

Symbolism on Sukkot

Rabbi Kenneth Auman

Faculty, Stern College for Women • Rabbi, Young Israel of Flatbush, Brooklyn, NY

Nissuch Hamayim – The Water Libation

Succot is unique among all the *yamim tovim* in that it featured water libations on the altar in the *Bet Hamikdash* each and every day of the holiday. This practice is not mentioned in the Torah, but is a *Halacha Lemoshe Misinai*, an oral tradition handed down generation after generation from Moses who received it at Sinai. The tradition does not present any rationale or explanation for the practice, and I offer the following symbolic *Chassidic* explanation for your consideration.

When a gift is given, the recipient can appreciate it in one of two ways. He may be grateful because of the nature of the gift itself – i.e. something important or something valuable – or he may be appreciative because of the identity of the person who gave the gift. Thus if a great, famous, or beloved person gives something of relatively little value, it will still be treasured - not due to the nature of the item, but rather because of who gave it.

Gd requested the water offering from us. Water is not a valuable item. Therefore it is obvious that Gd wishes it not because of the nature of the item, but rather because of who is giving it – the Jewish nation. So when we bring the water as a gift to Gd, at His request, that is an indication of **our** importance – that He treasures gifts from the Jewish nation even when they are of little value. This highlights the importance of *Klal Yisrael*.

But why specifically on *Succot*, and not on any other holiday? May I suggest that it is due to the proximity of *Succot* to the *Yamim Noraim*. During the *Yamim Noraim* period we took stock of our lives. If indeed we were honest with ourselves, we realized our many shortcomings. Recognizing shortcomings is not a pleasant task at all. It could very well lead to depression or sadness. And since everyone ought to be engaged in this process of introspection during the *Yamim Noraim*, we could all emerge from it in a collective state of depression as we realize and acknowledge our many failings.

Therefore God says to us, “Make a *yom tov*. As individuals you may have flaws, but together, as a nation you are the best. I treasure you and appreciate gifts from you even if they are of little monetary value because they come from you, my treasured nation.

Thus *Succot* is *zman simchatenu*...

Consider though, that on the very same altar that the water is poured over the holiday of *Succot*, seventy bulls were offered on behalf of the seventy nations of the world. This teaches us an important caveat to the lesson of Gd’s love for us. The fact that we are being told that we are great should not be taken as a denigration of anyone else. All nations are worthy of respect if they behave in a morally proper manner.

The Succah

We think of *galut* as being less than ideal, of being a punishment ... מפני הטאנו גלינו מארצנו The ideal state is to be in *Eretz Yisrael*, sovereign in our own land, rather than being in *galut*.

So too with the other form of exile mentioned in the Torah, that of the accidental murderer who must exile himself to a city of refuge – *Ir miklat*. The ideal situation would be for him to be at home, yet his accidental crime requires this punishment.

But we, on this holiday, are experiencing another type of *galut* – the *galut* of the *succah*.

Leave your permanent home and dwell in a temporary one.

Succah 2b

צא מדירת קבע ושב בדירת ארעי
סוכה ב:

This kind of *galut* is not a punishment at all; to the contrary, it leads us to the state of joy of ושמחת בחגך.

I would suggest that there are three differences between our *galut* on *Succot*, and the two previously mentioned ones.

1. With regard to the first two, we are propelled into *galut* against our wishes. On *Succot*, our journey to the *succah* is voluntary, taken to fulfill Gd's command. That itself causes joy.
2. With regard to the first two, we are taken away from something we like, and placed in a less desirable situation. Here, we are entering a place more holy than what we're leaving, the צילא דמהימנותא, the presence of Gd.
3. With the other two, we are taken away from that which is important to us. Here we are stating that our material possessions are not that important, that a meaningful life is more important. So this *galut* should serve to influence us even when we leave it...

Etrog

In our society we are far removed from many aspects of nature that were taken for granted by previous generations. The entire cycle of planting and harvesting is something that means very little to us. Certain symbolism that might have been evident to generations of yore, is often lost on us. An example of this is the *Midrashic* comment describing the *etrog*.

We read ... פרי עץ הדר, "And you shall take on the first day (of Succot) a beautiful fruit of a tree (or alternatively, the fruit of a beautiful tree)."

The *Merash* () attempts to explain the special characteristics of the *etrog* based on this verse.

Pri etz hadar - R' Chiyah taught, [this refers to] a tree whose fruit and wood taste the same, which is an etrog. Hadar - Ben Azai says [this refers to a fruit that] stays [dar] on its tree from one year to the next.

Vayikra Rabbah 30:8

פרי עץ הדר תני ר' חייא עץ
שטעם עצו ופריו שוה זה
אתרוג. הדר בן עזאי אמר
הדר באילנו משנה לשנה.
ויקרא רבה ל:ח

R. Chiyah, basing himself on the fact that the word for fruit and tree are together, posits that the uniqueness of the *etrog* is that both the fruit and the tree itself have the same taste.

Ben Azzai, in a play on the word "*haddar*," beautiful, reads it as "one who dwells." He is emphasizing the notion that the *etrog*, unique among fruits can remain on the tree for many seasons.

Both of these characteristics, the similarity of taste of the fruit and the tree, and the staying power of the *etrog*, imply consistency.

But they have different nuances with regard to consistency: The similarity of taste implies that the tree produces what it itself has. No hypocrisy, no double standard, but rather תוכו כבירו , what you see is what you get.

Therefore when we stand holding the *etrog* and praising Gd, we are stating that these praises are not just being uttered by our lips, but they are the true "fruit" of our hearts, they represent our innermost feelings and emotions.

The fact that the *etrog* can remain on the tree for many seasons, speaks to the ability of the *etrog* to withstand all different vagaries of weather. Therefore, when we stand holding the *etrog*, and praising Gd, we are stating that our praises are long lasting, and come from our hearts no matter what "weather" we are experiencing. Whether we are the recipients of good things or whether we experience adverse conditions, our faith and praise of Gd does not waver ...

Ushpizzin

The word *Ushpizin* means guests, and we know that it has a special connotation to *Succot*. The idea that each night of *Succot* we host in our *Succah* a distinguished guest from the past is not mentioned in the *Gemarah* or *poskim*, and comes to us through the *Zohar*.

But what is its significance? Some understand it as encouragement to invite the poor to one's *succah*, and that having "real" guests will invoke the approval of these great individuals from the past. But it is difficult to see the connection. (Also, then why not have *Ushpizin* on *Pessach* as well, when we are also encouraged to invite the poor?)

We know that the *succah* commemorates the ענני הכבוד in the desert. But the *succah* is more than mere commemoration. It is reenactment. What Williamsburg Virginia is to American culture, *lehavdil*, the *Succah* is for us. Just as when one visits Williamsburg (Va.) one is stepping into the past, so too, when we enter the *Succah* we are figuratively stepping into the past, and one again experiencing our ancestors' stay in the desert.

So when we leave our homes and enter the *succah*, we are leaving the 21st century and going back thousands of years. Therefore, all the great people from the past can enter our *succah* as well, and all of Jewish existence becomes merged into one ...

One might therefore say that the ארבע מינים represent Jewish unity in the present, and the *Succah* represents Jewish unity with the past. (This might explain the custom of the Ari to *bench lulav* in the *succah*).