

ושמחת בחד

The Joy of Sukkot

A HOLIDAY READER



Yeshiva University
THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

Dear Friends,

Of all the festivals described in the Torah, only Sukkot is afforded the extra emphasis of *simcha*, joy. The title for our reader comes from the verses in *Devarim*:

You shall rejoice (וְשִׂמְחָתֶךָ בְּחֻגֶיךָ) in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female servant, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities ... and you shall have nothing but joy (Deut. 16:14-15).

It is not always easy to inhabit joy, much less to be commanded to experience joy, but that is precisely what is asked of us this holiday. While taking our physical selves outdoors, stepping into a mindset of vulnerability and reliance on God, we are reminded of the enduring values that truly fill one's life with joy: family, community, peoplehood, *Torah u'mitzvot*.

In these pages, you'll find thought son inclusion and belonging written by our Sacks-Herenstein faculty to enhance your understanding of the Ushpizin. You'll encounter short essays by our Sacks Writing Scholars to enrich your Sukkot observance. Our Writing Scholars comprise a group of ten exemplary graduate students across YU's Jewish graduate programs, including Revel, RIETS, GPATS, Azrieli and the Fisch Center, who have committed themselves to writing and publishing over the course of the year. We are honored to share their writing with the wider community this Sukkot. Throughout the reader, you will also find short reflections on Hallel offered by Rohr Writing Scholars, members of our undergraduate writing fellowship.

These essays highlight many facets of the chag. Reconsidering the nature of joy this Sukkot, take a look at the articles by Dovi Siderson ("Nothing but Joy," p. 3), Ori Bach ("Joy in the Presence of God," p. 11), and Marc Fishkind ("Returning the Blessing," p. 14). The symbolism and power of the sukkah itself is highlighted by Matthew Minsk ("The First Sukkot," p. 6), Shimi Kaufman ("The Dual Identity of Sukkot," p. 10), and Hadassah Reich ("Living Deliberately," p. 11). Still others look towards the physical objects at our disposal this holiday. Alex Benedyk ("Sukkah, Lulav, and Jewish Unity," p. 7), Sarah Baird ("Redeeming the Old, Finding New Joy," p. 5), and Aviva Farkas ("The Etrog and Emotions," p. 16) help find meaning in the rituals of both past and present. Lastly, Peninah Taragin Gershman ("What Isaac's Night Teaches About Unfinished Sacrifice," p. 9) turns to one of the *ushpizin* to uncover what it means to hold contradictory emotions in living a life of faith.

Many of these essays touch on the tension in the nature and observance of Sukkot: it is at once a holiday of unrestricted joy while also a reminder of the fragility of life. The midrash poignantly summarizes this perspective (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Nispachim Bet*):

Why does it say "*but* be joyful" (Deut. 16:15)? That in this world, a person may rejoice, but his joy is not complete. In this world, when a person has children born to them, they are always concerned after their children ... But in the future, rejoicing will be complete, as is said, "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter" (Psalm 126:2).

Even amidst uncertainty, we pray that your chag is imbued with a sense of joy. We hope that the articles offered in this reader deepen your own reflections and practices this holiday, and that we may all experience true joy as a nation in the near future.

Wishing you and your families a Chag Sameach!

The Sacks-Herenstein Faculty

THE USHPIZIN OF INCLUSION AND BELONGING

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN CENTER AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

Sukkot is a wonderful harvest festival where we take the fruits of human labor in hand and thank God for the ability to partner in creation. Every day, we welcome our ancestors and their families into our Sukkot, reembarking on a journey of the ages and recalling the love story of our people and God that flourished in the wilderness. We face life's vulnerabilities, symbolized by our temporary dwellings, under the shelter of divine protection. These Ushpizin are designed to help us think about how we, in imitation of God, can shelter others and create more meaningful bonds of belonging in our Sukkot and in our lives by including those who may feel invisible in our communities: those who are single, widowed, divorced, disabled, struggling with infertility, or undergoing treatment for illness, or simply feel distant and detached. With these Ushpizin, we say, "We see you. We hear you. You are welcome here."



במטי מינך **אברהם** אושפיזי עילאי דיתבי עמי ועמך כל אושפיזי עילאי יצחק
יעקב משה אהרן יוסף ודוד

Abraham is the paradigmatic host, who, together with his wife Sarah, was known to always welcome people into his tent. The rabbis link every hospitable act that Abraham did for the three "men" to its fulfillment in the future (*Bereshit Rabbah* 48:10). For instance, Abraham offered them water; in the future, God would provide water for the Jewish people in the desert and in the Land of Israel. Abraham offered them bread; in the future, God would sustain the Jewish people in the desert and in the Land of Israel. Abraham gave them rest under the tree; so too, God offered the protection of clouds in the desert, the sukkah in the Land of Israel, and the messianic sukkah in the ultimate future (Is. 4:6).

Abraham

Miriam Zami Edeson

It is notable that the sukkah, the divine protection of the biblical past and the messianic future, is the reward for a simple invitation to dwell under a tree. Moreover, our sages remind us that we never know the impact of our actions – we never know how small gestures of invitation and inclusion may be reciprocated later or set off a chain effect. What might seem like a simple act of generosity now can truly have an enduring impact.



במטי מינך **יעקב** אושפיזי עילאי
דיתבי עמי ועמך כל אושפיזי
עילאי אברהם יצחק משה אהרן
יוסף ודוד

When Jacob arrives in Shechem, the Torah tells us, "וַיַּחַן אֶת־פְּנֵי הָעִיר" — "He encamped before the city" (Gen. 33:18). The Talmud, BT Shabbat, 33b, offers three perspectives of what Jacob established in the city: Rav says he introduced coins. Shmuel says he established marketplaces. Rabbi Yochanan says he built bathhouses. Why would the Talmud single these out as Jacob's great accomplishments?

Jacob

Rabbi Ari Rockoff

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (*Ein Ayah*) explains that a society thrives when people feel they need one another. Without a common currency, trade relies on barter, which is narrowing. I can only trade with someone who has what I want and wants what I have. Coins widen the circle, letting strangers do business. Marketplaces widen the network further, drawing people together to discover what each has to offer. And bathhouses add purity and cleanliness, a reminder that meaningful social interactions and dealings must rest on ethical and moral standards. Together, these three contributions form Jacob's blueprint for a flourishing community.



במטי מינך **יצחק** אושפיזי
עילאי דיתבי עמי ועמך כל
אושפיזי עילאי אברהם
יעקב משה אהרן יוסף ודוד

Isaac returned from "the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi" (Gen. 24:62), the well named for Hagar's experience of being seen by an angel (Gen. 16:13-14).

Isaac

Dr. Erica Brown

Why was he there? Could it be that he was all alone and traveled to the place associated with Ishmael, the only one who ever played with him? His mother died. His father no longer appeared in his story directly. His half-brother was sent away.

Upon Isaac's return, he "went out to meditate in the field" (Gen. 24:63), another act of solitude. We are with him in his loneliness. Our sages believed he was praying. Perhaps he was praying for company. Just then he saw in the distance a camel approaching that was carrying his beloved Rebecca, the woman who would bring him comfort, make a home for him, and help him create community. As we welcome Isaac into our sukkot, we think of who else needs relief from solitude. We recognize the power and mercy of each invitation we extend.

“We make a mistake when we think religion is only about believing. It’s also about belonging; and belonging is about community, that delicate yet powerful network of relationships where we learn moral literacy – by being there for other people when they need us, knowing that they’ll be there for us when we need them.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



במטי מינך **משה** אושפיזי עילאי דיתבי
עמי ועמך כל אושפיזי עילאי
אברהם יצחק יעקב אהרן יוסף
ודוד

Before Moses became the leader of the Jewish people, he became an upstander. In a single chapter, the Torah describes him intervening three times: he protects a Hebrew from an Egyptian, confronts violence between two Hebrews, and defends Midianite women whom he has never met. Moses’s circle of responsibility continually expands—from his brother, to his community, to the stranger.

Inclusion begins with seeing. Moses “went out to his brothers and saw their burdens.” He noticed suffering that others ignored and refused to remain a bystander. But he also teaches that truly seeing others cannot stop with those who look, believe, or live as we do.

As we welcome Moses into the sukkah, we are challenged to look beyond those already seated comfortably inside. Who is being overlooked, excluded, or mistreated? Hospitality opens the door. We even go outside our doors to help others enter. Moses reminds us that creating belonging requires both welcoming gestures and, at times, even moral courage.

Moses

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman



במטי מינך **יוסף** אושפיזי
עילאי דיתבי עמי ועמך כל
אושפיזי עילאי אברהם יצחק
יעקב משה אהרן ודוד

Different titles are associated with our ancestors: *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Teacher, and *Yosef Hatzadik*, Joseph the Righteous. Joseph was given this epithet because of the way he responded to adversity. He resisted the attentions of Potiphar’s wife, and after he was wrongfully thrown into jail, he could have wallowed in self-pity, allowing his misfortunes to consume him. Joseph, however, did the opposite, as is evident from his interactions with Pharaoh’s courtiers: the chief cupbearer and baker.

“When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught” (Gen. 40:7). The verse specifically uses the language of seeing. Yosef took the time to truly see the people around him. He noticed their pain and inquired about their feelings. When they explained their dreams, he tried to help. Joseph teaches us that no matter what we are going through personally, we should still see the struggle, pain and needs of others and reach out.

Joseph

Sara Cohen



במטי מינך **דוד** אושפיזי עילאי דיתבי
עמי ועמך כל אושפיזי עילאי אברהם
יצחק יעקב משה אהרן ויוסף

On Sukkot, we welcome *David Hamelech*, King David, as one of the Ushpizin. David’s story reminds us to look beyond status and appearances when we think about belonging. When the prophet Samuel sought out a future king, David was not initially presented with his brothers. Yet God reminded Samuel that, “כי האדם יראה לעינים וזה יראת ללב” - “A person sees what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

David, once overlooked, ultimately became the king who united the tribes of Israel and made Jerusalem the spiritual heart of the nation. David brings into our sukkot an awareness of those who remain outside or unseen. The fragile, open sukkah challenges us to expand our own circles of belonging. Welcoming David means asking ourselves not simply who is at our table, but who is missing, and how we can make room for them.

David

Aliza Abrams
Konig



במטי מינך **אהרן** אושפיזי עילאי דיתבי
עמי ועמך כל אושפיזי עילאי אברהם
יצחק יעקב משה יוסף ודוד

In a world without the Holy Temple, the *Beit Hamikdash*, or sacrifices, *korbanot*, the Priestly Blessing is the primary responsibility of Aaron’s descendants today. While the blessing begins with love, it concludes with peace. These two themes represent Aaron Hakohen’s legacy.

When Aaron passed away, the entire community mourned his loss. Rashi quotes the sage Rabbi Nathan, who explains that both men and women wept when Aaron died because he reconciled couples and resolved disputes. He also approached sinners with friendliness rather than judgment, treating them with warmth and inspiring them to become the people he believed they could be.

Every Sukkot, thousands of Aaron’s descendants gather at the Kotel for *Birkat Kohanim*, blessing the Jewish people with the same words Aaron and his sons spoke thousands of years ago. While the words of *Birkat Kohanim* preserve Aaron’s legacy, it is our actions that bring the words to life.

Aaron

Sara Cohen



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Nothing But Joy

Dovi Siderson, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

The Holiday of Sukkot arrives each year at what appears to be the most spiritually opportune of times. Having excursed to the heights of spiritual experience on Rosh Hashanah and the depths of personal introspection on Yom Kippur, it is never easier to relate to David HaMelech's profound yearning, recited twice daily through the conclusion of Sukkot, "to sit in the Home of Hashem all the days of [our] lives."

So too, and in quite a different manner, many find the calendrical position of Sukkot to be providential in a rather personal, mundane way. The spiritual work of the High Holidays is extremely taxing for many, especially to those for whom guilt, shame, and a distressing sense of imperfection manifest all too easily – and far too strongly. I vividly recall, from my Yeshiva days, the immense sense of relief we felt at the final Shofar blast on Yom Kippur. It was as though the soulful call itself washed away the compounding anxieties of forty days of fear, awe, and critical self-work, heralding in the sweet freshness of the Sukkah and the joy of Simchat Torah.

Such jubilation is apparently woven into the fabric of the holiday itself, as the Torah instructs us: "... ושמחת בחגך", "והייתה אך שמחה", "you shall rejoice on Sukkot... and you shall have nothing but joy" (Devarim 16:14-15; this famous "verse" is actually the splicing of two phrases that bookend these two verses). The Torah does not similarly emphasize the importance of joy in its treatment of Pesach or Shavuot; it is particularly on Sukkot that we are told three times to rejoice with Hashem. As the Ba'alei HaTosafot explain (*Daat Zekenim* to Devarim 16:15), Sukkot is *Chag Ha'Asif*, the Holiday of Ingathering, taking place as it does at *Tekufat HaShanah*, the turn of the year (Shemot 34:22). For Tosafot, Sukkot thus denotes the conclusion of the agricultural year, the moment before winter, when there are no harvests yet to complete, no plowings yet to perform, no work at all yet to be done. With stocked storehouses and full stomachs, Sukkot could truly be a time of *simcha shelema*, complete joy. The same sentiment rings true for us, though agricultural *simcha* is foreign to our way of life. We have completed the difficult work of Rosh Hashanah, the challenges of Yom Kippur. We believe that Hashem has heard our *tefillot*, answered our calls, and forgiven our sins. With satisfied souls and

fulfilled hearts, we too are ready for the *simcha shelema* of Sukkot.

If only it were that easy!

Joy is not something one can purchase at the grocery or order on Amazon. In today's world especially, saturated as it is with images of impossibly high standards for happiness and success, true fulfillment and absolute joy have morphed into fleeting fantasies for many of us. *Simcha shelema* seems a quaint, and overly optimistic goal; for many, it would seem to be completely unattainable. How, then, are we to understand the injunction to be joyful on Sukkot?

Such was the question animating a short and lively conversation I overheard long ago, as a young teen traveling to Har Nof in the days leading up to Sukkot. Moving slowly through the bustling traffic of Kanfei Nisharim, two elderly men in traditional Haredi garb pondered over the meaning of the words "you shall have nothing but joy." "What does it mean that 'you'll have nothing but joy?'" one man asked. "Can we control being happy?"

The answer he gave has stuck with me all these years later. "Just put in the effort to be happy," he explained. "Just try. And Hashem tells you, ווהייתה אך שמחה, you shall have nothing but joy. On Sukkot, I'll help you. I'll help you and you'll feel happy." Only later did I learn that this pithy interpretation is rooted in Rashi, who comments on Devarim 16:15: "*you shall have nothing but joy* is not a command; it is a promise."

The truth is that human experience is of a profoundly dialectical nature. It is both deeply within our control and at the same time infinitely beyond it. This is what the old man on that bus helped me understand so long ago. Happiness isn't a skill; it's not the inevitable outcome to some formula which produces it. The difficulty we all feel in experiencing true joy is not a new problem, however much social media exacerbates it: the Torah itself was sensitive in asking us to experience joy, because Hashem knows that joy is not something we can just "choose." So Hashem asks of us: just try. Do what you need to do to be happy. Spend time with family. Learn, *daven*, sing,

and dance. Eat good food, drink good wine. Do what you can to raise your spirits, because it's a gift you truly, truly deserve. You've put in the work, you've reflected, you've been penitent. You've woken up early and gone to sleep late and you've crashed the Gates of *Shamayim* with your Tefillah. You deserve to be happy; you deserve *simcha shelema*.

So put in the work; do what you can to be joyful. That's all you're asked to do. *And I'll help you*, Hashem promises. *I'll help you and you'll feel happy*.

"Succot is the festival of insecurity. It is the festival of a people who know they will never be entirely safe, surrounded as they are by larger, stronger nations, assaulted as they have so often been for having the courage to be different. Sitting in the succah, betzila demehemnuta, "under the shadow of faith" (Zohar, Emor 103a), is all the security we need."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



Redeeming the Old, Finding New Joy

Sarah Baird, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

In the midst of the holiday of Sukkot, another joyous festival takes place: Simchat Beit HaShoeva, the Celebration of the Water Libations. The Mishnah records the event as it took place in the Temple, vividly describing the water drawn from the Siloam Pool, the ecstatic dancing, the tremendous shofar blasts, and the music played by the Levites as they accompanied the Priests to the Ezrat Nashim. Illuminating this joyous spectacle were the golden candelabras, raised basins of oil casting a glow so bright that it was visible across the entire city of Jerusalem. “One who did not see the Celebration of the Water Libations never saw celebration in his days,” the Mishnah declares (M. Sukkah 5:1). To the many thousands of Jewish pilgrims who made the long and grueling *aliyah la’regel*, pilgrimage, their participation in Simchat Beit HaShoeva would have been one of the pinnacles of their experience and a validation of their arduous efforts to ascend to the city.

In the course of its description of this fantastic display, the Mishnah makes note of an interesting material detail, one that appears minor in the wider depiction of the great celebration: “From the worn trousers of the priests and their belts they would loosen and tear strips to use as wicks, and with them they would light the candelabra” (M. Sukkah 5:3).

There is precedent for this kind of repurposing in Talmudic discourse and the halachic tradition. In B. Shabbat 21a, the Talmud reveals that worn priestly garments were unraveled to make wicks for general use in the Mikdash, not only for Simchat Beit HaShoeva. In B. Megilla 26b, worn Torah scrolls are repurposed as shrouds for a *met mitzvah*, a deceased individual with no one to bury him. The driving idea behind these customs is often traced to B. Berakhot 39b, which included the following exchange regarding the Shabbat *eiruv* bread:

The Gemara relates: Rav Ami and Rav Asi, when the opportunity to use the bread of the *eiruv* in the Shabbat meal would present itself, they would recite: Who brings forth bread from the earth over it. They said in explanation: *Since one mitzvah was performed with it, we will perform another mitzvah with it.*

This practice of performing an additional mitzvah with a repurposed item reoccurs in the context of Sukkot. In addition to the Simchat Beit HaShoeva wicks made of old priestly garments, from B. Berakhot 39b, the Rema records the custom of saving the *aravot* from Hoshana Rabbah and using them to fuel the ovens for baking matzah (*Orach Chaim* 664:9). This minhag later developed into the more well-known custom of saving the *aravot* and burning them during *biur chametz* on Erev Pesach (Maharshal Teshuvah §87). Another popular minhag is to use the etrog after Sukkot and cover it in cloves to be used for the *besamim* during Havdalah. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed writes, “some enhance the smelling of *besamim* by using the etrog that they used on Sukkot; since it was used for a mitzvah, it is fitting to make a *berakha* on it at *havdalah*” (*Peninei Halakhah* Shabbat 8:6).

This spirit of repurposing and redeeming the old and worn carries through Sukkot to the structure of the sukkah itself. The modern sukkah often feels like a pastiche of recycled or repurposed materials; the walls are a combination of plywood and plastic tarps, adorned with the posters our teachers laminated twenty years ago from kindergarten, topped with a variety of natural materials for the *s’chach*. Though the Gemara and halacha offer extensive guidelines on the materials that can and cannot be used for the construction of a sukkah, the Rabbinic discourse understands that Jews would inevitably build the sukkah out of the physical world around them. Historically, Iraqi Jews used date palms for *s’chach*; Yemenite Jews used reeds. Moroccan Jews decorated their sukkahs with textiles and rugs, and Eastern European Jews relied on scrap timber and other agricultural items like fruit and vegetables to hang in their sukkahs.

Just as the Jews of antiquity danced to the light of the candle wicks from the priestly garb, redeemed through the additional mitzvah of Simchat Beit HaShoeva, we should seek opportunities in our own lives to redeem our modern material abundance in service of the Almighty and the Jewish people.

The First Sukkot

Matthew Minsk, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

The centrality of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, celebrated on Pesach, and *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, celebrated on Shavuot, to the development of the Jewish people is self-evident, making it all the more surprising that the Sages can't even agree to what the eponymous *sukkot* of the holiday refer. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the *sukkot* in which the Jewish people were made to dwell that we remember on the holiday refer to the *ananei hakavod*, the clouds of glory; for Rabbi Akiva, the *sukkot* commemorate the actual booths in which the Jews lived for forty years (B. Sukkah 11b).

The holiday of Sukkot also seems to differ from the other pilgrimage festivals by recalling the decades-long sojourn rather than one specific event. However, the question of the Tur (*Orach Chaim* 625, see also Ramban on Vayikra 23:43 and Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:43) of why we observe Sukkot in the fall rather than the spring seems to understand Sukkot as commemorating a singular point in time. The *pasuk* also stresses that the mitzvah of *sukkah* reminds us that God had the Jewish people dwell in *sukkot* “when I took them out from the land of Egypt” (Vayikra 23:43)—perhaps literally in that initial period.

Rabbi David Zahtz of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh suggests that on a basic level, the *sukkot* of Vayikra 23:43 refer to the location called Sukkot, the first place where the Jews traveled after leaving Egypt (Shemot 12:37). If this is true, it is surprising that neither of the Tannaim quoted above suggest this interpretation. However, we do find this interpretation in the collections of Midrash Halacha. The dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva is recorded in the Sifra on Vayikra 23:43, but also more curiously in both versions of Mechilta on Shemot 12:37. When considering where the Jewish people traveled after leaving their Egyptian home in Ramses, Mechilta de-Rebbi Yishmael notes the opinion of the Sages that Sukkot is the name of a place—while also bringing the *machloket* between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva about the *ananei hakavod* and physical booths! According to first interpretation of the Mechilta, the *sukkot* of Vayikra 23:43 is identified with the actual place named Sukkot of Shemot 12:37.

That first stopover out of Egypt is significant in its nature as a place of “*hoshavti*,” a place where God had the Jews dwell. That first night in the desert would have been a massive shock

for the newly-freed slaves. In Egypt, however bad life had been, there was always food on the table and a roof overhead. Now they have freedom and for the moment some food—the leftover *matzah* they had packed up and, failing that, large flocks—but there was no transition period for shelter.

We find one other mention of *sukkot* in the Torah. On his way back from his stay with Lavan, Yaakov builds a house for his family and sheds for his flock and names the place after those sheds: *Sukkot* (Bereshit 33:17). Mechilta de-Rebbi Yishmael also connects Sukkot of Shemot 12:37 to the *sukkot* of Bereshit 33:17. We can therefore understand that in the place Sukkot, right after leaving Egypt, the Jews were willing to hunker down in poor conditions reminiscent of cowsheds. This couldn't have been easy, but they stayed. More than that: throughout their journey in the desert, the Jewish people complain about all sorts of material inconveniences but never that they want their old beds back. That commitment started on the very first night in the animal huts.

If we can understand the *sukkot* of Vayikra 23:43 as referring to the experience of that first night, what is the *machloket* in the Gemara?

If *sukkot* are the actual booths, as Rabbi Akiva maintains, the greater significance is that *we* stuck it out, that *we* were in animal huts but never thought to go back because *we* trusted God. If *sukkot* instead refers to the *ananei hakavod*, following the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, we highlight that God reciprocated our trust; we took the step, but ultimately we were safe in God's hands the entire time, enveloped in the clouds of glory.

Rashbam (Vayikra 23:43) explains that we show our vulnerability and reliance on the *sukkah* specifically during the fall harvest season when we would be most prone to thinking *kochi v'otzem yadi*, that our successes are due to our own efforts (Devarim 8:17). Sitting in our *sukkot*, we call back to that first night in Sukkot, when we were desperate and had nothing. In the season of *kochi v'otzem yadi*, we might at least think that by trusting God, *we earned* the bounty, but the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 625:1) codifies that the *sukkah* is ultimately about the *ananei hakavod*, about God reciprocating our trust and providing for us. We celebrate that in our dire strait, we made the choice to commit to God—and more importantly, that He chose us in return.

Sukkah, Lulav, and Jewish Unity

Alex Benedyk, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

When the Torah introduces the mitzvot of sukkah and lulav, it uses a similar language indicating personal ownership. The mitzvah of lulav begins with ולקחתם לכם—“you shall take for yourselves” (Vayikra 23:40), while the mitzvah of sukkah is described as תעשה לך—“you shall make for yourself” (Devarim 16:13). One might therefore assume that both mitzvot require ownership of the sukkah or lulav. Yet halakhah makes an important distinction: on the first day of Sukkot, the lulav must belong to the person performing the mitzvah, and a borrowed lulav does not qualify. A sukkah, however, may be borrowed; one can fulfill the mitzvah by sitting in someone else’s sukkah.

Rabbi Eli Silberstein explains this distinction through the two dimensions of Jewish unity as described by Chassidut. The sukkah represents the deeper unity of Jewish souls—their unity at their divine source. As the *Tanya* famously teaches, every Jewish soul is literally “a part of God above.” At this level, the distinction between “my” soul and “your” soul is secondary. This is reflected in the sukkah: although

the sukkah may belong to someone else, I can nevertheless fulfill the mitzvah by dwelling in it. In a deeper sense, what is “theirs” can also be “mine.”

The lulav, however, represents unity through diversity. The four species are different from one another, just as every Jew possesses unique qualities and a unique role in *Avodat Hashem* (service of God). Each person must contribute his or her own individual strengths to the collective mission. Therefore, the lulav must actually be “yours.” A borrowed lulav cannot fulfill the mitzvah on the first day because the unity represented by the lulav is built from the unique contribution of each individual.

The different *halakhot* of sukkah and lulav therefore reflect two complementary forms of Jewish unity: the sukkah represents the unity we share at our source, while the lulav represents the unity we create by bringing our individual differences together in the service of Hashem.

“Man’s imaginary feeling of independent, his power and strength are counterbalanced by the rulings of the festival – the leaving of the house with its plenty for the tiny booth, in which our ancestors dwelt before they gained their resting place and inheritance, implanting in our hearts feelings of independence. In the wilderness when we dwelt in booths, we ate the corn of heaven and drank water from a flinty rock, and our whole life was one visible miracle.”

Professor Nechama Leibowitz



What Isaac's Night Teaches About Unfinished Sacrifice

Peninah Taragin Gershman, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

Each night of Sukkot, there is a custom to “welcome” one of seven *ushpizin*, or guests in Aramaic. The second night we welcome Isaac, who is associated with *gevurah* (strength, restraint), on account of the *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac), the episode that nearly cost him his life. As Abraham and Isaac are walking to the place of the *Akedah*, Isaac asks Abraham:

וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי... וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:

“Father! Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” (Bereshit 22:7).

Abraham responds:

אַלֵּקִים יִרְאֶה-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וְיִלְכּוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

“It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together (Bereshit 22:8).

Many commentaries agree that “And the two of them walked on together” demonstrates that Isaac walked to the *akedah* as one in thought with Abraham. He understood what was finally happening and had the strength to consent to what his father was about to do. As we know, Isaac’s life was ultimately spared when the angel appeared before them and stopped Abraham from completing the task. In Isaac’s place, he sacrificed a ram.

The Rebbe of Piaseczno, Rabbi Kalonynos Kalman Shapira (1889-1943), offered the following insight. In the Talmud (B. Shabbat 89b), we learn that due to Isaac’s strength in his willingness to be sacrificed to God, he earned the title of chief advocate of Israel in the world to come. It is true that Isaac’s willingness to give up his life for God was indeed noble and gave him merit. However, because he only exhibited the willingness to give up and did not actually give up his life, his sacrifice remained unfinished. The angel’s interruption did not close the story; it left it open. It is completed only through those who are later martyred *al kiddush Hashem* (in God’s Name), whose deaths finish what Isaac began. Only then, Rabbi Shapira

teaches, will Isaac be able to say in truth, “Behold, I offered up my soul to You.”

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, teaches that there are two ways to achieve supreme sacrifice to God. The first is to give up our physical life *al kiddush Hashem*. The second is to sacrifice our inner being from the depths of our heart. Isaac knowingly walked to what he thought was his death, willing to give up his physical life for God. That complete and unwavering willingness was itself the second kind of sacrifice—the surrender of his inner being. But because the Angel stopped Abraham’s hand, the physical supreme sacrifice never actually took place.

Both the Rav and R. Shapira distinguished between a sacrifice that is willingly offered, and one that is actually completed. It is not coincidental that R. Shapira chose to talk about this idea when he did. He presented it as part of his sermon on the second day of Sukkot in 1940 as Jews were being moved into the Warsaw Ghetto. This day was the first *yahrzeit* (anniversary death) of his son R. Elimelech who was killed in a Luftwaffe bombing of Warsaw in 1939. We might imagine that this explanation of Isaac’s incomplete sacrifice brought the Rebbe some comfort when faced with the tragic death of his son one year earlier. He may have been able to make sense of Elimelech’s death by noting that only through the deaths of martyrs would Isaac’s unfinished sacrifice be completed, letting him one day claim the role of chief advocate for Israel in the world to come. More broadly, R. Shapira’s sermons throughout the Nazi occupation of Warsaw are understood to have offered strength and guidance to the community that was living through unimaginable horrors. His sermons were included in the Oneg Shabbat archive that was curated and buried under the Ghetto, to be partially discovered after the war ended.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that the real test of the *akedah* wasn’t whether Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. Childhood sacrifice was not an uncommon practice at that time in history, and it would not have shocked him. It was also not a test of whether Abraham could give up something or someone he loved. He had proven that he

was willing to do so when he left his homeland and sent Ishmael away. The real test was whether Abraham could live within a contradiction. God promised him that he would be father to a great nation that would be achieved through his heir, Isaac. So, when God then told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham had to sit in the discomfort of questioning whether and how the promise of the nation would be fulfilled. Rabbi Sacks calls this contradiction “negative capability.” Negative capability is the capacity to hold uncertainty and contradiction without forcing resolution.

Rabbi Shapira similarly lived a version of negative capability. He had just seen his own child killed and he was living through the unfolding horror of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Yet he offered his sermons to the Oneg Shabbat archive. The contributors of the Oneg Shabbat archive did not expect to outlive the war. They were under no illusion that they would survive to see the archive re-opened. But they held onto the hope that the Jewish community in some form would survive and that the archive would stand as a testament to the life they built even inside the horror of the ghetto. Rabbi Shapira taught that Isaac’s own sacrifice stayed unfinished, open, to be completed by others after him. His own sermons were among those now buried and recovered words, waiting, in their own way, to be completed.

“Even though there is a commandment to rejoice on all the holidays, there was, in the Temple, extra joy on Sukkot... It is a mitzva to increase this joy. The joy that a person experiences in the performance of a mitzva and in the service of God is great dignity... There is no greater dignity or honor than to rejoice before God...”

Maimonides, “Laws of Sukkah”



The Dual Identity of Sukkot

Shimi Kaufman, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

The holiday of Sukkot has a dual identity. On the one hand, it is part of the yearly cycle of the *shalosh regalim*, the three seasonal, agricultural holidays on which ancient Israelites made their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, Sukkot is positioned as the culmination of the Yamim Nora'im, the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, marked by prayer and repentance. These two features of the holiday do not seem, at first glance, to be in conversation at all. How are we to draw meaning from both facets of the holiday at once?

Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Tur *Orach Chayim* 625), in his introduction to the laws of sukkah, questions why Sukkot is celebrated in the fall at all. The huts we sit in commemorate the shelter which God provided for the Jews as they travelled through the desert upon leaving Egypt, which occurred in the month of Nissan, the beginning of the spring. The Tur answers that to sit in the sukkah in the summertime would not be recognizable as a celebration of God's love – plenty of people go to sit outdoors when the weather is warm. To leave our homes as the fall begins, as the wind begins to pick up and the trees begin to wither, is a unique statement of commitment to God. We show that we are willing to brave the elements and follow God “into the wilderness, into a barren land” (Jeremiah 2:2).

This idea is sharpened when we consider Chazal's statement that God took the Jews out of Egypt in the springtime out of his great love for us; He specifically ordained that the Exodus should take place at a time of rebirth, comfort, and security (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Shemot 13:4). On Sukkot, we return this kindness. Just as God took us out of Egypt at the start of

spring, we leave our homes as the weather begins to turn, with the long road of winter ahead of us, as a parallel show of our love to God.

Tishrei marks the end of the summertime. The blinding light of the sun lays bare all of our deficiencies; the scorching heat of God's love burns them away. We ascend a spiritual mountain and reach the summit, and for a moment we can forget that this is not the end of the story. The darkness of winter, of night, of sin and doubt, waits just around the corner. But the cycle of the holidays teaches us that if there is fall, then there must be spring. If we accept the cycle of the seasons, if we walk out in the Sukkah's embrace even as the weather begins to change on us, then we need not fear that we will never make it out of the winter nights. If we can wield the *daled minim*, the four species, wave them back and forth and back and forth, if we can circle the shul 7 times, and 7 more times, and 7 more times, singing all the while, then we can understand that circles have no end.

There is a custom, as we leave shul after Shemini Atzeret has ended, to wish one another a *gut vinter*, a good winter. The custom originates from Eastern European Chasidism who would travel to be with their Rebbe for the holidays. The end of Sukkot meant a long journey home, and a long winter apart from their community. And so, they parted from each other with a blessing for the journey each was about to embark and an implicit assurance that they would meet again at Pesach. As Sukkot ends the Yamim Nora'im, it begins the cycle of the seasons, reminding us that even the coldest night is followed by the dawn.

Living Deliberately

Hadassah Reich, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

For two years, two months, and two days, Henry David Thoreau lived in a cabin that was only 10 feet by 15 feet. In his words, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.”

On Sukkot, we too leave our homes and take up residence in temporary abodes. The reason detailed in Vayikra 23:43 is so that future generations should know that Bnei Yisrael lived in huts after the exodus from Egypt. However, this doesn't address the timing of the holiday. Why is it specifically now in Tishrei? Wouldn't it make more sense to sit in huts on Pesach, when *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt) actually occurred?

In the *Chomat Anakh* on Vayikra 23:34, The Chida connects the calendar date of Sukkot to the Yamim Noraim that preceded it. Because of the awesome and frightening nature of Yom HaDin, Bnei Yisrael is in a state of fear and worry, thus keeping themselves hidden inside. To inform the world of Hashem's kindness in forgiving Bnei Yisrael of their sins, God instructs them to leave their houses without fear and to go out to the field to make sukkot and live in them “בהשקט ובשמחה,” in tranquility and joy.

Chomat Anakh describes a kind of peace and quiet, happiness and contentment, that Bnei Yisrael feel knowing that they were successful in getting through the Day of Judgement. They can now go outside and continue life with its usually scheduled programming.

But how do we make such a transition from the spiritual high and intense religious experience of the Yamim Noraim to Sukkot and beyond? How do we move from acknowledging our fragility and faultiness as humans, from listing our errors, and from pleading for our lives, to actually *living* them? To put it in Thoreau's terms, how do we “live deliberately?”

For other *mefarshim* (commentators), Sukkot's timing in Tishrei has nothing to do with a spiritual transition, and everything to do with a physical one. For instance, the Ibn Ezra comments that the ענני הכבוד, clouds of glory, protected Bnei Yisrael from the sun during the warm season, but in Tishrei it got cold, and so they began to build huts for warmth.

To begin making this transition from the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we first have to acknowledge that it is in fact a transition. The seasons change. The mundane aspects of life creep in with the cold and color the rest of the year. Eventually, the spiritual high from the Yamim Noraim fades and we must remind ourselves what goals we set and how we resolved to get closer to Hashem in the coming year. But the sukkah isn't just a reminder of warmth; it is symbolic of how Hashem took complete care of us. As Ramban writes, the *zikaron* (remembrance) that Bnei Yisrael should be aware of on Sukkot is that when they lived in the desert, they did not find a city for forty years, and Hashem was with them the entire time, and they lacked nothing (“לא באו בבית ועיר מושב לא מצאו ארבעים שנה, והשם היה עמם לא חסרו דבר”). All the essential facts of life were accounted for.

There may be points in the year when compared to the Yamim Noraim life feels emptier, like a *midbar* (desert). But even in those moments Hashem is there.

So how do we make this transition? Perhaps sukkot itself is the transition, both symbolizing the natural way that Bnei Yisrael made sukkot to keep warm in the winter and the miraculous way that Hashem protected us in the *midbar*. This is where these two realms of Hashem's divine assistance and individual's personal effort meet. So long as we recognize that when we build our own sukkah and when we collect the fruit of our own labor that it all comes from Hashem, we can bring the spiritual nature of the Yamim Noraim into Sukkot and beyond. So long as we recognize our successes come from Hashem, we can infuse our own efforts with godliness, and we sanctify the physical. Further, by adopting this mindset we can truly live deliberately, seeking lives of meaning and connection to Hashem.

Joy in the Presence of God

Ori Bach, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

Sukkot straddles the line between two worlds. On the one hand, it is part of the *Tishrei* festivals, setting the tone for the new year. On the other hand, it is part of the three pilgrimage festivals, which align with the agricultural calendar. In particular, it is the time when farmers would gather their grain from the threshing floor. This dual nature is reflected in the different presentations of the holiday in the two primary sections which discuss the festivals: Parashat Emor and Parashat Re'eh.

Yet, in both places, one thing is made abundantly clear. Sukkot is a time of joy. In Emor, the Torah commands that on Sukkot one “rejoice before your God seven days.” Similarly, in Re'eh the Torah commands, “You shall rejoice in your festival...” But a further look reveals that Sukkot is more than only a time of joy. It serves as a reminder as to *why* we rejoice.

One has just completed a long, arduous year of plowing, planting, harvesting and finally gathering. Certainly, there is an urge to celebrate the rewards reaped from one's hard work. It is in this backdrop in which the Torah commands, “You shall rejoice in your festival, *with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities*” (Devarim 16:14). Indeed, the Torah instructs us to rejoice, but ensures that we do so in the right way for the right reasons. Its message is clear. True joy only occurs when one shares their joy with others – when one uses their blessings to create community, to bring in those on the outskirts of society, the orphan, the stranger, and the widow.

The celebration is not one of material wealth, but one of people coming together. As we exchange our houses for temporary dwellings, separated from our luxuries and reminded of our equality, we remember that wealth is not an end in itself but a means to give to others and bring people together.

This idea is echoed by the Rambam (*Shevitat Yom Tov* 6:18):

In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the em-

bittered, is [not indulging in] rejoicing associated with a mitzvah, but rather the rejoicing of his gut.

Interestingly, this lesson was also learned by the philosopher John Stuart Mills, an ardent proponent of utilitarianism—a theory that ethics ought to be guided by what causes the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Ironically, Mills, who had spent so much effort maximizing pleasure, fell into a state of depression. As he wrote in his *Autobiography* (1873), it was then he realized that “those only are happy who have their minds fixed ... on the happiness of others.”

The same idea is reinforced in Parashat Emor. The verse states, “and you shall rejoice *before your God* seven days.” Once again, the final phrase – “before your God” is the key. Rav Soloveitchik, in his writings on mourning, explains that *simcha*, the biblical word for joy, stems from being in the presence of God. Although not as explicit as the frightening experiences of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, by Sukkot we are also in the presence of God. One opinion connects the sukkah to the clouds of glory. Numerous connections are made between the Mishkan, the place of God's dwelling, and the Sukkah. Rav Yitzchak Hutner explains that the reason the phrase *leshaken shemo sham*, “to establish His name,” is present in the description of the other pilgrimage festivals but omitted by Sukkot (in Devarim chapter 16) is because God's presence is always in the Sukkah, yielding the phrase redundant.

Once again, Sukkot reminds us where true joy comes from — the experience of being in the presence of the divine. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch articulates this idea beautifully: “Yet the individual cannot attain genuine joy in life—a joy that never wanes—if he lives only for himself, no matter how brilliant or magnificent his life may be. He will find joy only ‘before the LORD your God.’”

Perhaps this is why we read Kohelet on Sukkot. The cryptic megillah follows the eponymous character as he experiments with different lifestyles, seeking fulfillment. Most notably, he tries a hedonistic lifestyle, indulging in the finest food, wine, and women, yet remains empty. In this sense, Sukkot is a response to Kohelet's hedonism, affirming the megillah's concluding message.

It reminds us that true joy comes from bringing others together and divine service. Perhaps Sukkot captures the highest level of joy, harnessing both—bringing people together in divine service. In a time when there is no shortage of distractions, which disguise themselves as sources of happiness that can fill the emptiness inside us, Sukkot reminds us where true joy lies.

“Sitting in the succah, under its canopy of leaves, I often think of my ancestors and their wanderings across Europe in search of safety, and I begin to understand how faith was their only home. It was fragile, chillingly exposed to the storms of prejudice and hate. But it proved stronger than superpowers and outlived them all.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



Returning the Blessing

Marc Fishkind, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

Yom Tov often conjure up memories of family, *tefillah*, and the distinctive rituals that structure our year. Many of these rituals center on objects that have become inseparable from the holidays themselves: the sound of the *shofar* heralds the coronation of Hashem, the sight of the *sukkah* evokes intimacy and protection, and the taste of *shmurah matzah* lingers long after Pesach has passed.

Yet in one of the Torah's central presentations of the *chagim*, Vayikra 23, a different set of objects takes center stage. The Torah repeatedly commands that products of the land be brought and presented before Hashem: the *omer* (wave offering), the *shte ha-lechem* (two bread loaves), and, ultimately, the *arba minim* (four species). These rituals are associated with *ritzui*, divine favor or appeasement, language closely associated with *korbanot*, sacrifices. They are therefore more than arbitrary seasonal symbols. They suggest a recurring pattern in which we approach Hashem through the very gifts He has bestowed upon us, presenting them back before Him in recognition of their source and in the hope of securing continued blessing.

The Torah presents the *chagim* in Vayikra 23 according to a recurring structure: the date of the holiday is established, abstention from work is commanded, and a distinctive offering or ritual is introduced. *Chag HaMatzot*, for example, begins on the fifteenth of Nissan with a *mikra kodesh* ("proclamation of holiness") and prohibition of *melachah*, work. The Torah then commands that, upon entering the Land and harvesting its produce, the first *omer* be brought before Hashem:

וְהִנִּיף אֶת־הָעֹמֶר לִפְנֵי ה' לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם... וְנִסְּפוּ הַכֹּהֵן

[The priest] shall **wave** the *omer* before Hashem for your **favor** (Vayikra 23:11).

The Torah thus describes the *omer* not merely as an offering, but as one presented *lifnei Hashem*, before God, for the purpose of *ritzui*. Forty-nine days later, on *Shavuot*, the *shte ha-lechem* are similarly waved before Hashem. Strikingly, however, the Torah gives no explicit command to wave what are perhaps its most familiar "wivable" objects: the *arba minim*. Vayikra 23:40 merely commands that they be taken on the first day of *Sukkot* and that Israel "rejoice before Hashem your God for seven

days." Chazal nevertheless place them squarely within the same framework. Bavli Sukkah 37b models the *na'anuim*, the shaking and waving of the lulav, upon the waving of the *omer* and *shte ha-lechem*. Bavli Taanit 2b makes their purpose explicit: ארבעת מינין הללו אינן באין אלא לרצות על המים, the four species come specifically to achieve *ritzui*, appeasement, regarding the water. What begins with the *omer* as an explicit act of *ritzui* thus emerges as a broader pattern spanning the agricultural rituals of the Pilgrimage festivals, the *shalosh regalim*.

This *ritzui* is not merely a general plea for divine favor. Tosafot (B. Sukkah 37b) connects these acts of waving to Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16a, which identifies Pesach as the time of judgment for grain, Shavuot for the fruits of the tree, and Sukkot for water. At precisely the moment when our continued bounty hangs in the balance, we take from that bounty itself and present it back toward Hashem. The gesture expresses that these gifts are not simply ours; we recognize their divine source and seek their continuation.

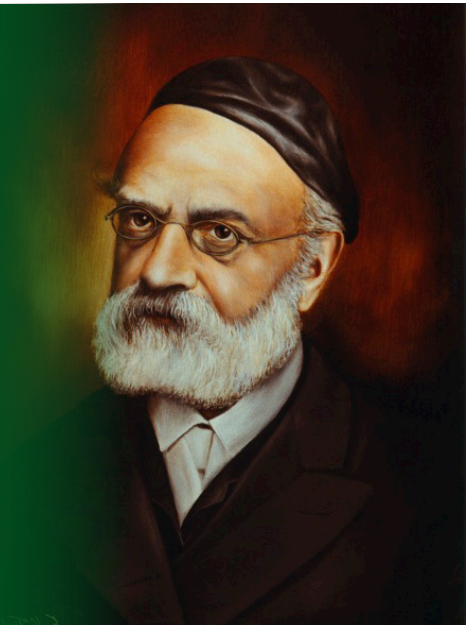
The same pattern extends beyond the agricultural festivals to the Yamim Noraim. Parashat Emor includes both Rosh Hashanah, described as a *zikhron teruah*, a commemoration or remembrance with loud blasts, and Yom Kippur within its cycle of sacred days. The "remembrance" of Rosh Hashanah can refer to many things, but Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16a explains that we specifically blow the horn of a ram so that Hashem will remember the *akeidah* of Yitzchak. Here too, an object is brought before Hashem at a moment of judgment in order to invoke favor. The ram's horn recalls the willingness of Avraham and Yitzchak to surrender everything to Hashem, and we ask that this memory cause us to be judged with mercy.

This framework also deepens the meaning of Sukkot. One of my favorite teachings from Rabbi Menachem Leibtag is how misleading the familiar song "ושמחת בהגך" "והיית אך שמח" can sound when detached from its context. Devarim 16:14-15 commands us to "rejoice" together with our children, servants, Levi'im, strangers, orphans, and widows, and to celebrate before Hashem, who blesses our produce and our labor. Only then will we be שמח, happy. The joy of Sukkot is therefore not hedonistic consumption

of abundance; it is the recognition that blessing comes from Hashem and carries obligations with it. Perhaps that is the deeper meaning of *ritzui* throughout the holidays: we take what Hashem has given us, turn it back toward Him, and demonstrate through gratitude, worship, and generosity that we understand what His blessings are for.

"The building of the sukkah teaches you trust in God. You know that whether men live in huts or in palaces, it is only as pilgrims that they dwell. You know that in this pilgrimage God is our protection. The sukkah is a transitory hut that one day will leave us or we will leave it. The walls may fall, the leafy covering may wither in this storm, but the sheltering love of God is everywhere. You dwell in the most fleeting and transitory dwelling as calmly and securely as if it were your house forever."

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch



The Etrog and Emotions

Aviva Farkas, Sacks Writing Scholar '27

In his collection of Hasidic stories about the festivals, Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin relates an incident that occurred to Reb Michel of Zlotchov. In addition to his regular tefillin, Reb Michel had a special pair of tefillin that had belonged to his father. Certain people had offered to buy this special pair for a large sum. Although his rebbetzin had encouraged him to sell it so that they could afford household expenses, he refused to part with it.

One year, it was the day before Sukkot and there was still no etrog in Zlotchov. Somebody came with an etrog, and the price he was asking was exactly the price that Reb Michel had been offered for his special tefillin. He sold the tefillin and brought the etrog. When his rebbetzin realized that he had sold the tefillin, but not for household expenses as she had begged him to do so many times, she became extremely angry. She bit off the etrog's *pitom* (tip)—thus rendering it invalid—and spat it onto the floor. Despite this extreme provocation, Reb Michel accepted the situation lovingly and did not become angry. His father then appeared to him in a dream and told him that his maintenance of equanimity in the face of provocation was valued in Heaven even more than his sacrifice in selling his tefillin to buy the etrog.

This story brings to mind another situation, over a thousand years earlier, in which etrogim were used as missiles. Accompanying the regular offering each morning of the seven days of sukkot, there is a commandment to

pour a water libation with much pomp and ceremony into a special receptacle set aside for this purpose on the altar in the Temple courtyard. There is a dispute over whether this mitzvah is derived from Torah verses or is a mitzvah handed down to Moshe at Sinai, but either way it is part of the Oral Torah, and the Sadducees, who only accepted the Written Torah, did not consider the water libation to be a mitzva. The Mishnah relates that one time a Sadducee priest poured the water libation onto his feet instead of onto the altar (M. Sukkah 4:9). The people who were watching became very angry and pelted him with their etrogim.

Together, these two stories recall the famous midrash which says that the four species that we take on Sukkot correspond to four different body parts: while the lulav corresponds to the spine, the *hadassim* to the eyes, and the *aravot* to the lips, the etrog corresponds to the heart. It can be a site for powerful emotions such as anger, or, as Ramban (on Vayikra 23:40) notes regarding the very etymology of the word etrog, it can be a site of intense desire. In fact, Ramban quotes the midrash that says that the etrog was the very fruit of the Tree of Knowledge desired by Adam and Chava. By taking the etrog together with the other four species on Sukkot, we are making a commitment to have proper emotions; to fix our emotions—whether they involve anger, desire, or something else—and to make them godly.

“The wilderness time is a journey toward fuller experiencing of the possibilities of love and trust. It is a time of movement, spent in transit toward a way of living...”

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg



Rohr Scholar Reflections on Hallel

Psalm 114:4-5: Daniella Taub, Rohr Scholar '27

מה־לֵךְ הַיָּם כִּי תָנוּס הַיַּרְדֵּן תִּסָּב לָאָחוֹר: הַהָרִים תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים, גְּבְעוֹת כְּבָנֵי צֹאן:

What alarmed you, O sea, that you fled, Jordan, that you ran backward, mountains, that you skipped like rams, hills, like sheep?

Mountains are known to us as some of the most stable and permanent features of the natural world. We even have a phrase for something that seems nearly impossible: “It’s like moving mountains.” And yet these verses from Tehillim paint a strikingly different picture. Instead of standing silently against the sky, the mountains seem to leap and dance, as though the entire earth is celebrating. The author turns to speak to the sea and the Jordan, asking why they have run away. Nature itself becomes a character in the story, reminding us that we are surrounded by forces far greater than ourselves. Just as the sea can “flee” and the river can “turn backward,” the verse suggests that what seems fixed or impossible is not necessarily beyond transformation.

The questions directed toward nature therefore become questions for us as well: What do I notice when I stop and truly look? Where do I see God’s presence in things I normally take for granted? By turning our attention toward the natural world, Tehillim encourages us to look again at what surrounds us and recognize the possibility of something greater within the seemingly ordinary.

This connects beautifully to Sukkot, a holiday in which we are deliberately asked to step outside of the ordinary comforts of our homes and become more aware of the natural world around us. For seven days, we leave the permanence of our houses and sit beneath a fragile roof of branches, where we can see the sky above us and feel the changing weather around us. We become more conscious of things we might normally overlook.

My family always jokes that we never care so much about the weather as we do on Sukkot. We find ourselves studying how gray the clouds are, debating whether to set the table inside or outside, and wondering whether that one drop of rain is enough to send everyone running indoors.

Perhaps that is part of the beauty of Sukkot. By stepping outside, we are reminded to pay attention to the sky above us, the weather around us, and the world that we so often move through without noticing. Like these verses from Tehillim, Sukkot invites us to look at nature not simply as a backdrop to our lives, but as something that can awaken us to wonder, gratitude, and the presence of God.

Psalm 115:16-18: Miriam Zami Edeson

הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַיִם לַיהוָה וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי־אָדָם: לֹא הַמֵּתִים יְהַלְלוּ־קָהּ וְלֹא כָל־יֶרֶדִי דוֹמָה: וְאַנְחֵנוּ נְבָרֵךְ קָהּ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם הַלְלוּ־יָהּ:

The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to humanity. The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord now and forever. Hallelujah.

There is something profound about the Torah’s insistence on human activity, involvement, and worship. “The earth was given to humanity,” the psalmist declares, echoing Deuteronomy’s proclamation that “the Torah is not in Heaven”: it is not beyond reach, across the sea, or impossible to attain. Rather, the Torah reminds us, it is *because* of our human nature that we are entrusted with the gift of the Torah, the gift to worship God. We are complex, emotional, full of contradictions; we strive and we fail; we have temptations and aspirations. And yet this is precisely who God wants to be “blessed” by. Not the angels, not the deceased. What might feel like an impediment to spiritual growth—our humanity, our fallibility—is really our advantage. In Hallel, as we recognize and extol God for all God’s wondrous deeds, we are enjoined to bring our full, real selves, for that is the greatest praise we can give God.

Psalm 116:12-13: Erica Brown

מִה־אֲשִׁיב לָהּ כֶּל־תַּגְמוּלוֹהִי עָלַי: כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת אֶשָּׂא וּבִשְׁם ה' אֶקְרָא:

How can I repay the Lord for all His bounties to me? I raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the Lord.

I often find myself echoing the words of King David in Psalm 23:5, “My cup runneth over.” Sometimes all I have to do is look at one of my grandchildren, hear good news about a friend or a student, or look at a beautiful piece of fruit, and I think of the cup God gave me. The archaic translation is awkward, yet the sentiment of abundance, of our good fortune spilling over, of it being unable to be fully contained is the ultimate expression of our gratitude. Rashi on that verse, explains that revayah is the language of fullness. A wonderful metaphor for human positivity, a cup is empty until we fill it. In Genesis, Joseph’s cup becomes a symbol of both betrayal and truth. In the book of Isaiah, God has both a cup of fury (51:17) and a cup of trembling (51:22). In the midst of Hallel, we encounter another cup: the cup of salvation: “How can I repay the Lord for all His bounties to me? I raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the Lord” (Ps. 116:12-13). Radak points out the practice of raising one’s cup at a feast. Here, in Hallel, we toast God for liberating and saving us again after again. Unable to ever recompense God for the good we receive, the least we can do is to lift up our cups and sing God’s praises.

Psalm 118:10-13: David Smigel, Rohr Scholar '27

כָּל־גּוֹיִם סָבְבוּנִי בִשְׁם ה' כִּי אֲמִילֵם: סְבוּנִי גַם־סָבְבוּנִי בִשְׁם ה' כִּי אֲמִילֵם: סְבוּנִי כְּדַבּוּרִים דַּעְכוּ כָּאֵשׁ קוֹצִים בִּשְׁם ה' כִּי אֲמִי־לֵם: דָּחָה דָּחִיתִנִּי לְנֶפֶל וְה' עֲזָרְנִי:

All nations have beset me; by the name of the Lord I will surely cut them down. They beset me, they surround me; by the name of the Lord I will surely cut them down. They have beset me like bees; they shall be extinguished like burning thorns; by the name of the Lord I will surely cut them down. You pressed me hard, I nearly fell; but the Lord helped me.

Reading the news today, it feels as though the world stands collectively against the Jewish People and that Israel is without a defender. With hostility from every direction, on campuses, on the ballot, and, of course, on the battlefield, the sense grows that a golden age of Jewry is coming to a close. Even walking down the streets of New York, it is hard to escape the feeling that people’s eyes are boring into you, the adrenaline coursing as you pray that you don’t become the next headline.

It is tempting to give in to hopelessness and despair — to simply give up and accept that we are alone. These verses in Hallel serve as a reminder that ultimately the immortal God is on our side, whereas the enemy is short-lived. Our adversaries are compared to bees and to thorns, which, though they can be menacing, are in truth nuisances incapable of profound harm. In the end, when we are backed into a corner on the verge of collapse, God comes in and rids us of our aggressors.

Sukkot is a time in which we explore our vulnerability and complete deference to God, leaving the sanctuary of our homes and exposing ourselves to the elements. In doing so, we place our trust in Him and recognize that the travails of this world are nothing more than a fleeting inconvenience.