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Sukkot

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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Sukkot



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Listen and Learn about Sukkot 

The Symbolism of the Four Species

Torah regarding the four species: One is obliged to take on the Festival of *Sukkot*, “You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the citron tree (*esrog*), the branches of date palms (*lulav*), twigs of myrtle (*hadas*), and brook willows (*aravos*)...”

Midrash Tanchuma explaining the symbolism of the four species: “King Solomon in Proverbs states, ‘Listen My son and take My Commandments and they will be hidden with you...’ What is the meaning of ‘take My Commandments’? There are many situations in the *Torah* where the expression ‘take for yourself’ is used.

Whenever the expression of ‘taking’ is used in the *Torah*, regarding an obligation, the fulfillment of that Commandment is for our own benefit. (For example, the *Torah* states, ‘Take for Me *Terumah*.’ The *Torah* should have written ‘Give to Me *Terumah*.’ Why then does the *Torah* use the expression ‘take?’” When one gives something, as commanded by the *Torah*, he is the

beneficiary of that giving. Thus, he is in effect ‘taking’ for himself by ‘giving’.)

Midrash: “When the *Torah* states (regarding the building of the *Mishkan*), ‘Take (for) Me *Terumah*’ it does not simply state ‘Take *Terumah*’ but rather it states ‘(for) Me.’ Meaning when one takes the *Terumah* (for the building for the *Mishkan*) one also takes G-d along with it.” The *Midrash* continues to explain that the four species that are taken on *Sukkot* represent various segments of the Jewish people – those who possess *Torah* and *Mitzvos*, those with *Torah* and are lacking in *mitzvos*, those who possess *mitzvos* and do not have *Torah*, and those who are devoid of *mitzvos* and *Torah*.

Commentators: Although there is a segment of Jews who are devoid of *Torah* and *mitzvos*, they are still considered connected to the Jewish people because they identify themselves as Jews.

Midrash regarding all of these segments of Jews: “All together you should be one grouping so that there

should not be any blemish among any of My children. If you do as I instruct you, I will elevate you...”

Chazal: The symbolism of the binding of the four species is the equivalent of binding all of the segments of the Jewish people together – causing them to be seen as one entity.

Every *mitzvah* brings about a positive consequence. However, one’s intent will determine the degree of that consequence. The binding of the *lulav* together with the other species generates an effect that causes a binding of the Jewish people together. Even the *rasha* (evil person) is affected and subsumed through this unification of all of these entities. Seemingly, if one has an understanding of each of the species of the *lulav* and binds them together with the intent of unifying all of the segments of the Jewish people (as G-d wants – He does not want to see a blemish in His Children) then the effect of the *mitzvah* has a greater impact.

Gemara in Tractate *Rosh Hashanah*: The consequence of bringing the *Omer* offering (grain offering), which was comprised of the new barley grain, is to bring blessing to the grain that is in the field. The consequence of the bringing water libations on *Sukkot* is that there should be rains of blessing (*gishmai beracha*). In every instance G-d asks the Jew to bring offerings not for His sake but rather for the sake of the Jew. We as a Jewish people are especially beneficiaries of G-d’s blessing when we are united as one people. This is the value of binding the four species of the *lulav* on *Sukkot*. Every Jew becomes intertwined with his fellow.

Reb Yisroel Salanter z’tl: If a Jew speaks *lashon hara* (negative speech with no value) in Vilna, a Jew in *Brisk* would transgress the *Shabbos*. Every Jew affects his fellow – in the negative as well as in the positive. Thus, when an individual engages in *Torah* study and perform *mitzvos*, the entire Jewish people are elevated and advanced because of his investment.

The All-Encompassing Principle of the Torah

Prophet Isaiah: “Do not continue bringing Me a worthless meal offering. The incense offering that is an abomination....”

Gemara in Tractate *Yomah*: The Second Temple was destroyed because of *sinaas chinam* (baseless hatred)

between Jews. This lack of unity among the Jewish people resulted in the tragedy of the destruction of the Second Temple. There were eleven ingredients in the incense offering – one of them being *chelbina*, which was a foul smelling ingredient. The *chelbina* represented a segment of the Jewish population that are *rishaim* (evil people). As foul smelling as the *chelbina* may be, if it is properly mixed and coalesced with the other spices that comprise the incense offering, it will actually bring out the most beautiful fragrances from them. However if the *chelbina* is not properly coalesced with the other spices then it remains foul smelling.

Reb Meir Simcha of *D’vinsk*: Similarly regarding the Jewish people, if there is true unity among them (*ahavas Yisroel* – love among Jews), then even the evil one is integrated and influenced by other Jews. This unity is pleasing to G-d.

Midrash regarding the four species which are taken on *Sukkos*: Each of them represents/symbolizes a segment of the Jewish people. The *esrog*, which has food value and fragrance, represents those who possess *Torah* and perform *mitzvos*. Those who have *Torah* and do not perform *mitzvos* are represented by the *lulav* (palm branch), which has food value (dates) and no fragrance. Those who have *mitzvos* and no *Torah* are represented by the *hadassim* (myrtle), which has fragrance and no food value. Those who have no *Torah* and no *mitzvos* are represented by the *aravah* (willow), which has no food value and no fragrance.

Torah: One must gather these four species and bind them together so that each may atone for the other. Meaning, if there is unity among the Jewish people, all of the segments are regarded by G-d as part of the whole – each atoning for the other. However if there is no unity among the Jewish people, then there is no atonement. Just as the incense offering, when it is not properly coalesced, is considered an abomination.

The law states that a *mincha* (meal) offering cannot be brought as a partnership. The *mincha* offering must be owned entirely by one individual. However, the *Torah* tells us that there is a communal *mincha* offering that was brought in the Temple on behalf of the Jewish people. If a *mincha* offering which is brought as a partnership is invalid, then why is the communal *mincha* offering acceptable?

Although a community (*tzibur*) is comprised of many individuals, they are considered one entity because

they share a common interest and value system. A partnership on the other hand is simply two or more individuals who have individual interests in the whole. The communal *mincha* is valid only because it is an entity that is not fractionalized.

However if the community is not unified, then it is as the Prophet Isaiah states, "...a worthless meal offering..." Prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, because of *sinas chinam* and lack of unity among the Jewish people, they forfeited the profile of a *tzibur* (coherent community). They were seen by G-d as many elements coexisting in one location. Therefore, their meal offerings had no value.

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: When a gentile came to *Hillel* the elder to convert, he had said that he would only convert to Judaism if he would be taught a single principle that encompassed the entire *Torah*. *Hillel* responded with the principle, "What you despise, to your fellow you shall not do." Meaning, "Love your fellow as yourself." *Hillel* explained to him that this single principle encompasses the entire *Torah* and the rest is commentary.

The *Torah* is comprised of *mitzvos* that are between man and man as well as between man and G-d. The *mitzvah* of loving one's fellow is between man and man. If this is so, then how can this principle encompass the entire *Torah* – including the *mitzvos* between man and G-d?

The principle of loving one's fellow as oneself engenders the unity of the Jewish people, which manifests itself in every aspect of serving G-d. At the time of the giving of the *Torah* at *Sinai*, the *Torah* tells us that the Jewish people were unified as one. This unity was a prerequisite to become the "Nation of G-d." There needs to be a commonality between the Jewish people and G-d. As He is One, the Jewish people must reflect that characteristic of oneness. It was the lack of unity/fragmentation of the Jewish people, which caused the destruction of the Second Temple.

Understanding the Significance of the Sukkah

Torah: "The *Torah* that *Moshe* commanded us is the heritage (*morasha*) of the Congregation of *Yaakov*..."

Rambam in *Hilchos Talmid Torah*: "The Jewish people were given three crowns: the Crown of *Torah*, the Crown of Priesthood and the Crown of kingship. The Crown of Priesthood was given to *Aaron* and his descendents.

The Crown of Kingship was given to King *David* and his offspring. The Crown of *Torah* is lying there waiting for every Jew to partake of it. As the *Torah* states, "The *Torah* that *Moshe* commanded us is the heritage (*morasha*) of the Congregation of *Yaakov*..." Every Jew has relevance to attain a level that he could be coronated by the *Torah* itself.

We give praise and thanks to G-d in the *Aleinu* prayer every day, for "not making us like the nations of the world and not giving us a portion like theirs..." The basis for this relationship between the Jewish people and G-d is the *Torah* itself. When G-d gave us the *Torah* at *Sinai*, we became the "Holy people."

Gemara in Tractate *Chagigah*: If a non-Jew studies *Torah*, he is liable for the death penalty because one should read the word *morasha* (heritage) in the verse as "*morasa* (betrothed). The "*shin*" in the word should be read as a "*sinn*" (the difference in pronunciation is based on what side one places the dot on top of the letter). Meaning, the *Torah* itself is the betrothed of the Jewish people. If anyone other than the Jew engages in *Torah* it is as if he is engaging with another man's wife – which is adultery (carries liability of the death penalty). Why is the *Torah* so stringent in this matter?

Gemara in Tractate *Avodah Zorah*: At the end of time G-d will give the nations of the world an opportunity to have a share in *Torah*. He will give them "an easy *mitzvah* which does not require a great outlay of money." This is the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah*.

At the end of time, the nations of the world will sit in their *Sukkah* and on that day G-d will "take the sun out of its sheath." The overbearing heat will cause the nations of the world great discomfort and they will need to leave the *Sukkah* and thus forgo the only *mitzvah* that they were given – which is an indication of their failing.

Gemara: "Why is this behavior an indication that they have no relevance to the *Torah*? After all, the law is if one is in a state of discomfort in the *Sukkah*, he is not permitted to remain in it." The *Gemara* answers, "It is because the nations of the world will "kick" the *Sukkah* as they leave." Thus, it is not that they leave the *Sukkah*, but rather their disdain for the *mitzvah* which will indicate their lack of relevance to the *Torah*.

Gemara in Tractate *Sukkah*: The *Sukkah* represents the Clouds of Glory which protected the Jewish people in the desert. The Clouds of Glory were the Divine Presence (*Shechina*). Thus, the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* is only for those

who have relevance to the *Shechina*. The Jewish people are the only people who are connected to the Divine Presence because of their relevance to *Torah*.

The Sukkah Is the Equivalent of the Clouds of Glory

Torah: “So that your generations should know that I (G-d) made you dwell in *Sukkot* when I took you out of Egypt.” The *Torah* is telling us that the reason the Jewish people must dwell in a *Sukkah* for seven days is because they dwelt in *Sukkot* during their forty-year trek in the desert.

Gemara in Tractate *Sukkah*: There is an argument between *Rebbe Akiva* and *Reb Eliezer* regarding the interpretation of the word “*Sukkot*.” *Reb Eliezer* explains that the verse is referring to the *Ananei haKavod* (Clouds of Glory) that protected the Jewish people throughout the 40-year period of wandering in the desert.

Rebbe Akiva: The word “*Sukkot*” is referring to the fact that the Jewish people actually dwelled in huts in the desert.

Mishna Breura (presentation of Jewish Law written by the *Chofetz Chaim*) citing *Magen Avraham* (commentator on the Code of Laws): In order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* properly, in addition to having in mind that one is performing the *mitzvah* for the sake of G-d, one must also have in mind to commemorate the Clouds of Glory (which the *Sukkah* represents). Is the *mitzvah* of dwelling in the *Sukkah* a mere commemoration of an event or is it something more?

Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia*: In the merit of *Avraham* our Patriarch’s hospitality to the three angels the Jewish people merited many gifts when we were in the desert. In the merit of *Avraham* offering the shade of his tree to the angels, G-d provided the Jewish people the Clouds of Glory to offer every level of protection. Just as the shade of *Avraham*’s tree protected his guests from the sun, so too did the Clouds of Glory protect the Jewish people in the desert.

Vilna Gaon z’tl (in his introduction to the Laws of *Sukkah*) citing the *Midrash*: “G-d said to *Avraham*, ‘Since you offered the shade of your tree for the angels, in the future when your children will be in the desert, they will be protected by the Clouds of Glory.’ *Avraham* responds to G-d, ‘The gift of the Clouds of Glory has a duration of only 40 years. What will replace the Clouds of Glory after my children leave the desert?’”

Avraham understood that the spiritual value of a *mitzvah* is unlimited– even if part of the reward for the *mitzvah* was going to be in the physical realm it would extend itself beyond the 40-year period. G-d responded, “After the 40 year period in the desert, I will give your children the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah*.” G-d rewarded the Jewish people measure for measure because of *Avraham*’s hospitality to the angels.

If the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* was merely commemorative in nature then it could not be a replacement for the Clouds of Glory which offered protection (measure for measure). Evidently, based on the *Midrash* cited by the *Vilna Gaon z’tl*, the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* not only is commemorative of the Clouds of Glory in the desert but it also currently provides all the benefits that were received by our ancestors in the desert from the Clouds of Glory. Meaning, when one dwells in the *Sukkah* and fulfills the *mitzvah* properly, he merits the protection of the Divine Presence throughout the year.

From this we can understand why the *Magen Avraham* who states that when one dwells in the *Sukkah* one must have in mind the clouds of Glory in addition to the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* because the *Sukkah* itself is the equivalent of the Clouds of Glory. When one dwells in the *Sukkah* he is not only fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* (which requires the proper intent) but also is activating the same spiritual forces that were provided by the Clouds of Glory. The *Torah* equates the *Sukkah* to a *Chagigah* (festival offering) which has sanctity. Thus the *Sukkah* itself has a consecrated status.

Gemara: One is not permitted to engage in certain activities that would be considered disrespectful in the *Sukkah*.

Chofetz Chaim: One should be especially careful not to speak *lashon hara* (evil speech) in the *Sukkah* because it is as if one is dwelling in the shade of the Divine Presence.

Leaving Our Permanent Residence to Go into the Temporary

The Holiday of *Sukkot* is referred to as “*zman simchaseinu* – the time of our rejoicing.” On *Sukkot* there is a special *mitzvah* of rejoicing before G-d for seven days. In the time of the *Bais HaMikdash* (Holy Temple), one would go to the Temple mount for seven days carrying the four species (*esrog, lulav, haddasim, aravos*).

Regarding the *mitzvah* of bringing *Bekurim* (new fruits and grains) to the *Bais HaMikdash*, there is an additional *mitzvah* of “*Krias Bekurim*” (the declaration of the new fruits). One only recites the declaration of the new fruits if one brings them to the Temple from the Festival of *Shavuos* to the end of *Sukkot*. If, however, one brings the new fruits after the festival, one can no longer recite the declaration that accompanies the bringing of the new fruits because it is no longer a time of *simcha* (Joy). The reason for this is that the declaration that accompanies the bringing of the new fruits is to express one’s gratitude to G-d for all that He has given him. That special level of clarity which evokes the feelings of being beholden is only brought about during a time of *simcha* (joy). How do we understand this?

Tur in his introduction to the Laws of *Sukkah*: “Although the Jewish people dwelled in *Sukkahs* after their exodus from Egypt, we nevertheless do not celebrate *Sukkot* in the Spring (after *Pesach*) but rather in the Fall.” He explains that it must be obvious that the reason the Jew dwells in the *Sukkah* is for the sake of fulfilling the *mitzvah*. If one were to dwell in the *Sukkah* in the springtime when others are going out of their winter homes to enjoy the shade of their summer dwelling, then one could think that the reason the Jew are dwelling in the *Sukkah* is because of his own personal comfort and not for the sake of fulfilling the *mitzvah*. Thus, the *Torah* commanded us to dwell in the *Sukkah* in the fall when others are seeking the comfort of their permanent residences.

Chazal regarding the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah*: “One should leave his permanent dwelling and enter into his temporary dwelling.” One leaves the security and comfort of his home to dwell in a temporary residence whose roof is open to the stars and is exposed to the elements. How do we understand this?

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: The six sections of the *Talmud* are alluded to in the words of the *Navi* (Prophet). The first section of the *Talmud* which is *Zeraim* (Seeds/Planting) is referred to as “*Emunah* (faith).” What is the relationship between faith and planting? Regardless of the quality of the seed and the

soil, if there is no rain the farmer’s crop will not succeed. If there is blight or locust the crop will be devastated.

Thus, the farmer understands that if he wants to reap his bounty he must have *emunah*. Because of his circumstance he appreciates that his success does not emanate from his own efforts but rather from G-d. Therefore the farmer prays to G-d so that his efforts should succeed. Thus the agriculturalist must have faith.

It is interesting to note that *emunah* comes naturally before the harvest. However after the crops have been gathered in and the bounty assured, the tendency of man is to forget that all his success came about only because of G-d. Therefore at this time (after the harvest in the fall) one must leave his permanent secure residence and dwell in the temporary abode.

The *mitzvah* of *Sukkah* reinforces the message and causes one to be cognizant that one’s security only comes from G-d. Security and bounty does not come about through one’s own efforts but rather through G-d’s blessing. This is similar to the reason one recites the blessings of thanks to G-d after one eats a meal in which one is sated. It is because when one is sated he is vulnerable to complacency and thus feels that G-d has no relevance to his success. Therefore one must define the source of his satisfaction and satiation as being from G-d through the recitation of the *Birchas HaMazon* (Grace after meals).

When one dwells in the *Sukkah* in the fall during the time of our rejoicing (when the harvest has been reaped) one is acknowledging that the source of his success is G-d. By leaving one’s home and dwelling in a temporary hut, one is declaring that his security only comes from G-d. His physical security becomes meaningless. On *Sukkot* the Jew dwells in the shade of the Divine Presence and is engulfed with protection that emanates from G-d and not a permanent physical structure. This is the time of true joy. One does not need to be concerned about anything because he has placed himself completely in the Hands of G-d. Appropriately we refer to this time as “*zman simchaseinu* – the time of our rejoicing.”

