

Sukkot

Back To Nature?

Chavruta:

Mishna Sukka ch.1-2 (esp ch.1:1,4 end of 11; ch. 2:7,9)
Rashbam in Vayikra 23:43

In a sense, Sukkot thrusts us back to the natural world that we have so forgotten in our globalised high-tech age. We sit in the Sukka, surrounded by the natural greenery of the "sechakh". We feel the night air above, the heat, the cold and occasionally the rain. As we make a bracha over the *Arba'ah minim* - that rather exotic assortment of branches, leaves and fruits - we find ourselves in a web of connectedness with nature. Indeed, a rendezvous with God's wonderful natural kingdom might just be a healthy balance to our hectic urban lives within the impervious brick walls of our homes and our sterile modern environment.

Even as we say the prayer for rain on Sheminni Atzeret we would seem to take up this theme of connection to the natural world. After all, rain in the modern mindset is far from the blessing that would be perceived by the farmer. Rain in the city is a commodity that is simply a nuisance to modern man. For us Moderns, our only thought when it rains is of umbrellas and whether the traffic will be held up! However, in a bygone era, rain was a means of livelihood, a source of blessing and the key to success of one's agricultural crop. In the Beit Hamikdash, the *Simchat Beit Hashoeva* - the water drawing ceremony - highlighted the ecstatic joy that water (rain) could engender in the emotions of the nation. Rain withheld was a source of extreme anxiety. The corollary - rain given at the right time in the appropriate quantity - precipitated an explosion of joy and deep-felt prayers of thanksgiving.

So, is Sukkot the festival that takes us back to nature? Is this what Sukkot is about? If so, what is the place of "nature" in the Jewish system of thinking?

MISHNA SUKKA

To investigate this suggestion, one can go in all sorts of directions; to the Torah, the Midrashim, or the mediaeval Jewish Philosophers. I am going to direct our attention towards the very simple, concise and legalistic text of the

Mishna. We shall engage in an analysis of the Mishnayot in Sukka Ch.1-2 which develop the Halakhic parameters of a Sukka. By looking at these Mishnayot, we should get a clear picture of how the Halakha views a Sukka conceptually, and we shall discover some rather interesting observations regarding the connection between Sukkot and "nature".

CHAPTER 1

1. "A Sukka that is more than 20 cubits high is unfit
R. Yehuda permits it.

If it is less than 10 tefachim (handbreadths),
if it does not have three walls,
if the sun exceeds the shady area
- it is unfit.

An "Old Sukka" is forbidden by Beit Shammai
and permitted by Beit Hillel.

What is an "Old Sukka?"

A Sukka that is made in excess of 30 days of
the chag.

If it was deliberately made for the purpose of the
chag, even from the start of the year, it is
permitted.

4. If a vine was placed over it (the Sukka walls)

...

and the sechakh was placed on top of it (the
vine) – it is invalid.

If the sechakh covers a larger area than the
vine, or if the vine was cut – it is valid.

This is the general principle:

Any substance that receives ritual impurity,
and is not made from materials that grow in the
ground

- is invalid

A substance that does NOT receive ritual
impurity

And grows from the ground

- is fit to become the covering (for the Sukka.)

CHAPTER 2:

2. ... Rabbi Yehuda says: If the Sukka cannot
stand up by itself, it is unfit.

... If the shade exceeds the sun, it is fit for use.

If (the s"chach) is as thick as a house, even
though the stars cannot be seen through it, it is
fit for use.

7. A person who fits the majority of his body in
the Sukka, but his table is in the house:

Beit Shammai forbid it for use
Beit Hillel allow it....

8. For seven days, a person should make his Sukka his permanent dwelling, and his home, his temporary dwelling.

If rain began to fall, from when may one evacuate (the Sukka)?
From when the food begins to spoil..."

ANALYSIS

Let us analyse this Mishnayot from a philosophical perspective. While we do so, let us contemplate the following opposites:

Natural – Manufactured
Permanent – Temporary
Exposed – Protected

Where might we begin?

Well, we definitely know that the Sukka is not a natural pre-existent shelter. The "Old Sukka" or a Sukka whose sechakh [thatch, or other plant covering] is not especially placed¹ is invalid. Instead, the Sukka must be "custom-made" and constructed with the Mitzva of Sukka in mind. The Mishna stresses that a person "makes" a Sukka. It does not happen automatically. In this sense, a Sukka is a premeditated creation that demands human input.

SECHAKH

Let us move on. The Sukka, as it is clear from its very name, is the sechakh, the covering canopy, that is placed on the walls. What requirements are made of this covering? On one hand, the material has to be natural, grown from the ground, of vegetable origin. However, it may not remain attached to the ground! Here we see a middle ground². Indeed, we are surrounded by natural foliage, but not too natural! – it must be foliage which is detached from its living roots!

¹ See, for example, Mishna 8 and the case of a hollowed out haystack.

² I discovered this particular analysis of the mishnayot in Masechet Sukka in a book on the Jewish Calendar by Prof. Eliezer Schweid of Heb. University. (He used to be the head of the J. Philosophy Dept. there.) He is a fascinating man because he is not shomer Torah U'Mitzvot, yet, at the same time he has a very deep spiritual soul and an active interest with connecting modern Israeli culture with Judaism. I usually do not bring views of non-religiously observant thinkers in my shiurim, however, I think his observations are "Torat Emet", and, as the Rambam once said: "accept truth from wherever it originates." This analysis struck a deep cord in me as revealing a deep cord within the Mishnayot hence I present it here.

On the other hand, the material that makes up the sechakh may not be too processed, too industrially developed. This relates to the issue (Ch.1 Mishna 4) of whether the object is susceptible to contracting ritual impurity (Mekabel Tume'a). The definition of an object that is "mekabel Tume'a" is an item that is manufactured/adapted for human usage. A plank of wood is not a receptacle for impurity, but when it becomes a table top and begins to serve a function in human living, then it begins to be a receptacle for Tume'a. So the notion of sechakh that is NOT mekabel Tum'ah informs us that the sechakh may not be a manufactured item.

Let us return to our terms of reference. The sechakh is somewhat natural, but not too much. It is almost a half-way house between the notion of nature and manufacture. If it has been industrially adapted to serve a human household need, then it is invalid. It is too processed, too "machined." On the other hand, the lush vine with its large leafy greenery is also invalid. We must first cut the vines from the nourishment of the earth in order to validate them.

EXPOSURE AND PERMANENCE.

The Sukka, by its definition is a temporary dwelling. We have already mentioned that a Sukka must be deliberately constructed. This indicates a sense of transience. But where lie the limits of its temporal nature?

Let us first note the issue of the exposure to the elements that the Sukka entails. The Sukka lets in the rain (ch.2 mishna 8) and even if one cannot see the stars³, there would appear to be something exposed about the Sukka. On the other hand, the Sukka is not simply a shelter from the sun, a pergola with a view of nature. No, the very opposite is true. The Sukka must have a definitive structure. It must have at least 3 walls, cutting oneself off from the "openness" of the field, the scenery⁴. It must have a more than 50% coverage on top. The sechakh must provide more shade than sun! So, on the one hand – 3 walls, majority shade - there is a protective aspect. And at the same time, there is a dimension in which the sukka is less protected – its temporal nature, its missing wall, its roof that lets in the rain – and this represents a greater degree of exposure to the elements than normal.

³ Ch.1 Mishna 6 discusses the issue of the degree of coverage. There it is clear that one cannot take a single slab of natural substance, eg. Wood, and use it as sechakh. There must be gaps between the natural elements that make up the sechakh. This even if the composite units are placed in immediate proximity to one another. So, full coverage is fine, but it must be made up from a number of independent units.

⁴ In ch.1 mishna 9 we see that the walls, even if suspended, and supported from above, must reach close to the ground. The talmud explains that this is so that animals cannot wander into the sukka. Once again, a degree of protection, sectioning off, is demanded.

The theme of Permanence vs. Temporality expresses itself further. The sukka is to become our "permanent" dwelling place for seven days, despite the fact that its essence is a temporary structure. On the one hand, if it cannot fit the basic furniture of daily living – a table – it cannot purport to be a normalised living space. It must mirror a permanent home. But from the other side, if it is too permanent, it is also improper. According to one view in the Talmud, the 20-cubit-high Sukka is invalid precisely because it lacks this element of impermanence. The Sukka is a place that I might have to evacuate if weather conditions turn nasty. It is far from a permanent, secure, hermetic abode.

SUMMARY AND MEANING

So, in this short analysis we have presented the Sukka at a midway point between nature and developed living; between exposure and protection; and between permanence and temporality.

Why does the Halakha place the Sukka into this strange twilight zone, suspended between opposites?

Human living is typified by our ability to transform our natural environment into an artificial one. An animal lives exposed to the elements. Human beings exercise their skill and intelligence, their technology and machinery to transform and process the natural world into a controlled, functional environment.

But it is more than this. The natural world is unpredictable, random. It has swings from cold to hot, from wet to dry, from night to day. Our technological society wishes to transcend the helplessness. Let us examine the nature of our homes. They are impervious, resistant to the elements. We feel secure and protected within their brick walls, their temperature regulation, our artificial lighting, the creature comforts of a domestic abode. The ultimate success of civilisation and the achievement of human dignity is precisely man's ability to exert absolute control over his environment.

On Sukkot, we leave our controlled environment for a more primitive one. We do not go back to a totally exposed environment, to nature, because this is not human living. But yet we leave our homes. We are half way between civilisation and total exposure to the natural elements. What is the meaning behind this halfway point?

Maybe we might suggest that in truth, our aspiration for human mastery of the elements is in fact, a myth, a lie. After all, there is so much that we cannot control: illness, disaster, weather, time, ageing... the economy! So many things are beyond our control. We live in an illusory state of mind whereby we imagine that we are indeed in

control. But in truth, there is a higher power that protects and controls us. We only have limited ability to regulate our environment.

Human civilisations run the risk of a mad obsession to conquer all, to secure our personal futures, to delude ourselves into seeing man as the all powerful, the creator, the controller. Mankind rushes forward with ever increasing speed in a tragic quest to conquer the elements absolutely, a task that will forever elude Human-kind.

On Sukkot, we celebrate the limitedness of Man, and the corollary; the protection and guidance of God. As Humans, we express our reliance upon a God and an understanding that even within our homes⁵, we are in fact vulnerable, and not at all impervious to the torrential randomness of Nature.

CHAG HE-ASSIF AND THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

This is the most important message at the Feast of the Ingathering – Chag HeAssif. At this time of year, the farmer had his barns and storehouses filled with grain, hay, dried fruits, nuts, an entire winter's worth of supplies. The feeling was one of satisfaction, and one in which the farmer would sit back and, looking at a successful crop, feel that he now was in full control. However cold and miserable the winter, I am insured for that "rainy day." I have used my human intelligence, sense of planning and organisation to ensure that my future is secure.

There was a period of time in our history when we were absolutely aware of our helplessness; when God's daily assistance was self-evident, and man could adopt a more modest, humble pose, as he left certain things for God. This was the environment of the wilderness when we were subject to God's protection and guidance. "Sit in Sukkot for seven days for I had Bnei Yisrael live in Sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt."

We sit in our Sukkot not to connect with nature. We sit in our Sukkot to experience the limited-ness of man, and the graceful protection of God.

Chag Sameach!

⁵ See the famous and wonderful Rashbam in Vayikra 23:43 that compares Vayikra 23 with Devarim 8. The ideas there fully compliment this shiur.