

Sukkot

After the awe and judgment of Rosh Hashanah and the atonement and cleansing of Yom Kippur, we are blessed with the holiday of Sukkot. We have been inspired and elevated. The Jewish soul is wide awake, and it has a few things to say.

We come home after fasting and praying on Yom Kippur and we realize that some basic changes are in order. First of all, I need to move out. Who needs such a large, fancy home? A simple hut is all I need.

The Sukkah is our repudiation of the nonsense that fills our lives. On Sukkot we start over with a clean slate, and we want to begin the New Year with simplicity. After praying for inscription in the Book of Life, we have gained a new appreciation for life. And when that happens, life itself becomes so precious and beautiful many of our supposed “needs” just vanish.

The more we appreciate the gift of life, the more we appreciate the Giver of that gift. And so the Sukkah becomes not only a home for ourselves, but a home for G-d as well. After Yom Kippur, G-d and the Jews move in together and celebrate their revitalized relationship.

“During [these] seven days you must live in huts [sukkot]... This is so that future generations will know that I had the Jews live in huts when I brought them out of Egypt. I am G-d your Lord” (Vayikra 23:42,43). In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer explains that the Torah is not talking here about simple huts (Sukkah 11b). For that there would be no need for an eternal festival. What we are talking about here is the A’nanay Ha’Kovod, the Clouds of Glory that escorted the Jews across the desert from Egypt to Israel. These protective clouds symbolized G-d’s Presence: “G-d went before them by day with a pillar of cloud, to guide them along the way” (Shemot 13:21).

What our Sukkah represents is G-d’s manifest Presence living with the Jew, protecting him from the dangers of the hostile desert. That was the Sukkah of then, and that is the Sukkah of today. This is the awesome experience awaiting the Jew after Yom Kippur. The only difference is that this time we have to build the Clouds of Glory ourselves. If you build it, He will come.

Of course, it goes without saying that to build an external Sukkah without constructing an internal one is missing the point. As the new year begins, now is the time to begin again the development of ourselves into a home for the Divine Presence. (This is what we mean when we say that the Sukkah represents the Mishkan (Tabernacle). As the Vilna Gaon points out, the Jews began construction on the Mishkan on the fifteenth of the seventh month, (i.e. on Sukkot.)

Sukkot is not only the culmination of the High Holy season. It is also the completion of the yearly cycle

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of festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. On Pesach we left Egypt, on Shavuot we received the Torah, and on Sukkot G-d Himself escorted us through the desert to Israel. But there is yet another cycle that ends with Sukkot, and that is the agricultural cycle. “Three pilgrimage festivals shall you celebrate for me during the year. You shall observe the Festival of Matzot... at the appointed time of the month of springtime (Pesach)... and the Festival of Reaping (Shavuot)... and the Festival of the Harvest... when you gather your produce from the field (Sukkot)” (Shemot 23:14-16).

Pesach is in the Spring when things begin to grow and blossom, by Shavuot the produce has reached maturity and is ready for reaping, and on Sukkot the grain is collected from the field and brought home. So Sukkot is also the end of the agricultural cycle.

We know that physical realities are mere reflections of deeper spiritual realities. The Maharal of Prague (1525-1609) points out that what’s happening out in the field matches quite perfectly with its corresponding festival. Pesach is the time of blossoming. This reflects the birth of the Jewish nation at the Exodus. On Shavuot, produce reaches maturity and completion. This reflects our receiving the Torah and reached our fulfillment. And the process culminates on Sukkot, the time for harvesting and bringing it all home. On Sukkot, G-d gathers us into His home. That is the Sukkah, our Mishkan.

In the siddur (prayer book) we find descriptions of the three festivals. Pesach is described as Z’man Cherutainu, the Time of Our Freedom. Shavuot is described as Z’man Matan Toratenu, the Time of the Giving of Our Torah. What about Sukkot? How is Sukkot described? Sukkot is distinguished with the title, Z’man Simchatenu, the Time of our Joy. There can be no greater joy for man other than to live with G-d. In its fullest sense, this is only possible now, after we have reached the heights of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

May we all merit to see the Presence of G-d in our Sukkot, in our homes, and in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Samayach
The JSN Team

