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The Sukkah and its Symbolism

Rabbi Eliezer says that the *sukkah* is meant to remind us of the realbooths from the wilderness period. Rabbi Akiba (surprisingly) suggests that it reminds us of the clouds of glory. What is at the heart of this debate ?

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The Mitzvah of Sukkah in Leviticus

In the description of the observance of the Festival of Sukkot in Leviticus 23, the Torah ordains two rituals apart from the sacrifices and prohibition on labor, the four species (Lev 23:39-41) and the *sukkah* (Lev 23:42-43). The commandment of the ritual *sukkah* reads:

מב בַּסֻּכֹּ֥ת תֵּשְׁב֖וּ שִׁבְעַ֣ת יָמִ֑ים כָּל הָֽאֶזְרָח֙ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל יֵשְׁב֖וּ בַּסֻּכֹּֽת: מג לְמַעַן֘ יֵדְע֣וּ דֹרֹֽתֵיכֶם֒ כִּ֣י בַסֻּכּ֗וֹת הוֹשַׁ֙בְתִּי֙ אֶת בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל בְּהוֹצִיאִ֥י אוֹתָ֖ם מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם אֲנִ֖י יְ-הֹוָ֥ה אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶֽם:

42 You shall live in *sukkot* for seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in *sukkot*, 43 in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.

In contrast to the ritual of the four species or *lulav* and *etrog*, the Torah here provides an explanation for the commandment.  At first glance nothing could be more straightforward.  The Israelites are commanded to reside in *sukkot* (literally “booths”) to recall the *sukkot* in which their ancestors resided during the exodus.  We today dwell in *sukkot* just as they dwelled in *sukkot* in the wilderness wanderings.

The Meaning of the Mitzvah in Rabbinic Tradition

The rabbis, however, debated the meaning of these verses:

"למען ידעו דורותיכם כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל בהוציאי אותם מארץ מצרים” – רבי אליעזר אומר: “סוכות ממש היו.” רבי עקיבא אומר: “בסוכות ענני כבוד היו."

*In order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in sukkot (Lev 23:43.*R. Eliezer says: “They were real *sukkot*.” R Akiba says: “They were the clouds of glory.” (*Sifra* 17:11, ed. I. Weiss, 103a-b)[1]

In R. Eliezer’s view the Israelites dwelled in real *sukkot* when they came forth from Egypt, and the annual ritual observance *reenacts* this dimension of the Exodus. For R. Akiba, the Israelites did not build and live in booths made of wood and vegetation. Rather they resided in booths formed of the supernatural “clouds of glory,” and the ritual observance today *commemorates*, but does not reenact, this dimension of the Exodus.  The sukkot we construct and inhabit *symbolize* the very different kind of sukkah that sheltered our ancestors in the desert.

Eliezer’s opinion is readily understandable. We know what a sukkah is, and if the Torah states that the Israelites dwelled in sukkot throughout their desert sojourn, then so be it, though that tradition is found nowhere else in the Bible. R. Akiba’s view, however, seems to require explanation.

Understanding Rabbi Akiba’s view as an attempt at *Peshat*

At first Rabbi Akiva’s position appears to be a type of fanciful *midrash*that opposes the *peshat*articulated by this colleague. Nevertheless, a case can be made that R. Akiba provides us with an attempt at *peshat*, or at least a competing *peshat*explanation—a contextual explanation—of the meaning of the verse.[2]  To interpret the “*sukkot*” of Lev 23:43 as real *sukkot* is not as simple as it may seem.

According to the Torah: The Israelites did not Dwell in Sukkot

The Torah, in fact, never refers to the Israelites residing in *sukkot* apart from this passage.  Throughout the narrative of the exodus recounted in the rest of the Torah, the Israelites are described as living in tents, as is indeed typical of desert travelers and dwellers.  Thus when Bilaam surveys the camp of the Israelites he states, How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings O Israel! (Num 24:5),[3] and not “How goodly are your sukkot, O Jacob.” Likewise, the Torah relates that when Moses would go into the “Tent of Meeting (אהל מועד),” the Israelites would “rise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses” (Exod 33:8),[4] and not “each at the entrance of his *sukkah*.”  The prophet Hosea (12:10) speaks of Israel dwelling in tents in the wilderness.[5]

Why does Lev 23:43 refer to the Israelites’ dwellings as *sukkot* when the rest of the Torah knows nothing about this?

What does it mean that God Caused Us to Dwell in Sukkot?

It is also possible that R. Akiba was influenced by the curious formulation of Lev 23:43, “I made the Israelite people live in *sukkot*,” using the verb in the *hiphil* conjugation (הושבתי), with God as the verb’s subject, rather than the *qal (*ישבו), with Israel as the subject.  We might have expected “in order that future generations may know that the Israelite people lived *(*ישבו) in *sukkot*” but the Torah states that God “made” or caused them to dwell in *sukkot*. This wording suggests that God provided the *sukkot*, and therefore, they were not mundane and ordinary booths.

Sukkah as “Clouds” in the Bible

Now the Bible occasionally uses the term *sukkah* to refer to clouds or to God’s celestial dwelling-place as manifested among clouds.  The Psalmist describes his vision of the divine: “He made darkness his screen; dark thunderbolts, dense clouds of the sky were his *sukkah*round about him” (Ps 18:12).[6]  Both meanings devolve from the base meaning of the root סכה, “to cover,” as both clouds and booths provide shade and covering from the sun.

And divine clouds routinely appear around the camp of the Israelites in the desert, namely the “pillar of cloud” that guides the Israelites on their way (e.g. Exod 33:9-10), and the cloud in which God reveals himself within the Tabernacle (Lev 16:2).  R. Akiba probably asked himself which meaning of *sukkot* best fits the usage in Lev 23:43 and concluded that it made better sense to understand the term as “clouds (of God’s glory)” then as “(real) booths,” since the Torah does record the Israelites being surrounded by clouds but never mentions booths anywhere in the story.

A Historical-Critical Angle: From Harvest Days to Historical Remembrances

Akiba’s interpretive dilemma can also be appreciated from another perspective. As is well known, Judaism offers both agricultural and historical explanations for the three pilgrimage festivals. The Torah connects the spring festival, the time of the barley harvest, with the Passover sacrifice and the Exodus from Egypt in detailed and multifaceted ways. But the Torah “fails” to associate the summer harvest festival, also known as the Festival of First-Fruits (*bikkurim*) and later known as Shavuot, with any historical event. Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism later connect Shavuot to the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai to provide a historical explanation.[7]

The Torah’s conception of the Festival of Sukkot, the fall harvest festival of ingathering (*hag ha’asif;*Exod 23:16), stands at an intermediate stage of this process of historicizing the festivals. Leviticus 23:43 connects the harvest festival to the exodus and the wilderness sojourn through the notion that the Israelites dwelled in *sukkot*, although this idea appears nowhere else in the Torah.

From a source or redaction critical perspective, this may be understood as the strained effort of a late author trying to fit the ritual of a harvest holiday into the rubric of the exodus-wilderness story, where it didn’t originally fit,[8] but Rabbi Akiba could not have understood the passage this way. Thus, the complicated and confusing reference to *sukkot* perplexed R. Akiba, and led to the understanding of those *sukkot* as the clouds of glory, not the real *sukkot*in which agricultural workers take shelter and in which harvest celebrations take place.

The Symbolism of the Sukkah in Rabbi Akiba’s Interpretation

In the rabbinic imagination, the “clouds of glory” formed a protective force-field around the Israelites as they moved through the wilderness.  Some rabbis imagined seven clouds, one on each side of the Israelite camp, one above, one below, and one—the Bible’s “pillar of cloud”—going before them and blazing the path (Tosefta *Sotah* 4:2).[9]  These clouds protected them from the hot sands below, the burning sun above, scorpions and snakes and even the assaults of their enemies.  The clouds thus symbolize God’s consummate protective presence, care and love for his people.  In this respect, the *sukkot* evoke the “honeymoon” view of the relationship between the Israelites and God during the wilderness sojourn.

As opposed to the main narrative of the Torah, which recalls a fraught relationship where the Israelites constantly complained, disobeyed, and sinned, some prophets remembered this time as a harmonious, “honeymoon” period when the Israelites faithfully and devotedly followed their God in a trek to the Promised Land.  Thus, Jeremiah prophesies: “I remember for you the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride; how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jer 2:2).[10]  In return, God sheltered them within the intimate presence of the clouds of glory, almost a nuptial chamber where bride and groom coexisted intimately.

For R. Akiba, the ritual of dwelling in the *sukkah* evokes this sensibility through its symbolism of the clouds of glory and the experience of the *sukkah*’s shade, which connects more tangibly to the protective shade bestowed by clouds.  In the hot, Mediterranean sun, shade was the outstanding symbol of protection.  Psalms 91 opens: “O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shade of Shaddai (*tsel shaddai*); I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold, my God in whom I trust.”[11]  Divine protection from the sun is the major theme of Psalm 121,especially, v. 5: “The Lord is your guardian; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.”[12]  In this *sukkah*’s shade, we experience the divine shade, the “shade of Shaddai,” and feel the consummate protection of God’s sheltering presence.

The Symbolism of the Sukkah in Rabbi Eliezer’s Interpretation

But what about R. Eliezer?  If our annual dwelling in *sukkot* reenacts the real*sukkot* in which the Israelites resided in the wilderness, then the conception of the commandment and its experience works differently.  A real *sukkah* is a fragile and impermanent structure, a “temporary dwelling” as rabbinic halacha would later define it.  The Israelites, in this view, were vulnerable and insecure throughout the years of wandering, exposed to the elements and susceptible to attack. On Sukkot, we move out of our solid and enduring houses to reenact this experience of vulnerability and instability.

Rabbi Eliezer’s view fits with the feeling of the holiday in its pre-historicized form as well. At the conclusion of the agricultural year, following the fall harvest, there is a danger of feeling overconfident and secure. At this point we are liable to “forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt the house of bondage… and say in your heart ‘My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth’” (Deut 8:14, 17).[13]  Specifically at this time of year we stay in *sukkot* to reenact and re-experience the ultimate precariousness of human life and our dependence on God.

Conclusion

Powerful rituals and symbols have multiple meanings. The ritual experiences entailed in the interpretations of R. Akiba and R. Eliezer are not necessarily mutually exclusive, especially over the course of a seven or eight day festival, where we have time to focus more than one theme.  On this Festival of Sukkot, may we merit experiencing the *sukkah* both as a symbol of the clouds of glory and as a reenactment of the real *sukkot* of the exodus.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-sukkah-and-its-symbolism)

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1. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Sukkot* 11b)—according to the printed edition and all known manuscripts—the names are reversed.
2. To clarify, this kind of *peshat* only works according to the traditional rabbinic premise that the entire Torah comes from one source or author. From an academic/critical perspective, it is certainly possible, even probable, that different passages in the Torah record different or even contradictory traditions.
3. מַה־טֹּ֥בוּ אֹהָלֶ֖יךָ יַעֲקֹ֑ב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶ֖יךָ יִשְׂרָאֵֽל
4. וְהָיָ֗ה כְּצֵ֤את מֹשֶׁה֙ אֶל־הָאֹ֔הֶל יָק֙וּמוּ֙ כָּל־הָעָ֔ם וְנִ֨צְּב֔וּ אִ֖ישׁ פֶּ֣תַח אָהֳל֑וֹ וְהִבִּ֙יטוּ֙ אַחֲרֵ֣י מֹשֶׁ֔ה עַד־ בֹּא֖וֹ הָאֹֽהֱלָה
5. וְאָנֹכִ֛י יְ-הֹוָ֥ה אֱ-לֹהֶ֖יךָ מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם עֹ֛ד אוֹשִֽׁיבְךָ֥ בָאֳהָלִ֖ים כִּימֵ֥י מוֹעֵֽד
6. יָ֤שֶׁת חֹ֨שֶׁךְ׀ סִתְר֗וֹ סְבִֽיבוֹתָ֥יו סֻכָּת֑וֹ חֶשְׁכַת־מַ֗יִם עָבֵ֥י שְׁחָקִֽים
7. For more on this process, see the TABS essays, [“Shavuot: How the Festival of Harvest Grew,”](http://thetorah.com/shavuot-how-the-festival-of-harvest-grew/)by Norman Solomon, [“The Festival of Covenants – Shavuot in the Book of Jubilees: The Earliest Source to Connect Shavuot to the Sinai Covenant,”](http://thetorah.com/the-festival-of-covenants/) by Michael Segal, and[“Ezekiel’s Failure to Mention Shavuot – And the Re-imagining of the Harvest Festival in the Wake of the Babylonian Exile,”](http://thetorah.com/ezekiels-failure-to-mention-shavuot/) by Evan Hoffman.
8. For more on this, see the TABS essays, [“The First Sukkah?”](http://thetorah.com/the-first-sukkah/) and [“The Sukkot Enigma: “Knowing” Why We Sit in a Sukkah.”](http://thetorah.com/why-we-sit-in-the-sukkah/)
9.

…המקום נתן לבניו שבעה ענני כבוד במדבר אחד מימינם ואחד משמאלם אחד לפניהם ואחד לאחריהם ואחד למעלה מראשיהם ואחד לשכינה שביניהם ועמוד ענן שהיה מקדים לפניהם…

1. זָכַ֤רְתִּי לָךְ֙ חֶ֣סֶד נְעוּרַ֔יִךְ אַהֲבַ֖ת כְּלוּלֹתָ֑יִךְ לֶכְתֵּ֤ךְ אַחֲרַי֙ בַּמִּדְבָּ֔ר בְּאֶ֖רֶץ לֹ֥א זְרוּעָֽה
2. יֹ֭שֵׁב בְּסֵ֣תֶר עֶלְי֑וֹן בְּצֵ֥ל שַׁ֝-דַּ֗י יִתְלוֹנָֽן: אֹמַ֗ר לַֽי-הֹוָה מַחְסִ֣י וּמְצוּדָתִ֑י אֱ֝-לֹהַ֗י אֶבְטַח־בּֽוֹ
3. יְ-הֹוָ֥ה שֹׁמְרֶ֑ךָ יְ-הֹוָ֥ה צִ֝לְּךָ֗ עַל־יַ֥ד יְמִינֶֽךָ

 יד וְרָ֖ם לְבָבֶ֑ךָ וְשָֽׁכַחְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְ-הֹוָ֣ה אֱ-לֹהֶ֔יךָ הַמּוֹצִיאֲךָ֛ מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרַ֖יִם מִבֵּ֥ית עֲבָדִֽים…יז וְאָמַרְתָּ֖ בִּלְבָבֶ֑ךָ כֹּחִי֙ וְעֹ֣צֶם יָדִ֔י עָ֥שָׂה לִ֖י אֶת־הַחַ֥יִל הַזֶּֽה