, signifying that our position in this world is transient. Humbling ourselves in this way transforms our attitude and helps us focus on the positive qualities in the people around us. The Sukkah thus breaks down the barriers of status and class and unifies our people.

In the days of the Holy Temple, we took the concept one step further. Not only did we include the people who are bereft of Torah and good deeds, but the Priests would actually take the willow and make a ceremony with just those branches. The holiday of *Hoshana Rabah* is a time when we exalt the people who are farthest removed from Jewish practices and values. This service celebrates acceptance and inclusion. The Priests dance around the Altar waving willow branches in recognition of the fact that every Jew has the potential to grow and learn and become participants and contributors to the community. Even the willow can play a role in our national destiny.

The joy of Sukkot is coupled with the ingathering of the harvest. We add this dimension of physical security and assured sustenance with the spiritual security that follows the High Holidays. This enables us to embrace our entire beings and our entire community. That is the secret of the Four Species. In the end, the Four Species truly are a source of joy – the joy of Jewish community.

How can we make this experience tangible in our celebration of the Holiday? This year, invite guests to your Sukkah or get yourself invited to someone else's place. Then try to focus on the positive in the people around you. Remember that every individual is unique and everyone has something to contribute. In this way, people are bound together and a Jewish community is built – one person at a time.

## THE FOUR SPECIES

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<sup>1</sup> See *Meshech Chochmah* (Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk, 1843-1926) to Leviticus 23:21 where he explains that the goal of the Jewish holidays is to connect Jews with each other (as opposed to Shabbat where the goal is to connect with G-d). This is why carrying in the public domain and cooking is permitted on the holidays.

# Quashing the Rebellion of the Trees

*Rabbi Yisroel Gordon*

Like every festival, Sukkot is introduced to us as a celebration of an agricultural event. It is “*chag ha’asif*,” the festival of the ingathering (Exodus 23:16). This is the time of year when farmers bring home the crops that they have worked so long and hard to produce.

But unlike the other festivals, Sukkot follows through on the agricultural motif with several fascinating mitzvot. There’s the famous Sukkah, built with the leftover husks and branches from the harvest. And then, of course, there is the *Arba Minim*, or Four Species: the Etrog (citron), the Lulav (date palm), the Hadasim (myrtle branches) and Aravot (willow branches) that are taken together on this holiday.<sup>1</sup> Sukkot is clearly geared toward focusing on our relationship with the land and its fruit. But what exactly is its message? What are all these leafy mitzvot saying?

In order to understand the holiday of Sukkot, we’ll need to take a closer look at the origins of agricultural produce. Let’s go back to the very beginning.



### Revolt in the Garden

In Genesis we read the creation story, and that includes the creation of trees too. And just like everything else in the universe, G-d created trees with words. G-d said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation...fruit trees bearing fruit” (Genesis 1:11). Now, when you’re building a universe with words, every single word makes a world of a difference. You need to really watch your syntax. “Fruit trees bearing fruit,” is redundant. G-d could have said, “Let the earth sprout fruit trees,” or, “Let the earth sprout trees bearing fruit.” Why “fruit trees bearing fruit?” The Midrash explains that G-d’s words were not at all redundant; they were chosen quite deliberately. G-d was trying to create trees whose wood had the same flavor as their fruit. When He said, “fruit trees bearing fruit,” He meant that the trees themselves should be fruity.<sup>2</sup>

But things didn’t quite turn out that way. When the trees came into existence in the very next verse, a discrepancy appears. “And the earth brought forth vegetation... trees bearing fruit” (1:12). Not ‘*fruit* trees bearing fruit,’ just “trees bearing fruit.” The trees did not obey orders. They came into existence as ordinary fruit-bearing trees without any flavor in their wood.<sup>3</sup>

Why didn’t the trees behave and do G-d’s will? The Chizkuni<sup>4</sup> explains that what we are seeing here is nothing more than the survival instinct of trees. They didn’t want to be flavored; they were afraid of being eaten! The trees therefore disobeyed G-d and came out bland.

Despite the compelling logic of the Chizkuni, it stands to reason that there are deeper issues at play. According to the Maharal of Prague<sup>5</sup> we are not dealing here with a debate about the virtues of wood flavoring. Rather, the disobedience of the

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

trees was actually the opening shot of an out-and-out rebellion. Here begins the eternal struggle between the spiritual and the physical, the divine and the mortal, heaven and earth.

In much the same way that a tree creates a fruit and sustains it with a constant flow of nutrients, G-d created the physical universe and sustains its existence with a constant flow of divine energy and providence. Trees are therefore symbolic of the divine source of all things, i.e. G-d, and their fruit is symbolic of the physical products of that source, i.e. the world. By instructing trees to have the same flavor as their fruit, G-d was making a policy statement with universal implications. The physical must not be more alluring than its divine roots, for then the physical will take center stage and the divine source will be overlooked and forgotten. This is what G-d commanded, but the narcissistic earth rebelled. It wanted to forget its creator and focus on the created instead. In a bold statement of defiance, the trees made their fruit distinctive and flavorful and their roots, trunks and branches bland. The material would reign supreme and the Divine would be relegated to secondary status. This was the rebellion of the trees and it was nothing less than a revolution against the monarchy of G-d.<sup>6</sup>

As we mentioned earlier, this was merely the opening shot. The entire physical realm desired independence and man was no exception.

“G-d, the Lord, took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it. And G-d, the Lord, commanded the man, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but you may not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil...’” (Genesis 2:15-17).

We all know what happened next. Like the trees before them, Adam and Eve focused on the “fruit” and ignored the

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

“tree.”<sup>7</sup> The rebellion continued with Adam and it continues on, generation after generation, to this very day. But a small, devoted group struggles against these forces and strives to recognize, appreciate, and connect to the one true source of everything. And they do it in a Sukkah.

### The Sukkah

On Sukkot, the Torah tells us to move out of our homes and into a hut, a “Sukkah” (Leviticus 23:42). It’s worth remembering that this is a biblical mitzvah, and as such it requires a sharp legal definition. What exactly is the difference between a house and a Sukkah? After all, some people use huts for homes all year round. Jewish law must provide a distinction between a house and a Sukkah.

Halacha defines a Sukkah as a structure whose roof is entirely constructed from a type of material called “s’chach.” The Torah introduces prototypical s’chach when it tells us to build a Sukkah out of *goren v’yekev*, the leftover husks and branches from the grain and grape harvest.<sup>8</sup> This brief statement establishes the three basic specifications for the roofing material of a Sukkah:

1. S’chach must grow from the ground.
2. S’chach must be detached from the ground.
3. S’chach must be raw material, still in its natural state.

It is not for aesthetic reasons that s’chach must be in its natural state. The Talmud teaches that in order to be kosher for a Sukkah, s’chach cannot be susceptible to “*tumah*,” spiritual contamination (Mishna, *Sukkah* 1:4).<sup>9</sup> Anything that grows is immune from contracting *tumah* as long as it is connected to the ground. And even after it is harvested, raw material remains immune to *tumah* as long as it is not manufactured into

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

anything of use. Only items of utility can contract *tumah*. It is interesting to note that fruit, despite the fact that it is in its natural state, is also susceptible to *tumah* and is therefore invalid for use as s'chach.

Another unexpected law about s'chach is its height. The opening Mishna of tractate Sukkah teaches that s'chach cannot be higher than twenty cubits off the ground, approximately 30 ft. The sages of the Talmud debate the reason for this law, but the conclusion is in accordance with the sage Rava who explained it thus: The Torah states, "During these seven days you must live in thatched huts. Everyone native in Israel must live in thatched huts. This is so that future generations will know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of Egypt. I am G-d your Lord" (Leviticus 23:42-43). Being that a Sukkah is a Sukkah by virtue of its having s'chach as its ceiling, s'chach must be readily visible in order to effectively remind the Sukkah dweller of his ancestors in the desert. A ceiling that is 20 cubits or higher will not be within the ordinary field of vision of people in the room and is therefore invalid (Talmud, *Sukkah* 2a).<sup>10</sup>

To sum up: A Sukkah is a structure whose roof is made out of s'chach, a natural material that grew from the ground, was later detached, but is still in its natural state and thus immune from *tumah*. This s'chach must be low enough so that it is readily noticeable by the people inside the Sukkah, thereby reminding them of the huts that their ancestors used when they traveled across the Sinai Desert.

It seems that the Torah really wants us to remember life in the desert. But why? What's so special about life in the desert? Our ancestors' survival was pretty miraculous, but we have lots of miracles in our history. Why do we need a biblical holiday to commemorate this one? As amazing as it was, surviving the

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

desert doesn't hold a candle to the transformative events of the Exodus and Sinai commemorated by the other two festivals, Pesach and Shavuot. Perhaps an examination of life in the Sinai Desert 3300 years ago will help reveal the mystery of Sukkot.

### **Back in Paradise**

For the Jews, life in the desert was nothing less than utopian. They traveled first-class, surrounded by clouds of glory, eating heavenly manna and drinking Miriam's water. As the ever-present Shechina guided their journey to the Promised Land, the Jews had no fields to farm, no businesses to manage and no wars to fight. Their only pursuits were studying G-d's Torah, performing His mitzvot, and experiencing the sublime pleasure of being one with G-d. They may have been in the Sinai Desert, but the Jews were traveling in a virtual Garden of Eden.<sup>11</sup>

Under such conditions, the people's relationship with their creator reached unimaginable heights. G-d feeds and cares for us today too, but He does it from behind the façade of the Department of Homeland Security and the local supermarket. That puts a limit on our relationship. In the Sinai Desert, however, the entire structure of the natural world was peeled back and the Jews related to G-d directly. Their dependence on daily miracles for survival forged a virtual umbilical cord between them and G-d. In such a state, they were simply incorruptible.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, our relationship today, while still very real, is disconnected. We are no longer in G-d's womb.

Returning to our Sukkah, we can now hear the message of the s'chach. Once upon a time, the s'chach was firmly rooted in the earth, and in that state it could not contract *tumah*. Like the Jews of the desert, it enjoyed a utopian existence connected to

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

its source, fully protected from alien influence. But that kind of existence was short-lived. Like the Jews, the s'chach was ultimately severed from its source.

We might expect the disconnected s'chach to be susceptible to all the rotting and spiritual defilement the world has to offer, but it doesn't happen. Miraculously, the s'chach remains pure. Despite the fact that it's currently unplugged, s'chach maintains its immunity from spiritual malaise as long as it stays in its natural state, unchanged from the way it grew. By being true to its inner identity and not transforming itself into something that it isn't, the s'chach remains conscious of its origins. And this consciousness creates a virtual force field. S'chach cannot contract *tumah*; it's absolutely incorruptible!

Now we can understand why fruit is invalid for use as s'chach. Although it may be in its natural state, fruit still manages to become *tamei*. The original rebellion of the trees rendered fruit far more appealing than the branches on which it grew. This results in a fruit that quickly forgets its origins, becoming susceptible to external contaminants as soon as it gets off the tree.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Righteous Etrog**

In the days following Yom Kippur, when we wonder how to hold on to the spiritual gains of the Days of Awe, the s'chach inspires us with its ability to remain pure despite its distance from its roots. The s'chach tells us the story of our ancestors and it tells our story as well. Although we may live in a different world than our parents, and our Source may hide behind the iron curtain of nature, we too can hope for purity if only we remain true to our origins.

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

When man brings home the fruits of his labors, he feels a sense of accomplishment. With a heart full of pride, he exclaims, “Look at what I have accomplished! Look at what I have made! Nature and I, we’re a great team!” Full of himself, man forgets the G-d that generously provided him with everything he has. So on Sukkot, at the time of the ingathering of crops, we gently remind man that he is not the one who makes things grow. The better he recognizes that truth, the better he connects himself to the one true source of all existence.

This is all fine and good, but it’s insufficient to quash the rebellion. The entire physical realm, starting with the earth and the trees, craves independence. Everything and everyone wants to forget their creator. To effectively fight this battle we’ll need to utilize a loyal operative on the inside.

Not every tree sinned. There was one tree that did not follow the forest and did not rebel. The Talmud relates that the Etrog (citron) behaved itself and followed orders. The wood of the Etrog tree grew and grows today with the flavor of its fruit, as G-d intended (*Sukka* 35a). This explains why the Etrog is the symbol of the righteous, the *tzaddikim*.<sup>14</sup> The good behavior of the tree had a profound impact on its fruit.

The Torah describes the Etrog fruit as a “*pri etz hadar*,” which is usually translated as “beautiful fruit.” This is accurate,<sup>15</sup> but the Talmud points out that the word “*hadar*” does have another meaning, “that which lives or dwells.” The Torah is not only saying that the Etrog is beautiful; it is also telling us that the Etrog is a fruit which “dwells” on the tree.<sup>16</sup> While most fruit fall off when they are ripe, the citron hangs on year after year. It just won’t let go of its source! This is because the Etrog tree controlled its desire for independence from G-d, rejected the rebellion of the trees, and minimized the difference

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

between its wood and its fruit. As a result, the Etrog fruit, even after it reaches maturity, is in no rush to flee its origins. Here we have a physical manifestation of the allegorical verse, “It is a tree of life for those who cling to it” (Proverbs 3:18). The Etrog truly is a beautiful fruit!

With this background, a little-known Midrash becomes all the more astounding. According to one tradition, the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden was an Etrog tree! (*Bereishit Rabba* 15)<sup>17</sup> What other tree had a better understanding of good and evil? This was the one tree that recognized its divine roots and understood that the façade of materialism has no right to supremacy over the inner beauty of the spiritual. G-d commanded that the fruit of this tree be left alone to stand as a testament to its message. But Adam and Eve didn’t listen. They were seduced by the luscious, hanging fruit and they forgot the Source. Ironically, with the connected Etrog they sinned and disconnected themselves from G-d.<sup>18</sup> What a tragedy!

But there is hope for the future. When we obey G-d and pick up an Etrog on Sukkot, we are fixing Adam’s sin. Together with the s’chach, the Etrog reminds the world, the trees, and all of us that even as we gather in our produce and rejoice in our bounty, we can still remain conscious of and connected to the Divine Source of all. The more we do that, the more we counteract the rebellion of the trees and man, and the more immune we become to the spiritual dangers of the material world.



<sup>1</sup> See Leviticus 23:40

<sup>2</sup> Rashi ad loc., *Bereishit Rabba* 5:9

<sup>3</sup> The idea of the created having a say in the process of its own creation is admittedly quite bizarre. How could an inanimate object rebel against the programming of its creator? This is a difficult Midrash, but it may be that we are seeing the development here of a human prototype. G-d is stepping back (*tzimtzum*), in a sense, and introducing free will into the world. With free will comes the capability for rebellion against G-d, a necessary component in the design of human beings. The ultimate fulfillment of man is in living a G-d-centric life, and that is meaningful only when rebellion is an option.

<sup>4</sup> Biblical commentary of Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach Chizkuni. Provence, mid 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Lowe, 1525-1609.

<sup>6</sup> We now have a new answer to the question raised in note 3. Of course, the created has no say in its own creation. G-d is just writing the script of the creation story in this way to inform us of the rebellious nature inherent in all things physical.

<sup>7</sup> This explains why the land was punished when Adam sinned. See Genesis 3:17.

<sup>8</sup> *Sukkah* 12a from Deuteronomy 16:13.

<sup>9</sup> *Tumah* (*tamei*) is a mysterious spiritual state associated with death. People or things that come into contact with a Jewish corpse, for example, are said to have contracted “*tumah*.” Among other things, a person who is *tamei* may not enter the Holy Temple nor eat sacrificial meats. (Due to the current lack of a Temple in Jerusalem, most of the laws of *tumah* have no current application.) Purification from *tumah* is achieved through immersion in a mikva (ritual bath) or, in the case of contact with a corpse, with the ashes of the Red Heifer (Numbers 19:1-22). The laws of *tumah* are described at length in the book of Leviticus and in the *Taharot* order of Mishnah.

<sup>10</sup> The *Bach* (O.C. 625) infers from the *Tur* (ad loc.) that despite the fact that ordinarily mitzvot do not technically require intent (*kavana*) for their fulfillment, the mitzvah of Sukkah is different. The aforementioned verse teaches that the Sukkah must remind us of the desert huts of our ancestors, and if no such thought comes to mind then the mitzvah of Sukkah remains unfulfilled. The *Mishnah Berurah*, however, rules in accordance with the opinion of the *Pri Megadim* that this intent is ideal but not imperative.

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (Hasidic Rebbe of Ger, 1847-1905) explains in his classic “Sefas Emes” (*Balak* 5647) that although the mission of the Jews is to fix the physical world, in order to do so they must first live outside of it. To be an effective master over nature, one must first go to the opposite extreme and be independent of nature. This is what occurred in the Sinai Desert. After that, the Jews could enter the Promised Land where they would lead a natural life, fulfilling the mitzvot of the land, thereby fixing and elevating the physical world.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that they were incapable of sin. On the contrary, the greatest sins of our history took place in the Sinai Desert. However, awareness of G-d’s presence was constant, and as a result the Jews always had solid rationalizations for their behavior. Although rationalized sins, when committed within the context of such a close relationship with G-d, may be inexcusable, at the same time they are limited in their ability to corrupt the soul.

<sup>13</sup> It must first get wet, however, before it can contract *tumah*. See Leviticus 11:34.

<sup>14</sup> *Vayikra Rabba* 30, see also Talmud *Shabbat* 88a

<sup>15</sup> This description of the Etrog as a “beautiful fruit” has halachic implications. An Etrog that lacks certain basic elements of beauty may be disqualified for use as a result (see Talmud *Sukkah* 36a-b).

<sup>16</sup> “G-d said one [thing]; I heard two – for G-d is mighty’ (Psalms 62). [This teaches that] one verse can have multiple meanings” (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 34a).

<sup>17</sup> The sages had several competing traditions as to what type of tree the Tree of Knowledge was (see Talmud *Berachot* 40a and *Bereishit Rabba* 15), but interestingly, they all agree that it was not an apple. The idea that the Tree of Knowledge was an apple tree is a popular misconception arising from Christian sources.

<sup>18</sup> A strange thing happens after they eat the fruit. “The eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked...” (3:7). What is the meaning of this? Rabbi Baruch Sorotzkin z”l has an excellent explanation of these mystical events. The fruit transformed the Adam and Eve’s consciousness, and this altered consciousness continues to afflict humanity to this very day. Initially, Adam and Eve were perfectly comfortable in the nude. This is not because they lacked our sensitivities. On the contrary, they were holy people who felt the need for covering themselves. The only difference between them and us is how the self is defined. In their innocence, Adam and Eve saw themselves as souls and

## QUASHING THE REBELLION OF THE TREES

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did not identify with their bodies at all. Their bodies thus served as a garment for their souls. They felt no need to put clothing on top of a body that is itself clothing. But by focusing on the forbidden fruit of the tree and allowing themselves to be seduced by externals, a fundamental change took place within Adam and Eve. After eating the fruit they no longer identified themselves as souls; they saw themselves as bodies. Suddenly, they felt naked.

# Beyond Sukkot:

## Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah and the Long, Hard Winter

*Rabbi Moshe Adatto*

**F**ame. Some holidays have got it, and some don't. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are on the map – even if you're not Jewish you've probably heard about them. Sukkot, on the other hand, is relatively unknown. However, even Sukkot's lack of prominence is nothing compared to the anonymity of Shemini Atzeret. So, if you don't know what Shemini Atzeret is, don't worry – you're in the majority.

Shemini Atzeret is a biblical holiday which immediately follows the seven days of Sukkot. Its lack of fame can be attributed, in part, to the fact that it is tacked on to the end of Sukkot. However, perhaps a more serious issue that complicates this holiday is confusion: confusion about what the holiday is, and confusion about what we are celebrating.

### **The Identity Crisis**

The very name of the holiday is a source of confusion. '*Shemini*' literally means eighth, giving the impression that this is the eighth day of *Sukkot*. However, the Torah refers to Sukkot

## BEYOND SUKKOT

as a seven-day holiday. By the time we celebrate Shemini Atzeret, Sukkot is history; biblically, the mitzvot of Sukkah, *Lulav* and *Etrog* are over.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, nowhere in the prayer service do we find Shemini Atzeret being called “Sukkot.” So, even an elementary attempt to understand its name shows *Shemini Atzeret* to be one mixed up holiday.

Although the Torah calls this day Shemini Atzeret and presents its celebration as a continuation of the pilgrimage festival of Sukkot, we have another name for it. This day is also called “Simchat Torah.”<sup>2</sup> The source of this name seems to flow from the custom to complete the yearly cycle of Torah reading on this day.<sup>3</sup> However, this custom itself needs to be understood. Why did the rabbis arrange the cycle of Torah readings to end on Shemini Atzeret? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to complete the Torah on Shavuot, the day on which we received it? What is Shemini Atzeret’s connection to Torah?

The day’s schizophrenic nature slowly but surely manifests itself. On the one hand, Shemini Atzeret is a continuation of Sukkot; but on the other hand it is its own holiday. This paradox is captured beautifully in the Talmud, where Shemini Atzeret is described as a separate holiday only in regard to six laws.<sup>4</sup> When asked our question, “Is it part of Sukkot or is it a separate holiday?” The Talmud resoundingly answers, “Yes!”

### **Part and Apart**

Any attempt to classify Shemini Atzeret as either a separate holiday or as part of Sukkot is doomed to fail. Clearly, it is not one or the other; it must be both at the same time. But how is it possible to be both a part and apart? Either Shemini Atzeret is a distinct holiday or it is just another day of Sukkot!

## BEYOND SUKKOT

Additionally, the idea of Shemini Atzeret as a distinct holiday is troubling. The meaning of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are clear; they celebrate freedom, the receiving of the Torah, and Divine protection in the desert, respectively. What is the nature of this fourth holiday? The Torah's silence on the issue is deafening.

Nowhere is this apparent void of inner meaning as manifest as in our holiday prayers. Each holiday is given a description: Pesach is the time of our freedom; Shavuot is the time of the giving of our Torah; Sukkot is the time of our happiness. However, Shemini Atzeret's description is exactly that of Sukkot; it is the time of our happiness. What kind of holiday does not have its own unique character?

### Stay Just a Little Bit Longer...

We know that all biblical names contain the secret of an object's essence. Since "Shemini" only confuses us, let us see what "Atzeret" has to offer. The root of *Atzeret* is 'Atzar,' which means 'to stop.' Aside from the straightforward understanding that a holiday is a time when we stop performing certain forms of creative labor, Rashi has this to say about the work stoppage on the eighth day:

*I stopped ('Atzarti') you with me. This is analogous to a king who invited his sons to a party for a couple of days. When the time came for them to leave, [the king] said, "My sons, please stay with me one more day; your leaving is difficult for me!"*

Rashi, Leviticus 23:36<sup>5</sup>

In order to appreciate the truth of this parable, we need to understand Shemini Atzeret's position as the climax of the High

## BEYOND SUKKOT

Holidays. After rededicating ourselves to G-d on Rosh Hashanah and experiencing the purification of Yom Kippur, we are finally prepared to celebrate Sukkot. G-d invites us into His home<sup>6</sup> for seven days, and we move in. In the Sukkah there is no mitzvah to do anything specific; we just eat, drink, and live a normal life there. What makes it special is that we are doing it in G-d's presence, and that makes all the difference in the world. Like newlyweds, we don't need to do anything special together, we just enjoy being together.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not possible to maintain that kind of closeness forever. After seven days in "the king's palace," it is time to go home. But when it's over, G-d pleads with us to stay just "one more day." Shemini Atzeret is the goodbye party as we make the transition from the spiritual high of Sukkot back to the mundane, predominantly physical existence of everyday life.

Shemini Atzeret is intrinsically connected to Sukkot; it comes as a direct result of the Sukkot experience. Because it cannot exist out of the context of Sukkot, its existence is wrapped up with Sukkot's – it is the eighth day. However, it is an *external* response to the Sukkot experience, and in this sense is a separate holiday.

However, in the parable of the Midrash, the extra day is the same as the first seven – the party goes on. If Shemini Atzeret were to follow that pattern, it would require an extra day in the Sukkah, not a separate, one-day celebration in our homes. Additionally, in the human psyche we can understand the advantages of an extra day to say goodbye – it gives a person the time to adjust to being without the other person and the comfort of having a little bit more time together with the person who is going away. However, when applied to G-d these ideas become unintelligible. In short, G-d can deal. So, why the need for a goodbye party?

### The Four Seasons

To get to the bottom of this issue, we must understand why we are saying goodbye to G-d at this time of year. Shemini Atzeret doesn't only conclude the period of closeness of Sukkot, or just the High Holidays either; Shemini Atzeret concludes the year-long holiday cycle. Despite the fact that Rosh Hashana is the Jewish "New Year," our holidays follow a different monthly cycle which begins with Pesach.<sup>8</sup> That puts Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret at the very end of the cycle and Shemini Atzeret's goodbye is thus a goodbye to the whole holiday season.

Judaism views physical reality as an expression of a deeper spiritual reality<sup>9</sup> and the seasons of the year are no exception. Winter, as the coldest and darkest time of the year, is a time of spiritual distance. As the world warms up and the light steadily increases, our sense of G-d's imminence grows. This continues until the intimacy peaks at the end of summer, when we experience peaks in both physical and spiritual heat. Autumn marks the beginning of the end. Things slowly cool down as we slide back into the darkness of winter.

This perspective explains the timing of the Jewish holidays. During the cold, dark winter, G-d is "distant" and there are no biblical holidays.<sup>10</sup> Every holiday falls during the warm, clear months of spring and summer because holidays are appropriate when G-d is close. This broad holiday season begins with Pesach in the spring, continues with Shavuot and the High Holidays in the summer and ends with Sukkot / Shemini Atzeret which comes right at the end of summer and beginning of fall. As the last holiday before the long winter, Sukkot, and more specifically Shemini Atzeret, is the time to gather in and store spiritual fuel for the winter. The Torah alludes to this idea when it calls Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, "*Chag Ha'asif*," the



## BEYOND SUKKOT

Holiday of Gathering (Exodus 23:16). Aside from its straightforward meaning, namely that the fruits that were harvested over the summer were gathered into silos before Sukkot, this name also refers to the gathering of the spiritual fruits that were produced by the clarity that summer brings. And just as the physical produce must get us through the cold winter, so too the spiritual produce must maintain our connection to G-d through the period of spiritual darkness. The term “*Atzeret*” of “*Shemini Atzeret*” is related to the term “*Otzar*,” which means ‘to store’. As the final day of Sukkot, on *Shemini Atzeret* the ingathering of Sukkot is complete – the “produce” has been stored.<sup>11</sup>

The key to surviving the winter is *Shemini Atzeret*. As Rashi noted, *Shemini Atzeret* is G-d’s response to the reality that the party is over. The time of overt closeness has come to an end. We are leaving G-d’s house and returning to our own more physical dwellings. We are leaving the light and warmth that come from closeness to G-d, and beginning the descent into the cold, dark winter. And while it’s true that G-d can deal with the separation, we need help figuring out how to cope with a “long distance relationship.” To prepare us for this letdown, we are given one more day of closeness with G-d, one more day to bask in the warmth of “summer.”

In addition to cushioning us emotionally, this extra day teaches us a powerful lesson. Though the essence of the day is closeness with G-d, we don’t stay in the Sukkah, G-d’s house. Instead, we return to our homes, the place where we will spend the winter. We don’t have any special mitzvot and we don’t do anything extraordinary. However, the message behind the celebration is anything but small. The closeness that we have achieved with G-d during the summer is real. Despite the coming darkness and distance, we know that our relationship with G-d is strong enough to withstand that distance. Like an

old married couple whose relationship is no longer in need of physical proximity, we too are confident in the strength of our relationship with G-d, and can feel comfortable despite the “physical” distance.

### **What’s in a Number?**

Shemini Atzeret’s complex relationship with Sukkot expresses itself with numbers. In Judaism, numbers are pregnant with meaning, with each number representing a different idea. The number seven symbolizes the natural order; much like the world, which was created in seven days. Sukkot is a seven day holiday because it represents the natural closeness to G-d which developed in the light and clarity of summer. The next number, eight, is one step higher than the natural world. It represents supernatural phenomena, such as the eight-day miracle of Chanukah. Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of Sukkot, thus represents supernatural closeness to G-d. Naturally, living with G-d should only be possible during the summer when the warmth and radiance of the sun is a sign of G-d’s closeness. During the winter, summertime intimacy should not be possible. Shemini Atzeret informs us that we can live with G-d even when it’s not naturally possible.<sup>12</sup>

### **Shemini Atzeret as Simchat Torah**

We are now ready to understand Shemini Atzeret’s connection to Torah. We have seen that Shemini Atzeret is a celebration of our relationship with G-d. It was the Torah that created that relationship! By giving us a Torah, G-d established a covenant with us and we became G-d’s partners in bringing about His vision for man and the world. It is this relationship that we celebrate on Shemini Atzeret.

Therefore, Shemini Atzeret is also the perfect day to celebrate the Torah.<sup>13</sup> It's not a day of study, nor an anniversary of an historical event related to the Torah – it is simply a day to express our joy through song and dance. We celebrate the fact that G-d forged our relationship by sharing His will and giving us a mission and a purpose. This is why the rabbis chose to complete the Torah reading cycle on Shemini Atzeret. Torah is only understood when we take it in its entirety. By completing the Torah, we gain a full perspective of its beauty and its meaning in our lives. Then, and only then, are we filled with “Simchat Torah,” the joy and happiness that the possession of Torah brings.<sup>14</sup>

It turns out that the reason this day is called “Simchat Torah” is because of the nature of Shemini Atzeret itself, and not because we complete the Torah. Contrary to popular belief, Shemini Atzeret was celebrated as Simchat Torah even before the custom to complete the Torah on that day!<sup>15</sup> It was the natural connection between Shemini Atzeret and Torah that led to the decision to complete the annual reading of the Torah on this day. The day on which we appreciate the gift of Torah in our lives is the perfect time to appreciate the Torah in its entirety. And it's also the perfect time to start it all over again.

### **The Unity of Shemini Atzeret**

All of the different strands of Shemini Atzeret are now united. It is part of Sukkot because it celebrates our relationship with G-d; but at the same time it is also a separate holiday because it celebrates a different, deeper level of this relationship. On Shemini Atzeret, the climax of the holiday cycle, we are released from the natural limitations of the number seven and we move up to the supernatural quality of eight. By Shemini Atzeret, our relationship with G-d has reached maturity and we are no longer limited by the spiritual

## BEYOND SUKKOT

nature of the seasons. Shemini Atzeret enables the intimacy of the Holidays to survive the darkness of winter. And on this day, we appropriately rejoice in the source of the relationship – the Torah. As possessors of Torah, our relationship with G-d will remain strong whether it is a time of light and clarity or darkness and distance.

Shemini Atzeret is a celebration of our intimate, eternal relationship with G-d. It may not be famous, but maybe it's better to celebrate the relationship in private.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, currently in Israel Jews do not sit in a Sukkah on Shemini Atzeret. However, in the Diaspora most Jews have the custom to sit in the Sukkah on Shemini Atzeret without reciting the blessing on the mitzvah (as per the Talmud Sukkah 47a). This practice is a carry over from the time when the Jewish calendar was not set, but was declared by the court at the start of each month. This allowed for the possibility of confusion between the seventh day of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret for Jews who lived far from the court in Jerusalem. See Talmud (Beitzah 4b) as to why we continue with this practice even today when the calendar is set. Be that as it may, Jews sit in a Sukkah on Shemini Atzeret despite the fact that it is Shemini Atzeret, not because it is Shemini Atzeret.

<sup>2</sup> Many Jews living outside of the land of Israel mistakenly believe that Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are two separate holidays, with Shemini Atzeret being the day after Sukkot and Simchat Torah being the day after that. However, this is not accurate. Although it is true that biblically Shemini Atzeret is a only a one day holiday, in the Diaspora it is celebrated for two days. As we find in the holiday service, both days following Sukkot are called Shemini Atzeret. Simchat Torah is merely the name of a secondary, non-biblical “holiday” that does not have a day of its own; *it is celebrated on the second day of Shemini Atzeret*. In Israel there is greater clarity, for Shemini Atzeret is celebrated for only one day, the day after Sukkot, and that day is also Simchat Torah. This article endeavors to find the connection between of the two celebrations of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

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<sup>3</sup> See Rama (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, 1530-1572), Orach Chayim 669:1, who cites this custom as the reason why we call this day Simchat Torah. However, later in the article we will question this premise.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud: Sukkah 48a. The six laws are: 1) as opposed to Sukkot, on Shemini Atzeret a lottery was drawn to determine which family of Kohanim (priests) received the right to bring the offerings in the Temple 2) a separate *Shehechyanu* blessing is recited, 3) we don't sit in the Sukkah, 4) Shemini Atzeret's holiday offerings in the Temple do not follow the pattern of Sukkot's, 5) the Levites sang a different chapter of Psalms than they sang on Sukkot, and 6) a different insertion is recited in the *Amidah* and *Birchat Hamazon* (i.e. we no longer call the holiday Sukkot, but Shemini Atzeret).

<sup>5</sup> Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, 1040-1105) appears to be quoting a Midrash. Indeed, see Nachmanides ad loc who, after quoting Rashi, cites the Midrash in Vayikrah Rabbah as Rashi's source. However, our present day editions of Vayikrah Rabbah do not contain this comment. The closest source in Rabbinic literature still extant is Sukkah 55b. However, there are significant differences between that text and Rashi's.

<sup>6</sup> See S'fat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, 1847-1905): Sukkot 5673.

<sup>7</sup> See Midrash, Sh'mot Rabbah 46:1 that Shavuot, which commemorates the Revelation at Sinai, is symbolic of the wedding between the Jews and G-d, with the Torah being the Ketubah. However, when Moshe broke the Tablets, the Ketubah was destroyed. Although that does not terminate the marriage, it does make the "couple" unable to live together. It is only after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when G-d gave the Jews the new Tablets (i.e. a new Ketubah) that G-d and the Jews were allowed to "live together as a married couple." Thus, Sukkot is the celebration of the rejuvenated relationship between G-d and the Jews.

<sup>8</sup> Rosh Hashana 2a

<sup>9</sup> See Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem* Chapter 46, pg. 176. For example, the fact that our sustenance in the physical world is dependent on rain falling from above is an expression of our entire existence, both physical and spiritual, depending on G-d infusing life from above in a much deeper way.

<sup>10</sup> Chanukah, which falls mid-winter, is a rabbinic holiday. Some have suggested that the Rabbis established a holiday at this time of year to aid us in surviving the spiritual difficulties of the winter. This provides us with new meaning in the light of the Menorah.

<sup>11</sup> See *Netivot Shalom*: vol. 2, Simchat Torah 1:3

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<sup>12</sup> Shemini Atzeret's connection to the number eight is so strong that the Midrash (*Tanchuma: Pinchas* #15) states that, in theory, it would have been celebrated in the eighth week after Sukkot. But due to the practical difficulty of traveling back to Jerusalem in mid-winter, the Torah placed Shemini Atzeret immediately after Sukkot.

<sup>13</sup> Siftey Chayim (Rabbi Chayim Friedlander, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholar in Israel), vol. 1, 346. See also Midrash Yalkut Shimoni (Pinchas #782), which says that the celebration of Shemini Atzeret is "in You (G-d) and in your Torah." See *Z'man Simchateinu* (Rabbi David Cohen), #35.

<sup>14</sup> See Maharal, introduction to *Tiferet Yisrael*, pg. 4.

<sup>15</sup> See Zohar: Pinchas 256b that Jews celebrated Shemini Atzeret as Simchat Torah even during the Tannaic Era, whereas the custom to complete the Torah on Shemini Atzeret only dates back to the Gaonic Era. Obviously, the Zohar does not mention the custom to complete the Torah on this day, and still cites the custom to rejoice over the Torah. See Siftey Chayim, vol. 1, pg. 346, footnote 2, which points out that this Zohar seems to contradict the Rama, quoted earlier in footnote 3.

# Building a Sukkah: A Halachic Guide

*Rabbi Avi Lebowitz*

*As the holiday of Sukkot approaches, many of us will be taking a field trip to The Home Depot or the local lumberyard and attempt to design a customized Sukkah. Bob the Builder types will go for a solid wood Sukkah, whereas others who are concerned about storage space will find themselves studying PVC pipes in the plumbing/electrical section. While Sukkah building is a fun and exciting family project, we need to keep several laws and customs in mind. These guidelines are what make the difference between a bona fide Sukkah and an ordinary hut, yet they leave plenty of freedom for innovative materials and creative designs.*

*The three main components of a Sukkah are the frame, the walls, and the s'chach (roof). The frame of the Sukkah can be formed from 2 x 4 x 10 plywood bolted together or simply by duct taping PVC pipes into large cube. The walls of the Sukkah can also be made from virtually any material, provided that they are tightly bound to the frame and do not sway in the wind. When it comes to the s'chach we are more limited. For the shade on the top of our Sukkah we must place tree branches, bamboo or other non-food items that grew from the ground.*

*This article is meant to serve as a concise yet thorough guide for the building of a kosher Sukkah as described by the Talmud and the halachic literature. Use it as a reference – not all of the details are always relevant – but there are many points that come up quite frequently. This guide is not all encompassing and unusual Sukkot may raise questions not dealt with here. The Jewish Study Network is proud to offer Sukkah consultation as a free service to the Jewish community - just email your query to avi@jsn.info.*

## WHY & WHEN

There is a biblical mitzvah to dwell in a Sukkah for the seven days of the holiday of Sukkot. By dwelling in a Sukkah we commemorate the huts that our ancestors lived in when they traveled across the Sinai desert. The Sukka also commemorates the protective “Clouds of Glory” that surrounded the Israelites as they made their way to the Holy Land.

One might expect the mitzvah of dwelling in a Sukkah to accompany the holiday of Passover, for it was after the Exodus that our desert travels began. However, the Torah wants to emphasize that the move from our homes into the Sukkah is purely for the sake of doing a mitzvah. We are instructed, therefore, to celebrate Sukkot in a season when most people are returning to their homes and preparing for winter, rather than during the spring when people commonly move into bungalows and Sukkah type vacation homes.

To demonstrate our excitement for the mitzvah, it is best to begin construction of our Sukka immediately after Yom Kippur, rather than procrastinating until right before Sukkot.



## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Choosing the right site for your Sukkah is no trivial matter. A Sukkah must be built in an open area where there are no trees or overhang separating the s'chach from the sky. Placing a Sukkah underneath a tree or overhang is tantamount to building the Sukkah inside one's dining room and renders it unfit for use on the holiday. However, in certain circumstances, a sparse tree may not invalidate a Sukkah. (This is a complex issue; in the event that there is nowhere else to build your Sukkah, a rabbinic authority should be consulted.)

A Sukkah may be constructed on a movable object such as a ship or a truck. But one should bear in mind that the Sukkah must be capable of withstanding the expected wind speed of the environment in which it is built.

Although some ritual items such as the *lulav* and *etrog* may only be used by their owner for the fulfillment of the relevant mitzvah (that is, one cannot fulfill their obligation with a borrowed lulav or etrog), the mitzvah of the Sukkah is different. It is not necessary to own the Sukkah to fulfill the mitzvah of using it. Therefore, if one does not have their own Sukkah, they can make arrangements to use a friend's.

There is a major distinction between using a borrowed Sukkah, and using a stolen Sukkah. A borrowed Sukkah is kosher, but a stolen Sukkah, aside from violating the prohibition against theft, is rendered non-kosher for use as a Sukkah. There is an interesting consequence of this prohibition. One must be careful not to construct their Sukkah on public property, unless they were granted specific permission by the city to do so, because the "stolen" ground on which the Sukkah is constructed may

classify the Sukkah as a “stolen” Sukkah and thus be considered invalid.

## SUKKAH DESIGN

*The term “Sukkah” comes from the word for a hut’s roofing material, “s’chach.” This is because the primary function of the Sukkah is to provide shade from the hot sun and that is accomplished by the s’chach. We therefore find far more standards and requirements regarding the s’chach than we find for the walls. We will follow the sequence of construction and discuss the walls first.*

### **I Enclosed Area**

The minimum area that a Sukkah must enclose is 7 *tefachim* in length and 7 *tefachim* in width. A *tefach* is a Talmudic measurement of approximately 4 inches; therefore a Sukkah must be at least 28 inches by 28 inches. It is assumed that the head and majority of the body of an average adult can fit in that space. There is no limit to how large an area a Sukkah can enclose, provided that it does not violate any other criteria necessary for a proper Sukkah.

A round Sukkah is kosher provided that it is large enough to inscribe a 7 x 7 *tefach* square inside of it. A round Sukkah must therefore have a diameter of at least 40 inches.

Ideally a Sukkah should consist of four walls, but one can construct a Sukkah with just three full walls. Under circumstances where one is short on materials, one can even construct a Sukkah of even less than three full walls, if they are situated properly.

Two perpendicular walls, the length and width of each being 10 feet, plus a third wall of at least 7 tefachim (28 inches), make a valid Sukkah. Even the area beyond the 7 *tefach* wall that is only encompassed by the two 10 foot walls is also considered within the Sukkah as long as it is covered with s'chach. (See diagram A on page 64.)

One can even construct a Sukka from as little as two walls plus a half a wall of 16 inches if it is configured in a very specific way. The two walls should be placed perpendicular to one another and the half wall should be placed as a third wall attached to one of the first two. A post is placed directly opposite the corner of the two main walls in the spot that you would like the third wall to reach. A beam, or a taught string, is then used to connect the top of the post to the top of the partial wall. This suffices to create a halachically recognized third wall. (See diagram B on page 64.)

## **II Materials for Sukkah Wall Construction**

The walls of a Sukkah may be constructed from any material provided that they are strong enough to withstand a normal wind. The definition of a “normal” wind in this context is location-specific. The Sukkah must be able to withstand a typical, expected wind of the location where it is built. When canvas or the like are used for the Sukka walls, one must see to it that they are securely fastened so that they do not sway more than 12 inches in a normal wind. This is the most common fault of poorly built Sukkot.

One should not use the forbidden mixture of wool and linen for Sukkah walls. Furthermore, one should not hang materials of this type in the Sukkah for decoration unless they are out of grasp.

### III Halachic Sukkah Walls

In Talmudic law, airspace of less than three *tefachim* (one foot) is viewed as if it were closed. This concept is called *lavud*, and when complete physical walls are not possible, *lavud* is very useful. Using *lavud*, walls of a Sukkah may be constructed by placing vertical poles less than a foot from one another. The area in between will be considered halachically closed, creating virtual walls and a kosher Sukkah.

Similarly, kosher Sukkah walls can be made by tying multiple fishing lines around the frame of the Sukkah, or nailing in 2x2s, each one within one foot of the next. Here too *lavud* “connects” all of the horizontal strings or planks, unifying them into a “wall.” With this in place, nothing more is needed. We will then not be concerned if the “actual” walls sway in the wind since the virtual, halachic walls are sufficient.

### IV Sukkah Height

The minimum height of a Sukkah is 10 *tefachim* (40 inches). This requirement applies to the s’chach and the walls as well; they both must be at least 10 *tefachim* high. The halachic definition of a wall requires a height of ten *tefachim*. In regard to the roof, any area with a roof that is lower than ten *tefachim* off the ground is not considered suitable for living.

The maximum height of a Sukkah is 20 *amot* (approximately 32 feet). The reason for the maximum height of a Sukkah is that the Torah insists on a type of hut that can be constructed as a temporary structure, whereas a Sukkah that is higher than 20 *amot* can only stand if it is built as a permanent structure. The maximum height is a limitation on the height of the s’chach rather than the walls.

One can design a Sukkah where the walls are only 10 *tefachim* high and the s’chach is 19 *amot* high. It is a perfectly valid

Sukkah despite the fact that the walls do not even come close to reaching the s'chach.

Decorative materials that are hung from the roof of the Sukkah, even if they are dense and hang below ten *tefachim* (40 inches) do not reduce the size of the Sukkah as far as halacha is concerned. Therefore, one can place decorations even in a minimal size Sukkah (28" x 28" x 40") and the Sukkah will remain kosher, even though there is now less usable space in the Sukkah.

## THE "S'CHACH"

*Being that the s'chach (roof) is the primary element of the Sukkah, it is blessed with a wealth of halachic details. We can break down the Biblical requirements into six categories: 1. It must be made from a material that grows from the ground. 2. It must be made from a material that is not susceptible to contracting impurity. 3. It must not be attached to the ground while it is being used as s'chach. 4. It must be dense enough to block out the majority of the sunlight. 5. It must be valid s'chach at the time that it is placed on the Sukkah. 6. The height must not exceed 32 feet. There are also some additional rabbinic requirements for s'chach. We will begin with the first three points which define the material itself.*

### **I What Is S'chach?**

The s'chach must be made from a material that grows from the ground. However, aside from growing from the ground, there is a second important characteristic. S'chach must not be able to contract *tumah*, spiritual impurity. Only certain items are capable of contracting *tumah*: food items, receptacle containers, and finished goods. Therefore, s'chach must be a "raw" material that grows from the ground such as wood, branches, leaves, straw, nutshells and husks of grain. It cannot be made from the

fruit itself since food items are susceptible to contracting *tumah* impurity. It also cannot be made from dirt which is considered the ground itself and thus does not grow from the ground, nor can it be made from wood products that were manufactured to be window shades, floor mats, etc. S'chach mats may be used provided that they were originally manufactured with the expressed intent to be used for s'chach.

The third requirement for s'chach itself is that it must not be attached to the ground. One can use the branches of a tree for s'chach, but only after they have been cut from the tree.

## **II How Much S'chach Do I Need?**

The fourth requirement states that one have enough s'chach over the Sukkah so that when the sun shines directly overhead at midday there will be more shade in the Sukkah than sunlight. However, one should not make the s'chach too dense. Ideally, the s'chach should cover the entire Sukkah so that there is plenty more shade than sun, but it is sparse enough for one to view the stars through the cracks. In a situation where the s'chach is very dense so that the stars are not visible, the Sukkah is still valid provided that rain can penetrate the roof. If rain cannot penetrate the roof then it is too similar to a permanent structure and is therefore unfit to be used as a Sukkah. (Although one's home or bungalow may sometimes fit the parameters of a kosher Sukkah, it is nonetheless biblically invalid since the Torah insists on a Sukkah to the exclusion of a home that is lived in throughout the year.)

Accordingly, one should not use any type of branches or leaves that are prone to dry out and shrink or fall, resulting in a Sukkah which lacks sufficient shading. This problem is often underestimated.

### III The De Facto Sukkah

The fifth requirement is more complex. The language the Torah uses for the mitzvah of Sukkah is “*Make Sukkot for yourselves*” (Deuteronomy 16:13). This implies that the s’chach, the primary element of the Sukkah, must be physically placed on the Sukkah for that purpose. If one dug into a pile of straw hollowing out an area large enough to be a Sukkah (i.e. a straw igloo), it would not be kosher, since the straw used as s’chach was not placed there as a roof to provide shade. Similarly, if one were to place branches that were still attached to a tree over their Sukkah, and only afterward cut the branches from the tree, the Sukkah would be invalid since at the time that the s’chach was placed, it was not kosher s’chach. (This concept is known as *ta’aseh veloh min ha’asuy*, “*Make [Sukkot]*” (ibid), to the exclusion of the *already made*.)

If one used the branches of a tree as s’chach but only cut them from the tree after they were placed on the Sukkah, each piece of s’chach must be subsequently lifted and placed back down again with the intent of using it for s’chach (or at least for the purpose of providing shade).

There is a dispute in a situation where one builds a Sukkah inside a house, and then removes the house whether such a Sukkah is in violation of our principle. However, when a removable roof is opened and s’chach is laid down in its place, it is a perfectly valid Sukkah. In this situation one may even close the removable roof on top of the s’chach in order to protect the Sukkah from rain. When it is reopened, the Sukkah will remain valid. Similarly, one may place a tarp over s’chach in the event of rain and later remove the tarp after the rain has passed. Obviously, as long as the tarp is covering the s’chach the Sukkah is temporarily invalid.

Since it is necessary to place the s'chach so that it will be kosher at the moment it is placed on the Sukkah, some insist on placing the s'chach on the Sukkah only after the walls are already standing. Therefore, if one is building a frame to which they will attach walls and place the s'chach, the walls must be set up prior to the placing of the s'chach on the frame.

#### **IV Disqualified S'chach**

There is a rabbinic institution limiting how wide each individual piece of s'chach may be. One cannot use wood that is wider than 4 *tefachim* (16 inches). (When each piece is less than 4 *tefachim* but they are adjacent to one another so that they create a board larger than 4 *tefachim*, it is questionable whether this is included in the restriction.) Even if the wood is placed so that the width that is larger than 16 inches is facing sideways so that the foot print on the roof is less than 16 inches, it is still not valid for s'chach. The reason for this is because planks that have a width of 16 inches or more are considered standard construction material. The sages were concerned that if such planks were used, people would not recognize the difference between Sukkot and huts that are lived in all year round. (A dwelling that is lived in all year round is biblically invalid, since the Torah insists on a "Sukkah" to the exclusion of a house). Although planks that are less than 16 inches wide are permitted, it is customary to avoid using any type of wood that is normally used in construction. Thus, one should not use 2x4s as s'chach, but rather thinner and more fragile slats of wood.

If one lacks ideal s'chach, one may resort to materials that are rabbinically disqualified.

One should also not use as s'chach (or as a wall) an item that has a putrid smell or branches whose leaves are constantly falling off, because we are concerned that the annoyance of the strong odor or falling leaves will cause you to leave the Sukkah.



Also, the falling leaves may reduce the s'chach to less than fifty percent of the ceiling, rendering the Sukkah invalid.

#### **V “Halachic” S’chach**

We explained previously that there is a halachic concept known as “*lavud*.” This concept allows us to consider any open space less than three *tefachim* (1 foot) to be viewed as closed. We can apply this concept to s'chach as well. If a breach in the s'chach creates an opening of less than one foot wide, we can view the area as closed and the Sukkah remains valid. However, one may not sit underneath that area even though it is viewed as closed, because it is not considered to be closed with valid s'chach. In a situation where the s'chach has a three *tefach* gap which spans across the width of the Sukkah, the validity of the entire Sukkah is in jeopardy. A halachic authority should be consulted.

Surprisingly, one may use non-kosher s'chach to fill in gaps and holes. The advantage to filling in the holes even with non-kosher s'chach, as opposed to leaving them empty, is that if left empty the maximum open airspace that is allowed is 3 *tefachim* (one foot), whereas if the space is filled in the halachah allows up to 4 *tefachim* (16 inches) of non-kosher s'chach. There is a dispute among the authorities whether one may sit directly underneath the invalid s'chach. However, when there is less than 3 *tefachim* (one foot) of non-kosher s'chach, all agree that one can sit underneath that area just as if it were kosher s'chach. Common examples of non-kosher s'chach include metal poles and the overhang of a tree or an awning (on top of the s'chach).

One can use the concept of “*lavud*” and non-kosher s'chach simultaneously. For example, if there is less than 4 *tefachim* of non kosher s'chach adjacent to less than 3 *tefachim* of airspace, the Sukkah is valid. However, some authorities raise a question regarding a situation where 4 *tefachim* of non-kosher s'chach is split by less than 3 *tefachim* of airspace, whether we implement

the concept of *lavud* to view all 4 *tefachim* of *s'chach* as one unit thereby invalidating the Sukkah. Nonetheless, if there were only 3 *tefachim* of non-kosher *s'chach* split by airspace of more than one *tefach* but less than 3, we do not consider the airspace to be filled with non-kosher *s'chach* to invalidate the Sukkah.

#### **VI The “Bent Wall”**

When non-kosher *s'chach* is placed adjacent to the wall, then we can use a halachic leniency known as “*dofen akumah*,” literally, a bent wall. This concept allows us to consider the non-kosher *s'chach* adjacent to the wall to be an extension of the wall itself. We can implement this concept to view the non-kosher *s'chach* as a bent extension of the wall for up to 4 *amot* (approximately six and a half feet)! Since we are viewing it as part of the wall, this non-kosher *s'chach* does not invalidate the Sukkah. However, one may not sit underneath this non-kosher *s'chach*, for it is not actually *s'chach* at all; it is part of the wall. (This concept of the bent wall is obviously not applicable if there is a gap of open airspace between the *s'chach* and the wall. However, it is worth noting that we can use *lavud* here too, so the actual wall need only come within 3 *tefachim*, i.e. one foot, of the *s'chach*.)

If the section of non-kosher *s'chach* is more than 4 *amot* wide it cannot be viewed as a bent continuation of the wall. The wall adjacent to it is therefore disconnected from the rest of the Sukka and cannot be counted as one of the Sukkah's walls. This may or may not be a problem; it depends on the number of remaining walls. Remember, a Sukkah need only have three walls. If this Sukkah was built with four walls, the Sukkah would still be valid even after ignoring the wall adjacent to the non-kosher *s'chach*, for three valid walls remain. However, if the Sukkah was originally constructed with only three walls, then by subtracting the wall adjacent to the non-kosher *s'chach*,

the Sukkah will be left with only two walls thereby rendering the entire Sukkah invalid.

### **VII S'chach Support**

Aside from requiring that actual s'chach be made from a material not susceptible to ritual impurity, many opinions require that even the support of the s'chach should be from a material that is kosher for sechach. The reason behind this restriction is a concern that if one uses such material to support the s'chach, one may come to use these items as the actual sechach.

This disqualifies material that is susceptible to ritual impurity for use as s'chach support. Therefore, one should not support the s'chach with metals, regardless of whether they are used to support the s'chach in the form of screws or nails, or as cross beams on which the s'chach rests. Furthermore, if the s'chach is very light in weight one cannot place these types of items on top of the s'chach to weigh it down and prevent it from blowing away. Similarly, one cannot use rope to tie the s'chach pieces to one another in order to prevent them from flying away, since rope is susceptible to ritual impurity and cannot be used as a direct support for the sechach. Nevertheless, s'chach mats that are manufactured for the purpose of being used as s'chach are permissible even though the slats are strung together.

One may screw, nail or tie down the wooden crossbeams on which the s'chach will be resting, since the s'chach is not being directly supported by the item which is susceptible to ritual impurity.

## INTERIOR DESIGN

One may not sit under a canopy or tent set up inside their Sukkah, since the canopy would separate the occupant from the s'chach. However, one may cover themselves with blankets inside the Sukkah as this does not constitute a separation. The definition of what constitutes a separation is a canopy that is 10 *tefachim* high (40 inches) with a flat "roof" of one *tefach* (4 inches) wide.

One may spread sheets of decorative material underneath the s'chach even though it will separate between them and the s'chach, provided that it is placed there for the purpose of beautifying the Sukkah and it is within 4 *tefachim* (16 inches) of the s'chach. This does not constitute a separation because the decorations become part and parcel of the Sukkah. However, if the purpose of the sheet is to provide protection from falling rain or even if it is placed there to catch pieces of falling s'chach, some authorities maintain that it invalidates the Sukkah. In general, when hanging decorations from the s'chach one should attempt to attach them high enough so that they do not hang down past 4 *tefachim* (16 inches) off the ceiling.

## MISCELLANEOUS

One may not construct a Sukkah with the intention of using it as a house and living in it permanently because the Torah insists on a "Sukkah" to the exclusion of a house.

A Sukkah does not have to be constructed specifically for the holiday of Sukkot. But the Sukkah must be built for the purpose of providing shade to the area underneath. Therefore, even a

Sukkah constructed by a non-Jew for his own purposes is perfectly valid so long as it was made for the purpose of providing shade.

A Sukkah that was left standing from the previous year may be used again for the holiday of Sukkot. However, one should either replace or add something to the s'chach.

A Sukkah need not be constructed prior to Sukkot. One may even construct a Sukkah on the intermediary days of the holiday. Certainly, if over the holiday the Sukkah was ruined, one may make the necessary repairs so that they will have a viable Sukkah for the remainder of the holiday.

Once the holiday begins, all of the material that were invested into the construction of the Sukkah and the beautification of the Sukkah are considered set aside for Sukkah use and cannot be used for any other purpose. One may not even take a splinter off the Sukkah wall to use as a toothpick.

Diagram A:

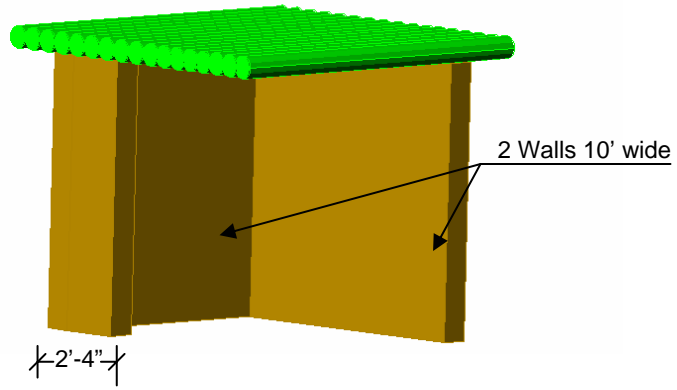
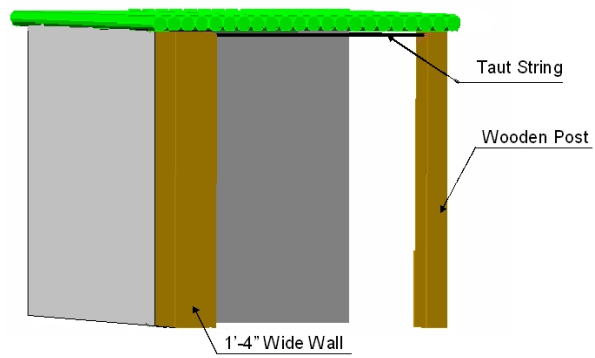


Diagram B:



Illustrations by Justin Bocian