

## Underlying Values and Concepts of Sukkot & Shmini Atzeret

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | October 10, 2019

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Each holiday in the Jewish calendar has its own unique personality, based on the laws, customs and other aspects of the holiday. These also teach us specific Jewish values, the Jewish outlook on life and the morals and ethics to live by not only for this holiday, but the rest of the year as well. Sukkot, for example, is the holiday of simcha-joy, as the command to be joyous on this holiday appears more in the Torah than for any other holiday. (For a discussion of what is signified by “joy,” see the chapter on “Happiness.”) What are the other special commandments and customs of Sukkot, and what do they, with all their details, teach the Jewish people about the values of this holiday and Judaism, in general?

### **THE HOLIDAY WITH DOUBLE THE COMMANDMENTS – ANY CONNECTION?**

Every other major Jewish holiday in the Torah has one and only one major positive commandment. On Pesach, it is to eat matzah. On Rosh Hashana it is to blow the Shofar. On Yom Kippur, it is to fast and deny bodily pleasures. But only on Sukkot did G-d give the Jewish people two equally dominant commandments to do: to sit or live in the sukkah for seven days, and also to take the Four Species (*etrog*-citron, *lulav*-palm, *hadasim*-myrtles and *aravot*-willows) and then hold and/or shake them together. Why only on Sukkot were the Jewish people given two special Torah commandments? In addition, is there any connection between these two seemingly diverse activities?

While there is an overall concept in Judaism of Jewish unity, we will show that both of these commandments stress the importance of the unity of the Jewish people. Most of the 613 commandments are performed by Jews as individuals. Even when a family eats the matzah together on Passover, they do so as individuals, as there is nothing shared about the eating. But the mitzvah to sit in the sukkah, by definition, is a shared experience. The commandment must take place in one closed environment, a hut built outside the home where the actual commandment is to live and do all of one’s activities, but most traditional Jews simply eat all meals in the sukkah. The sitting together is the commandment itself. This idea of Jewish unity is reflected in the sources. The Torah commandment to sit in the sukkah includes all Jews (*kol*-all citizens).<sup>1</sup> The Talmud extends beyond the simple meaning of this verse and says that the ideal is for all Jews in the entire world to sit together in one large sukkah.<sup>2</sup> The ultimate symbol of unity, the Temple in Jerusalem, is also called a “Fallen Sukkah” in the special insert added to this holiday in the Grace After Meals blessing.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of sukkah is also that which brings peace in general, and between Jews in particular. Every Friday night, Jews request from G-d to bring “the sukkah of Your peace upon us” and then repeat the phrase “sukkah of peace” at the end of the blessing.<sup>4</sup> One modern commentary<sup>5</sup> differentiates between the type of teshuva-repentance achieved five days earlier on Yom Kippur in synagogue, and another kind of teshuva-repentance that the Jewish people achieve on Sukkot as they sit together in the sukkah of peace. Therefore, it is one of the special powers of the sukkah to unite the entire Jewish nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 23:42

<sup>2</sup> Sukkah 27b

<sup>3</sup> Sukkot insert to Grace After Meals

<sup>4</sup> Friday night Service, end of the blessing right before Shmoneh Esreh

<sup>5</sup> Sefer Maor Vishemesh, Sukkot s.v. “Oh”

The other major commandment of the holiday of Sukkot proclaims the same message. There are four separate species. On Passover, there are also six items on the Seder plate. But there, each item remains separate. On Sukkot, however, a Jew cannot fulfill the commandment unless one unites all four different species together as one entity.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if one of the four species is absent, the mitzvah-commandment is not fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> What is the specific symbol of these four species? Among the many explanations, each one of the species represents one of the four kinds of Jews.<sup>8</sup> The arava-willow, with no smell or fruit, symbolizes the Jew bereft of Jewish learning and commandments. The etrog-citron, which has both smell and fruit, represents the Jew who has both Torah learning and mitzvot-commandments. The lulav-palm branch has only fruit (dates), symbolizing those who perform commandments, and the hadas-myrtle, with only a scent, stands those Jews who learn Torah. Thus, all kinds of Jews must unite symbolically in order to fulfill this commandment. Therefore, both of the Torah commandments of the holiday of Sukkot promote and teach the Jewish people the importance of Jewish unity.

### **THE VIRTUAL USHPIZIN GUESTS ON SUKKOT**

Both on Passover and on Sukkot, Jews invite guests to celebrate the holiday with them. But these invitations are very different. On Passover, the invitation is actually part of the Passover service (see chapter about Passover), with the words of invitation recited in Aramaic, the spoken language of the time the Passover Hagaddah was written, so that every poor person could understand and accept the invitation. On Sukkot, this invitation is also specifically verbalized by traditional Jews and yet no one expects these guests to physically join in the meal, so that no extra places have to be set and no extra food has to be cooked or bought. Who are these guests and what is the idea of this custom?

The *Ushpizin* (the word for “guests” in Aramaic) invited are seven Jewish ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David. Each guest is invited for a different evening of the Sukkot holiday. But these are virtual guests, as nothing is actually done to demonstrate that they truly will attend the meal (unlike the special cup of wine set aside for the guest Elijah at every Seder table). What kind of custom is this, to invite people in name only, virtual guests who seemingly will not do anything? (Among certain Sephardic communities, there actually was a custom to leave one seat empty with a white napkin and place holy Jewish books on it, and it was customary to light an extra candle for the virtual *Ushpizin* guest.<sup>9</sup>) What does it all mean? Why the invitation for people who are not alive and will not physically come, virtual guests in name only? And why were these seven specific guests selected? There were other greats in Jewish history as well who are not invited, such as Judah, Joshua, King Solomon and others. So why do we invite only these particular seven people?

The essential Torah commandment of the Sukkah is for all Jews to live in the Sukkah, as we saw above. (The Hebrew word “*taishvu*” in modern Hebrew signifies “to sit,” but regarding the Sukkah it actually signifies “to live” in it, as it says by Jacob “*Vayeshuv*” in regard to the Land of Canaan,<sup>10</sup> where the word clearly signifies living, not sitting). There is no mitzvah-commandment to do anything special – just to reside in the sukkah for seven days. A Jew can learn, play, talk, eat, sleep or do anything else he or she normally does, and the commandment is fulfilled... But what is the deeper idea of this commandment and this invitation?

On Rosh Hashana and especially on Yom Kippur, spends the time focused on repentance, spending much time in the synagogue. It would be easy to make the assumption that this is the ideal life for the Jew. Thus, G-d gives the Jewish people the commandment of sukkot in order to negate this assumption. Judaism and Jewish existence are about living each moment of normal life – but as a Jew. Judaism, as a way of life,

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<sup>6</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 651:1

<sup>7</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 651:12

<sup>8</sup> Rabbeinu Bechaye commentary on Exodus 30:34

<sup>9</sup> Book of Our Heritage, Kitov, Seventh chapter

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 37:1

dictates how the Jew does everything in the daily, everyday human experience. This is the higher level of being a Jew, and it is the commandment of Sukkot – to do everything that everyone else does in regular life, but do it as a Jew, for seven days in a temporary hut. But living in this hut called a sukkah is only temporary, only “virtual.” This is to teach the Jew that life itself is similar to that Sukkah – temporary and virtual. The real and permanent life is the one that is lived after man’s existence in this world.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the one week in the sukkah reminds Jews that their existence here, like the sukkah, is fragile and temporary – virtual, if you will. It is for that reason that Jews invite “virtual guests.” And it is these people, specifically, who, like the living in the temporary sukkah, were all wanderers at some point in their lives, homeless, without any permanent existence, very much like living in the sukkah, as Jews leave their permanent homes to live there. This is the reason for the specific selection of the seven virtual guests, one for each day: Abraham, the wanderer, Isaac, who had to leave his home for Gerar during the famine, Jacob, who needed to flee from the evil designs of Esau and spent twenty years outside of Israel, Joseph, who was forcibly brought down to Egypt and lived for the rest of his life there, Moses, who was forced to live in the land of Midian, Aaron who also wandered from Egypt for a time to meet his brother in the desert, and King David, who was temporarily homeless as he ran to escape the clutches of Saul – all of them experienced a status as homeless wanderers or temporary residents.

Therefore, as Jews wander from their homes to dwell in a sukkah to become cognizant that all existence, even in permanent homes, is temporary and “virtual,” so too, Jews invite into their sukkah ancestors who understood this message due to their homelessness and intrinsic way of life. That is why these particular virtual guests are invited on each night of Sukkot.

(Alternatively, according to the Zohar (Emor 103a), the souls of each of the seven Ushpizin leave their places in Gan Eden and enter the sukkot in this world to enjoy the spiritual radiance. Each day of Sukkot, the seven souls are present, and each day, one takes a turn leading the others.)

#### **WHICH OF THE FOUR SPECIES IS DOMINANT?**

When the Jew takes the Four Species and brings them together, they can symbolize many concepts. Above, we pointed out the unity of the Jewish people as one of their symbols. Another Midrash states that each of the Four Species represents a different part of the human body because of the shape of each plant.<sup>12</sup> The etrog represents the heart, the lulav the spine, the hadasim the eyes and the aravot the lips. These are major organs of the body, and their unity symbolizes that the entire body must come together in praise of G-d. However, even though we have seen that all Four Species must be present and be held together to fulfill the commandment, the blessing is not made enumerating all four plants. It is made only on the lulav. Why not bless all four species that are needed to fulfill the commandment? Furthermore, when Jews predominantly spoke Yiddish up to 100 years ago, whenever they spoke about taking the Four Species or making the blessing upon performing the commandment of bringing them together, they said we will now “*Bench Eshrig*”, we will make the blessing on the etrog-citron. Why not all four? And if we had to designate only one of the species for blessing, why was the etrog cited in Yiddish, but each Jew, when he or she actually recited the blessing on the Sukkot holiday, did indeed make the blessing on the lulav alone?

Yiddish always was and is an emotional language. Certain Yiddish expressions, until today, have entered the lexicon of modern Hebrew as well as American English because these expressions signify emotions far better than anything in the native tongue. Perhaps, by saying “*Bench Eshrig*” the Jew was relating to these four species in an emotional manner. The etrog represents the heart, and the Yiddish Jew related to Judaism through his or her heart. It was the emotion of Judaism that drove most traditional Yiddish-speaking Jews. On the other hand, when the rabbis had to decide to designate the blessing on the Four Species, they could have easily worded it to include all four different plants. However, perhaps they

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<sup>11</sup> Mishna Avot 4:16

<sup>12</sup> Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 30:14

wanted to make a statement about what was most important to them in Judaism. It was not what the Jew says with his lips (aravot) or sees with the eyes (hadasim). It was not even what the Jew feels with his or her heart (etrog). The essence of being a Jew is the action that the Jew takes and does, represented by the spine (lulav). A Jew is judged by his or her actions, not anything else. A Jew also has to have the backbone, the lulav, to stand for something as a Jew, and act upon one's beliefs. Thus, it is possible that the rabbis intentionally chose the lulav for the blessing, in order to signify these ideas. The common Jew remained with his emotional attachment to Judaism, and placed the etrog-heart as his center of his or her Jewish life.

### **WHY DO WE HAVE THIS HOLIDAY AT ALL AND WHY ON THESE SPECIFIC DAYS?**

Every other Jewish holiday is celebrated on the day that a specific miracle occurred, or on the day a special event took place for the Jewish people. But nothing specific happened on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Tishrei, the day Sukkot is celebrated! What, then, are Jews celebrating specifically on the holiday of Sukkot? The Torah seems to tell us what is being celebrated when it says “that your generations (of Jews) should know that it is because I (G-d) caused the Jewish people to dwell in booths when I took them out of Egypt.”<sup>13</sup> But that was a forty-year event and not at all related to this specific day. Why, then, celebrate this holiday of Sukkot on this particular date? Furthermore, we know that G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt in the Hebrew month of Nisan, in the springtime. Sukkot for the Jews probably first appeared in the desert at this time. Logically, Jews should celebrate this holiday then, in the month of Nisan, the same month in which Passover is celebrated. And if the celebration is commemorating G-d's physical protection of the Jews in the desert, a summer holiday showing this miracle is certainly a much more effective message, rather than the fall holiday of Sukkot. Finally, what is it exactly that the Jewish people are supposed to “know,” according to the instructions of the verse commemorating this event?

It is clear from the verses that Sukkot is indeed the holiday of G-d's protection of the Jewish people, whether that protection took a miraculous form in the desert or the natural form of huts provided by G-d. One opinion in the Talmud is that it was the miraculous clouds that protected the people from the elements, while the other opinion is that G-d provided actual booths for the Jews, similar to what Jews use today to fulfill the commandment of building Sukkot.<sup>14</sup> That protection by G-d is what the Jewish people are supposed to remember. It is not just a one-time protection from G-d, but, rather, His continuous protection of the Jewish people – not only when they left Egypt in the spring, not even the entire forty years in the desert. The message of Sukkot is G-d's continuous protection from that moment on, which continues even beyond the 40 years of our existence in the desert until today – for all situations. That is the message – not to simply remember the desert for all generations, says the Torah, but that G-d's protection continues for all generations. There is nothing special about this particular date, or even any particular year. Every day of every year is the time of G-d's protection. But the season is significant. During the season when the rains begin to fall in the Middle East, when people usually come in from their summer homes and the outdoors, is not a time when people voluntarily leave their homes to live in huts. By going out into the elements at this time to live in the Sukkah, each Jew is loudly proclaiming his or her belief in G-d's protection. Therefore, Sukkot is the holiday of Divine Providence and trust in G-d – all year round, and a demonstration of the love of G-d for the Jewish people.

### **WHAT DID HAPPEN ON THE 15<sup>TH</sup> OF TISHREI?**

Unlike the previous explanation (where the exact date was not significant, but the season is), the Vilna Gaon does say that something special occurred on the first day of Sukkot, the fifteenth day of the month of Tishrei.<sup>15</sup> G-d first surrounded the Jewish nation with the *Ananei HaKavod*, the Clouds of Glory (or Clouds of Protection) immediately after the Exodus, as the Torah (Shemos 13:21) informs us: “Hashem went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way.” After the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d removed the special Clouds of Protection from the Jewish people. However, after Moses received

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<sup>13</sup> Leviticus 23:43

<sup>14</sup> Sukkah 11b

<sup>15</sup> Kuntres on Sukkot, quoting the Vilna Gaon, Rav Karlenstein

atonement for the sin on Yom Kippur, he ordered the people the next day to bring the gold and silver to begin erecting the Tabernacle. After two days, they brought more than enough. And it was on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month that they began to actually build the Tabernacle, and this is also when the Clouds of Glory, that Divine Protection, returned and continued for the next forty years in the desert. These two events occurred on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei.

Normally, clouds are a symbol of division, separating between the spiritual above and the physical below, between the high and the low. This idea was suited to the beliefs of the Egyptians and other cultures of the day who did believe in a g-d, but only in a divine being who created the world a long time ago, but did not get involved in the daily lives of human beings. The verses in Hallel, written by King David, show the difference between the non-Jewish and Jewish belief in this matter, according to the Malbim's commentary.<sup>16</sup> The Egyptians and the other nations believed in a deity who was only above, while the Jewish people believe in one G-d Who is both above and also comes down to earth below, to become involved in the day to day activities of man. Therefore, the Jewish people believe in a connection between G-d who is high above and also the same G-d who comes down below. That is one reason that the symbol of the Sukkah, the *sechach* covering, should be porous enough to see the stars.<sup>17</sup> This law shows the link between what is above and what is below. Thus, while the Clouds of Glory protected the Jews from above, the Sukkah signifies that Jews should connect to G-d above from below.

#### **THE SYMBOL OF THE SECHACH ROOF TO THE SUKKAH**

In building the walls for the sukkah, just about any type of material is kosher and acceptable in Jewish law and custom. However, the roof, the *sechach*, must consist of material that grew from the ground, but not the vegetables or fruits themselves, since they can become ritually impure. Rather, the roof material must be derived from the non-usable leftover parts of plants and trees. That is what makes a proper sukkah roof in Jewish law, and renders a sukkah kosher.<sup>18</sup> What is the symbol behind why specifically this kind of material must be used for *sechach*?

Belief in the sun as the controller of nature, and that this luminary is the cause that produces everything in the world, is a negation of the Jewish belief in G-d. This is the Egyptian belief, mentioned above, where G-d created the world and now leaves everything to be run by nature. This also seems to be the belief portrayed in Kohelet-Ecclesiastes, the Megillah read on Sukkot. The word itself, "Kohelet" signifies the "gatherer" of physical things in the world. How does the *sechach* negate this belief? That everything good in the physical world originates from the sun, is also the meaning of the phrase that "all depends on Mazal, the heavenly body."<sup>19</sup> The main Mazal or heavenly body in the sky is the sun, which seems to determine the fate of the physical world. All bountiful crops are derived from the sun. In an agrarian society at the time of the Torah, people tended to count their crops and vineyards as that which is truly valuable. Yet, what is used for the *sechach*? Not the crops themselves (which represent wealth) that depend on the sun for photosynthesis and growth – rather, it is the leftovers, that which seem worthless. Kohelet deems the person who only gathers things (such as crops or money) as having devoted his life to worthless pursuits.<sup>20</sup> He uses the phrase "under the sun" 29 times in the Megillah. Everything he speaks about is always under the sun, which he considers worthless. But that which is above the sun – i.e., G-d, (and, by extension, everything associated with serving Him) is worthwhile. That is why the Midrash states that Jews have no "Mazal."<sup>21</sup> This does not signify that Jews never have any luck or good fortune, but the Jews, unlike all the other nations, rely on G-d for their bounty, and not upon nature or the sun.

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 113:4-6 with Malbim commentary

<sup>17</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 631:3

<sup>18</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Sukkah 5:1, Mishne Berurah on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 630:1

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Ezra commentary to Job 28:1

<sup>20</sup> Kohelet 1:1-5

<sup>21</sup> Otzar Midrashim, Esther 5

In addition, there is another Jewish law that there must be more shade than sun in the sukkah, based on that roof of *sechach*.<sup>22</sup> G-d is referred to as the shadow, the shade. By having more shade than sun which gives crops to the world, Jews declare that for them, the shade is stronger than the sun.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the power of shade, of G-d, must always be more ever-present for Jews than the power of the sun. The important thing for Jews is not the sun that seems to create reality in the world. Rather, importance lies in what appears not to be living, the *psolet*, the *sechach*. This proportion of shade to sun, was also understood by the successful Jews in the earlier generations who made the study of the Torah (Shade/G-d) their main concern and their ordinary work (sun/non-spiritual) subordinate to it.<sup>24</sup> More shade than sun was necessary since for the Jew, the non-physical, or even the non-living, is the essence, and the physical is the less important part of life.

#### **ANOTHER STRANGE ASPECT OF THE MITZVAH-COMMANDMENT OF THE SUKKAH**

As mentioned above, it says that every *eizrach*-citizen should sit in the Sukkah for seven days.<sup>25</sup> This word, *eizrach*-citizen, appears twelve times in the Torah. In each of the other eleven contexts, besides the commandment about a Sukkah, along with the *eizrach*-citizen, another member of Jewish society is always cited – the *ger*-convert/stranger (either an actual convert or a non-Jew living among Jews who observed the Seven Noachide laws). Only by the mitzvah of sukkah is the *ger*-stranger/convert omitted in the verse. Why? What makes this idea even more peculiar is that Rashi's commentary on this verse regarding sukkah actually states that the word "Israelite" in the verse refers to a *ger*-stranger/convert.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, this makes the question and strangeness even more pronounced. If the commandment of sitting in a Sukkah is indeed incumbent on the *ger*, then why omit this part of the population from the verse?

All the commentaries struggle with this omission. Nachmanides says that once we know that *eizrach*-citizen and *ger*-stranger/convert go together, then when one is mentioned, the other is assumed.<sup>27</sup> But of the twelve places mentioned above, why does the mitzvah of sukkah contain the only omission of the *ger*-stranger/convert? In the comments of the Rashbam, we begin to understand an approach as to why the *ger* was not mentioned in the verse. Rashbam says<sup>28</sup> that when it comes to *eizrach*-citizens, even those who have large homes must go out and sit in the sukkah on this holiday. The implication is that the *ger* does not have a home. Why not? These strangers represent the homeless people in Jewish society in Biblical times. They had no land or permanent home that was given to them when the Land of Israel was divided among the tribes, as they were not members of any of the Jewish tribes. Thus, for the majority of these people, who joined the Jewish community later, they had no home, and they lived in a sukkah the entire year. Therefore, there was no need to command the *ger* to leave his home and live in a sukkah on the holiday of Sukkot. He or she already lives in a sukkah all year long. Only the wealthier *eizrach*-citizen, who had a home, had to be commanded to leave it. The Chizkuni commentary specifically says this is the reason for the omission in the verse.<sup>29</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is hard to fathom the conditions of poverty in Biblical times. Even one hundred years ago, the poverty and squalor for almost all Jews living in the Ukraine is unimaginable today. But the homeless problem is something that we know continues to exist even in the present. What we might not have known is that it also existed in Biblical times. The *ger* is the homeless person of the traditional Jewish community.

<sup>22</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Sukkah 5:19, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 631:1,2

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 91:1, Tiferet Shlomo, Moadim

<sup>24</sup> Berachot 35b

<sup>25</sup> Leviticus 23:42

<sup>26</sup> Rashi commentary on Leviticus 23:42

<sup>27</sup> Nachmanides commentary on Leviticus 23:42

<sup>28</sup> Rashbam commentary on Leviticus 23:42

<sup>29</sup> Chizkuni commentary on Leviticus 23:42

A twentieth century scholar, Rabbi Ben Tzion Firer, wrote that an additional reason (to those cited above) that G-d wanted Jews to leave their homes and live in sukkot was because of the *ger*-stranger/convert. Part of living as a Jew has always meant identifying with the oppressed and disadvantaged. Rabbi Firer says this is part of the commandment of the sukkah: live as a homeless person for seven days a year. Living in a sukkah shows solidarity with those whose residences, if they have any, are temporary dwellings, like the sukkah. There are two ways to help the needy. People can give them something valuable so that they are objectively less needy. Or, if they cannot afford to do this (especially in previous years when Jews were not as wealthy as today), we can show that needy person solidarity by living in the same conditions as they do. Sometimes, this second method is more powerful, as it usually makes the *ger*-stranger/convert feel even better than any gift of charity. It makes this homeless person feel more accepted in society.

Part of the mitzvah-commandment of Sukkot, as was noted above, is for Jews to remember that they themselves were once the *ger*-stranger/convert in Egypt. The Jews in Egypt may have had primitive houses as slaves, but they were certainly treated like the dregs of society. And in the desert, the entire people were “homeless” for forty years, with no permanent abode, and not one place to call home. This concept also helps us understand and answer a question that the commentaries mention: why was the holiday placed in the autumn and not the spring, when the Jews left Egypt? For those who do not accept the explanation of the Vilna Gaon cited above, they usually cite the reason<sup>30</sup> that if the Jews went out of their homes to a sukkah in the springtime, that would be natural, and no one would recognize that they are doing it as a commandment from G-d. But in the autumn, when everyone is returning to their homes, it shows that living in a Sukkah for a week is not a natural phenomenon. Thus, G-d purposely declared that Sukkot fall during the autumn, in order to demonstrate that Jews are fulfilling this commandment in order to show solidarity with the poor, and not because it is comfortable for them. In order to identify with the homeless, it has to be a time when it does not make logical sense to do such an action for personal enjoyment. And in the summer, the *ger* himself or herself would never appreciate what the rest of the Jewish community is doing for him or her. Thus, the idea discussed above, that all Jews are in the same sukkah, now has added meaning. All Jews are in the same boat, and Jews should identify with those who live in a sukkah-like dwelling all year long.

This concept also explains a unique Jewish law regarding the sukkah that does not exist anywhere else in Judaism. If a Jew feels uncomfortable in the sukkah – i.e., it is too cold or the flies bother him terribly – then this person is no longer obligated to sit in the sukkah.<sup>31</sup> This Jewish law, in any other context, would seem absurd. Imagine that if a Jew feels uncomfortable with hunger pangs on Yom Kippur, he or she would be allowed to eat. Or if a Jew is uncomfortable with the noise from the noisemakers on Purim when Haman’s name is mentioned, that person could leave the synagogue. In no other situation is discomfort during performance of a Jewish ritual an excuse for not doing it. Why is this so only in the case of the sukkah?

If the purpose of being in the sukkah is to identify with the *ger*, the homeless person, then this Jewish law begins to make sense. It cannot be true identification with the person who is homeless if the Jews feel that he is suffering. If a Jew does it only because he has to, then the homeless *ger* will feel worse, not better, about others living as he or she does. It sort of defeats the purpose. Therefore, if a person feels mild discomfort but is still able to empathize with others who live like this the entire year, one stays in the sukkah. However, if the pain reaches proportions where it feels like is “torture” or great discomfort to remain, the homeless *ger* is not benefitting from that kind of empathy, and, thus, that Jew is supposed to leave the sukkah.

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<sup>30</sup> Tur, Orach Chaim 625

<sup>31</sup> Sukkah 25b, Maimonides, Hilchot Sukkah 6:2, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 640:4

This new insight also helps explain how Maimonides defines simcha-joy on Sukkot. Based on the verses that obligate the Jew to feel simcha-joy on this holiday,<sup>32</sup> Maimonides defines this obligation specifically.<sup>33</sup> On Sukkot (and Pesach, but the basis is Sukkot), a Jew is obligated to be joyous and good-hearted with his family by giving some of his food to the *ger*-convert/stranger, orphan, widow and any other needy person. Failure to do this precludes Jewish joy. Thus, the solidarity with the *ger* is not only to go out and live as he or she lives. It also requires kindness to the *ger* and others, to do something positive beyond living in a hut for seven days. (The reason Passover is also included is that it is the holiday to remember that all Jews were strangers and downtrodden in Egypt.). Therefore, if a Jew has the means to help out the *ger* and/or the poor, yet merely goes out to live in the sukkah to show solidarity, then this becomes an empty gesture. The job of the Jew is to make the *ger*, the homeless, or the poor to feel joyous, in any way he or she can. Then, in turn, that Jew will feel Jewish joy as well.

### **SHMINI ATZERET –THE HOLIDAY WITHIN A HOLIDAY**

The holiday of Shmini Atzeret is very strange indeed. On the one hand, it is an autonomous festival, as the *Shehechyanu* blessing is recited in the Kiddush and candle lighting,<sup>34</sup> indicating that it is the beginning of a new celebration. On the other hand, the name of the holiday itself (the Eighth Day of Atzeret) indicates that it is a continuation of the holiday of Sukkot that was just celebrated for seven days. It is certainly a Yom Tov, but without any of the Sukkot commandments. So what is this holiday exactly, and what can we learn about its values, concepts and ideas?

### **THE PARALLELS TO THE HOLIDAY OF SHAVUOT**

The parallels between this holiday and the holiday of Shavuot are too numerous to be coincidental. First, there is similarity in the names of the holidays to consider. The Torah calls this holiday Shmini Atzeret.<sup>35</sup> The rabbis call the Shavuot holiday “Atzeret” in the Mishna.<sup>36</sup> Rabbeinu Bechaye explains this term, *Atzeret*, which is usually translated as “the stop,” in a new manner. He says<sup>37</sup> that the word *Atzeret* refers to the Jewish people themselves, because with them “everything stops.” Both of these holidays are days in which the holiday focuses only on the Jewish people.

Shavuot, in actuality, is the “eighth day” of Passover, separated by the 49 days of counting the Omer. Shmini Atzeret was also supposed to be 49 days after Sukkot, as a separate holiday, but the Midrash explains<sup>38</sup> that G-d had mercy on the Jewish people and did not want them to have to trek back to Jerusalem in the middle of winter. Thus, He kept them one extra day when they were already in Jerusalem for Sukkot anyway. The parallels continue: There are no special commandments given for either holiday, as they are simply holidays (Yom Tovim) without any special rituals. (Many were added later by the rabbis as customs.) Seforno explains that this allowed the people to just celebrate with G-d, on both days.<sup>39</sup> There is no date cited in the Torah for either holiday, unlike all the other Jewish holidays in the Torah. On Shavuot the Torah was given, and on Shmini Atzeret it is completed.

The sacrifices brought in the Temple for each holiday are unique. On Shmini Atzeret it is merely one ram (after 70 were brought on Sukkot from day one, when 13 were brought, then on the succeeding days there were 12, 11, 10, 9, 8 and finally 7 on the seventh day). Shavuot similarly has a unique holiday sacrifice, the Two Loaves of Bread. On Shavuot it is customary to learn Torah all night, and the night before Shmini Atzeret it is also a custom to learn Torah throughout the night – the only two nights of the year this

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<sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy 16:13-15

<sup>33</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:17-18

<sup>34</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 668 and Mishne Berurah commentary

<sup>35</sup> Leviticus 23:36, Numbers 29:35

<sup>36</sup> Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:2

<sup>37</sup> Rabbeinu Bechaye commentary on Numbers 29:35

<sup>38</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 15

<sup>39</sup> Seforno commentary on Leviticus 23:36



is so. (Why this occurs on the night before and not on the holiday itself in the case of Shmini Atzeret is beyond the scope of this book.) Both are the only one-day holidays in the Torah. (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, also one-day Torah holidays, are not considered festivals in the same category.) Finally, no reason for either holiday is supplied in the Torah, unlike the other festival holidays.

The reason for these parallels is beyond the parameters of this chapter, but many of the special aspects of Shavuot (discussed in the chapter on Shavuot) also apply to Shmini Atzeret.

### **THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SHMINI ATZERET**

Every Jewish holiday has a historical basis for something that occurred on that day, and the festivals also have a nature aspect associated with them as well. Thus, Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and signifies the rebirth of nature (in the springtime). Shavuot recalls the Giving of the Torah and the offering of the First Fruits to the Temple. Sukkot reminds us of G-d's protection in the desert (see above) and coincides with the time of harvesting. Even Rosh Hashana (birth of the world, birth of man, first sin and first Repentance) and Yom Kippur (atonement for sin of the Golden Calf) have historical bases. But what is the historical event related to Shmini Atzeret? There seems to be no mention of anything historical, not in the Torah, Talmud or Midrash. Is there, then, anything that occurred on this date that is part of its Jewish celebration and Jewish heritage?

Rabbi Firer claims that there is indeed a historical event connected to Shmini Atzeret. If we follow the chronology of events of the Jewish holidays, that alone will give us a clue. On Passover, the Jewish people left Egypt. That was followed by G-d's giving the Torah to the Jews on Shavuot 50 days later. That event was followed by forty years in the desert, represented by Sukkot. What happened after those forty years? The Jews entered the Land of Israel. Therefore, Shmini Atzeret, the holiday that occurs immediately after Sukkot, representing the forty years in the desert, represents the Jews entering the Holy Land. Is this mere conjecture or is this based on any source? On the Torah verse describing this holiday, the Targum Yonatan translates the verse into Aramaic<sup>40</sup> by saying, "On the eighth day, you should enter with joy from your journey to your home, with an entrance of joy and celebration and holy experience." Therefore, when Jews enter their homes from the seven days in the Sukkah, they are paralleling the Jews entering their true home, the Land of Israel.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NUMBER EIGHT**

The fact that the holiday is called the eighth day in the Torah is significant. Maharal discusses the differences in Judaism between the numbers seven (which are Passover and Sukkot) and eight (Shmini Atzeret, Chanukah, etc.).<sup>41</sup> Seven is always the cycle of nature. It is no accident that every culture lives by a seven-day week. There are seven colors in the spectrum, seven notes in the music scale. The seven-year Jewish cycle follows this pattern as well. Eight, on the other hand, represents that which is beyond nature, or the supernatural. Thus, Maharal says that the future harp of David in the Third Temple will have eight strings, and not seven, in that supernatural structure. Chanukah is the supernatural victory of the Jews over the Syrian-Greeks and the miracle of the oil that also defied nature. (See chapter on Chanukah.) So too, the Jewish people themselves represent the supernatural people of the world because they continue to exist and excel despite everything stacked against them, and despite their infinitesimally small numbers. The Land of Israel and G-d are also associated with the supernatural. Thus, the symbol of the holiday of Shmini Atzeret is the supernatural people entering the supernatural land on this eighth day of celebration.

### **SHMINI ATZERET IS A BRIDGE TO REAL LIFE**

Based on the Mishna, Maimonides writes that a Jew is supposed to begin removal of the dishes from the Sukkah at the end of the holiday before Shmini Atzeret begins.<sup>42</sup> This Jewish law has nothing to do

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<sup>40</sup> Numbers 29:35 with Targum Yonatan commentary/translation

<sup>41</sup> Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot 1:5, Masechet Shabbat, Netzach Yisrael, page 148, chapter 32

<sup>42</sup> Mishna Sukkah 4:8, Maimonides, Hilchot Sukkah 6:11, 14

with making the home ready for the upcoming holiday. But it does seem to indicate that it is incumbent upon the Jew to begin to prepare for going back to the “real world” of living in one’s home. It begins at the very end of Sukkot, but is most prominent on Shmini Atzeret.

How and why does Shmini Atzeret prepare the Jew for “re-entry?” For the past three weeks, some say seven weeks since the beginning of the month of Elul, Jewish life has not really been a “normal” part of everyday living. It has been a long, spiritual ride. Even Sukkot, which is more physical than the most spiritual Yom Kippur, is a leaving of one’s home to “be with G-d” and rely on His protection. But Shmini Atzeret parallels the “real world,” with no special commandment to sustain each Jew with what he or she has achieved until now. Everything that has happened until now has to be retained and maintained for the rest of the year in each Jew’s real life existence. But how can this be accomplished? It is accomplished with simcha-joy.

The Talmud states<sup>43</sup> that the reason there are no specific commandments on Shmini Atzeret is that there is only simcha-joy on this day. On this passage, Vilna Gaon states that the main simcha-joy of Sukkot is reserved for Shmini Atzeret. What is the goal? Through this joy, the Jew can retain the accumulated feelings of simcha-joy from all the previous holidays, and sustain them through Torah learning and good deeds throughout the year. But how is this accomplished? For the rest of the world, simcha is usually translated as “fun” which, by definition, is short-lived and temporary. But for the Jew, simcha is a feeling that is internalized and that can last for the next eleven months. For the Jew, simcha is symbolized by a circle. That is why the simcha of Sukkot is symbolized by the circles of Hakafof (encircling the *bima*) with the lulav. On Shmini Atzeret (in the Diaspora one day later), the circles of Hakafof are dancing around the Torah. Since a circle has no beginning and no end, this demonstrates that the simcha of this day should not end when the day ends, when the holiday ends. That is why as soon as the Torah is completed in every synagogue on Shmini Atzeret (Simchat Torah in the Diaspora), it immediately begins anew. This is the universal custom, adopted in order to show that Torah learning is a never-ending cycle. The natural high that the Jew attains in this holiday season can be sustained with Torah learning and good deeds during the rest of the year. That is also why the Torah itself is called a *sam hachaim* – an elixir of life, a “natural high,” in many places in the Talmud.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is possible to continue this feeling, even after the holidays are over. There is no need for any special rituals or mitzvot in order to live a Jewish life with internal joy. That is the message of Shmini Atzeret, as it closes the cycle of the Jewish holidays.

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<sup>43</sup> Sukkah 48a

<sup>44</sup> Eiruvin 54a, Yoma 72b, Taanit 7a