

## Harvests, History and a Different Mountain: Why Sit in a Sukkah?



The Torah explains in Deuteronomy 16:13 that we observe Hag haSukkot חג הסוכות for seven days, to celebrate gathering our grain, making wine and harvesting our vineyards.

חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לְךָ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאַסְפֹּךְ מִגֶּרְנֶךָ וּמִיִּקְבֶּךָ:

After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days.

In the ancient world these commodities were the life-blood of our ancestors. Festivals were held to celebrate the fruit

of the vine, and wine, until spiritual life sobered up a little among the Jewish People.

The idea of God's kingship won out and a day of sounding the shofar was proclaimed. Rosh HaShanah displaced a totally grain and wine centered celebration. Yom Kippur reminded us of our spiritual potential. Sukkot sent us back to the world in fragile huts, to remind us more about the history mentioned in Leviticus than the earth worship noted.

Because specific gods were associated with bountiful yields and harvest, our ancestors decided that we needed to distance ourselves from imbibing ceremonies and celebrations that mirrored ancient wine god worship. Again, in Leviticus, Aaron and the priests were warned against coming to the altar drunk. We do call Sukkot Hag HaAsif, a harvest festival, to highlight its agricultural roots, but it is not the main focus.

In the Book of Leviticus a different reason for sitting in the Sukkah is offered. בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים The time for sitting is the same as in Deuteronomy, seven days (eight in the diaspora), but the Torah continues in Leviticus 23:43, "That your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt..." A feast was declared for reminding

the Jewish people of our history. The journey through the desert wilderness was to be recalled and recounted according to this passage.

Don't we already have a holiday about getting out of Egypt? It is true that it seems familiar, to say we are celebrating how God made us dwell in booths in the desert as it relates to the exodus. However, the Passover seder focuses us on the moments of our ancestors' gathering in their homes in Egypt and the miracles and signs of the ten plagues. Our home-based ritual stands in counter-distinction to our sukkah-based historical re-enactment of time in the desert.

But isn't there another holiday that celebrates the climax of the desert experience? Does not Shavuot commemorate our standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah from Moses, the Ten Commandments written and the law being taught? Was that not the moment our ancestors said, "Na'aseh v'nishma!" - "We will do, we will hearken?"

Sukkot just may have a Torah connection, but it is not to Mount Sinai and not to ten of the teachings of God written on two small, portable tablets. Quite distinctly, and quite wonderfully, the Sukkot and Torah connection, and a connection to a different mountain in the wilderness, comes through a play on the Hebrew word סוכה -

HaSukkot, Sukkahs in Deuteronomy 16 and הסכת -  
hassket - the same letters, different word and a verb in  
Deuteronomy 27:9.

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה וְהַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּים אֶל כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הַסְכֹּת | וּשְׁמַע  
יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נְהַיִיתָ לְעַם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying:  
Silence! Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the  
people of the LORD your God:

In Deuteronomy 16:13 we see the word הסכת *HaSukkot* -  
sukkah in the plural. That is a reference to the sukkot in  
which people would dwell (and must for the holy day, to  
celebrate) as they harvested grain and wine. The very  
same four letters are used in Deuteronomy chapter 27 to  
form another word! This is the only two times in the Torah  
these letters appear in this order. The chapter 27  
reference is not to a physical sukkah; the four letters are  
used to make the verb *hassket* - “to be mindful.”

Chapter 27 of Devarim describes Moses and Jewish  
elders speaking to the Children of Israel and teaching  
them Torah. The next generation was reminded of their  
connection with God, as well as to the land of Israel.

Moses was instructed to write all the words of the Torah on great stones that would be erected as a monument and teaching tool not on Mount Sinai but on Mount Ebal. According to Rashi, Moses wrote the Torah in seventy languages, to share the wisdom he had received and draw others closer to the sacred word of God. After the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan River, the stones were to go up as affirming their connection with both the land and the Torah.

Great rejoicing and feasting was commanded, after they crossed into the promised land and set up those great pillars. The Torah then says, “הסכת ושמע ישראל היום הזה” - “Be mindful of all this means, listen Israel, this day you have become the people of the Lord your God.” When we read of Sukkot in the verb *Hassket* - both being *הסכת* - we discover yet another deep reason to dwell in our booths and a new *kavannah*, intentionality, for the hag.

The parallelism between the *hasukkot* of chapter 16 and the verb *hassket* of chapter 27 is striking. Sit in the sukkah and be mindful that Moses and our elders taught us the words of the Torah when we arrived at Mt. Ebal. We normally regard this mountain as infamous, so here we have redeemed a geographical negative zone in Israel! Mt. Ebal is not the place to remain only associated with

the religious ritual of curses being pronounced (blessings were proclaimed on Grizim). However, Mount Ebal becomes the place at which both the written and oral Torah came together to ensure Jewish continuity and connectedness to God.

Sukkot is known as a holiday in which we can insert our entire selves, both physical and intellectual selves. With our bodies we enter the sukkah. With our minds we study Torah and Talmud and the teachings of the generations while we dwell in the Sukkah. The Gaon of Vilna held that one could say the blessing “Leishev BaSukkah” “to dwell in the Sukkah” not only for meals but when one sits down to study sifrei kodesh, any volume from the sacred library of Jewish tradition.

While we are encouraged to be grateful for the bounty of our harvests (Deuteronomy 16) and to remember historical experiences (Leviticus 23), another dimension arises when considering the linguistic echoes in הסכת - *hasukkot* and *hassket* and the use of the letters and the words they make in two different contexts.

Recalling that there is a goal of increasing our joy on Sukkot because the Torah commands us to be אך שמח - thoroughly joyful, we have identified a way to achieve this. Without being farmers or vintners or only made joyous

through recounting our history and God's kindnesses, we may engage in the simha shel limmud, the joy of Torah or Talmud study in our Sukkot!

So why sit in a Sukkah? To make time for Torah study - as Pirke Avot teaches:

שִׁמְאֵי אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה תוֹרָתְךָ קִבֵּעַ. אֲמַר מְעַט וְעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה, וְהוּי מְקַבֵּל  
:אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסִבֵּר פְּנִים יְפוֹת

Shammai used to say: make your [study of the] Torah a fixed practice; speak little, but do much; and receive all people with a pleasant countenance.

And that generates more joy - not only internal to our hearts but to share with others, as Shammai taught as well.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah!  
Rabbi Bolton