

Chag HaSukkot:

Did Israel sit in Sukkot in the Wilderness?

"You shall live in Sukkot (booths) for seven days, all citizens in Israel shall live in Sukkot (booths); in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths, when I brought them out of the Land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God." (23:41-43)

The Torah informs us that the Sukkot, the huts or booths in which we reside for the week of Chag Hassukot correspond to a specific historical reality. God "made the Israelite people live in booths" during the Exodus from Egypt, and we imitate and simulate that collective experience on Chag Hassukot. Now, this familiar passuk has always raised a number of questions: What exactly does the Torah have in mind when it speaks about God housing us in "Sukkot" during the Egyptian Exodus? What booths is the verse referring to? Does the Torah record such an event?

Most readers are probably familiar with the Talmudic discussion in Sukka 11b:

'I made the Israelite people live in booths.'
It refers to the "clouds of glory" said Rabbi Eliezer.
Rabbi Akiva says: God made real Sukkot for them.

For Rabbi Eliezer, the booths of the wilderness are the miraculous protective "Clouds of Glory." For Rabbi Akiva, God's booths are actual huts in which the Israelites lived during their years of sojourning in the wilderness. Let us take Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva and investigate their respective opinions.

CLOUDS OF GLORY

Rabbi Eliezer talks about Ananei HaKavod – Clouds of Glory. What are these clouds? The Mekhilta offers us some clarity:

"There were seven clouds¹: Four of them to each side/direction (of the Israelites), one was above them and another below their feet. A further cloud would pass in front of them leveling the valleys and flattening the mountains." (Mekhilta Beshalach 1)

We are dealing with a miraculous phenomenon where we have mysterious clouds with protective powers that shielded and eased the path of B'nei Yisrael as they trekked through the wilderness. The Annanei Hakavod are said to have flattened mountains, as well as shielding the Israelites from the sun, and other harsh aspects of desert living. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the Sukkot that we inhabit mirror and reflect the cloud-experience of the wilderness.

This concept has its advantages and disadvantages. Advantages will include a straightforward reading of the passuk: I placed the Israelite people in sukkot. This is a

¹ Interesting that in the Mekhikta, other views are offered:

Rabbi Yehuda – 13 clouds

Rabbi Yoshiya – 4 clouds

Rebbi – 2 clouds.

So there is far from consensus amongst the Tannaim on this point.

Godly form of envelopment and protection, and hence God's protective clouds might fit the bill.

REAL BOOTHS?

But for adherents of the *peshat* approach to Chumash the *Ananei Hakavod* are a red flag. After all, the text of the Chumash never mentions clouds leveling mountains, or clouds under the feet of the Israelites! Those who adopt a more rational mode of thought and more text oriented approach are immediately attracted to the more realistic proposition by Rabbi Akiva, that the Israelites lived in huts, shelters. After all, if we are commanded to live in huts in commemoration of the booths of our ancestors in the wilderness, we should assume that B'nei Yisrael did indeed live in huts!

They are in good company. The Ibn Ezra also didn't favour the theory of *Ananei Hakavod* very much!

THE APPROACH OF THE IBN EZRA

"Some of the early scholars said that there were seven clouds, but to my mind, there were only two, and possibly only a single cloud." (Ibn Ezra)

The Ibn Ezra is commenting on the verse in Shemot that informs us that the Am Yisrael were lead by a cloud as we departed from Egypt:

"The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they may travel by day and night." (Shemot 13:21)

The Ibn Ezra reads that verse in the following manner:

"A pillar of cloud by day, to guide them: to show them the route. It also protected them², and this is the meaning of the phrase (in Tehillim 105:39) 'He spread a cloud as a screen.'

A pillar of fire by night, to give them light – It might be that the pillar of fire was within the pillar of cloud at night, as its states (Shemot 40:38) 'fire will be within it at night.'

That they may travel by day and night: They traveled around the clock ... These clouds, if there were two, remained with them until they crossed the Yam Suf (Reed Sea) but in my opinion, they then ceased to accompany them for there wasn't a need to travel at night after Pharaoh and his army had drowned in the Sea. (Shemot. Peirush Katzar 13:21)

But questions remain. And the most significant of them is the origins of Sukkot. If we have debunked the theory of the "Clouds of Glory," then what are the Sukkot that Bnei Yisrael lived in during the wilderness era?

The Ibn Ezra answers:

"...Near Mt. Sinai was a forest of Acacia trees. When they arrived there (Sinai) and were told that

² The Ibn Ezra may be referring to Shemot 14:19 where we read how the "the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up place behind them. It came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel ... and one could not come near the other throughout the night."

Might this episode be one of the primary sources for the concept of Annanei Kavod - protective clouds - in each direction?

At any rate, the Ibn Ezra seems to think (on the basis of the verse in Tehillim) that the pillar of cloud spread itself wide over them to shield them from the scorching desert sun.

