

We have just concluded the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, when solemnly we gathered on R"Y and Y"K and asked Hashem to grant us life and forgive our sins. We engaged in serious introspection about our deeds, sins and accomplishments and the trajectory of our lives. How odd that 4 days after Y"K, the Torah mandates another holiday, this time a harvest festival. Moshe Waldoks, who used to lead the Chapel Minyan service years ago, used to call this an example of the Divine sense of humor.

But this is the time to make the transition from the gravity of the Yamin Noraim to the lightheartedness of Z'man Simchateinu, the time of our joy, the proper appellation of Sukkot. I have a few suggestions to help ease the transition:

Recall with me the 3 pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. They are clearly tied to the agricultural cycle.

Pesach: the spring holiday of planting.

Shavuot: the holiday that comes 40 days after the spring planting, and celebrates the harvest of the first fruits.

Sukkot: the real harvest festival. Like harvest festivals in our own time, we celebrate the ingathering of all crops, and the cessation of agricultural activities, until the cycle begins again in the spring again.

Now the Rabbis endeavored to assign each of these agricultural milestones some historical significance.

Pesach: the exodus from Egypt

Shavuot: the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah

Sukkot: dwelling in booths or huts in the desert...????

Let's be real. There really is no historical event celebrated by Sukkot. Some say the booths really functioned as temporary housing for harvesters. Yet Sukkot was the biggest of the 3 in ancient times. It was known as Ha-Chag (the holiday). Since most people in those days were engaged in agriculture, it is no surprise that when all was gathered in, there was a need to formally give thanks for the plenty.

So how do we non-agricultural people relate? How can we experience the joy of Sukkot?

1. Build a sukka. I bought a kit many years ago with aluminum poles to make the frame and a decorated canvas wall to be hung on the frame. It even has the Kiddush for Sukkot as well as the blessing "Laishave basukka" printed on the canvas. We decorate it with strings of cranberries, fruits, colored leaves, etc. and at least have Kiddush in the Sukka. It serves as a monument to a sense of gratitude for my blessings as if I were a farmer.
2. Lulav & etrog: Obvious fertility rituals which address any farmer's concerns. Will next year's conditions be as favorable? Will I have a good harvest?

3. Synagogue rituals: We can't make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, but we can chant Hoshanna and Hallel which recapitulate ancient temple-based holiday rituals.

I would now like to turn to the universalism of the holiday of Sukkot. We have the harvest festival called Chag Ha-Asef, the holiday of the gathering, at the end of the agricultural cycle. The Rabbis saw Sukkot as a vision of the end of days. Just as a sense of contentment and satisfaction comes to the farmer who has finished his work and harvested his crops, so the Rabbis saw this as a vision of the dawn of the Messianic Age. The prophetic readings anticipate that all nations will come and worship in Jerusalem.

The Haftarah for the first day of Sukkot is from Zechariah: And it shall come to pass that everyone that is left of all the nations that come against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the feast of Sukkot. (Zech 14:16). "And the Lord shall be king of all the earth; in that day, shall the Lord be One and His name One." (Zech 14:9) Note that the sacrifices rendered over Sukkot total 70 bulls; an allusion to the universalism of the 70 nations. Finally, in an analogy to harvesting, just as we gather our fruits together into the sukka, so God gathers all his fruits (read peoples) together into His great Sukka the Sukkat Shalom, the all embracing Covering of Peace.

An essential element of the holiday is the extending of hospitality and taking in guests. In a symbolic form, we invite Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses Aaron and David and their wives. This is called Ushpizin and is also inscribed on my Sukka walls.

So is today's haftarah so war-like? Yes, it is a prophecy of Messianic days. But the prophet Ezekiel predicts that the restoration of Israel to its former inhabitants will not go unchallenged. Formidable enemies from the North under the leadership of Gog will invade Israel. Ezekiel assures us that this invasion will fail. The Messianic Age cannot arrive before a great battle, when the forces of evil will be vanquished. This great battle is traditionally believed to be fought on Sukkot. Does this sound like modern history or ancient nonsense?