

SUKKOT

I started writing something about Sukkot, trying to connect the reasons for the sukka and its importance with other aspects of the holiday, namely simcha and the emphasis on the word CHAG. One source was added to another source and I kept finding new information. It became very unwieldy and disconnected. Finding that this was not a flowing idea but more a forced message, I had to put together something - at least in my own mind - that gave order to it all, not to dismiss what I had learned and had hoped to include, but to unify and make sense of it.

Maybe because I finally stopped trying so hard to put everything together that a new idea finally occurred to me. One that I think is true and, perhaps, even weighty. The word SIMCHA isn't used regarding Pesach and only once regarding Shavuot, while used three times in terms of Sukkot. In addition, the usage of some form of the word CHAG demonstrates something similar: Pesach - CHAG HAMATZOT LASHEM (Vayikra 23:6); Shavuot - V'ASITA CHAG SHAVUOT LASHEM (D'varim 16:10); but regarding Sukkot, it says CHAG HASUKOT SHIV'AT

YAMIM LASHEM" (Vayikra 23:34); CHAG HASUKOT TA'ASEH L'CHA SHIV'AT YAMIM (D'varim 16:13); SHIV'AT YAMIM TACHOG LASHEM (16:15) and TACHOGU ET CHAG HASHEM SHIV'AT YAMIM (Vayikra 23:39); V'CHAGOTEM OTO CHAG LASHEM SHIV'AT YAMIM...TACHOGU OTO. For some reason, there is more emphasis on CHAG. What is it about Sukkot that separates it in such a way from the other holidays?

I returned to the original idea with which I had begun, about the sukka itself, to see if I could find any insight. There is a difference of opinion about the mitzva itself. R. Eliezer says the mitzva is to commemorate the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the people when they left Egypt. R. Akiva, on the other hand says that the sukkot that we are commemorating are actual physical huts. What is the reason he feels this was the essence of the mitzva? Perhaps it is because of what the sukka represents. The Jews in Egypt had been exposed to the magnificent permanent edifices that represented the Egyptian culture - but this was not a Jewish message. We are in this world on a temporary basis, Life is fleeting. Nothing is "permanent". The physical form of the sukka emphasizes this. In addition, the verse doesn't say the Jews YASHVU, lived in these sukkot, it says HOSHAVTI ET B'NEI YISRAEL - 'I placed them there'. The verse also

doesn't specify 'where' - it doesn't say BAMIDBAR - in the desert. Rather, it says B'HOTZI'I OTAM MEI'ERETZ MITZRAYIM (when I took them out of Egypt) - the sukkot were only there as a part of the Exodus from Egypt, a step towards a different goal, a temporary situation.

When I put all of this together, the emphasis the Torah places on certain things specifically on Sukkot, as opposed to the other Regalim, and the importance which R. Akiva places on this Yom Tov, I thought that that might really be the message and the difference. What do I mean? Pesach is the holiday that commemorates our physically becoming a nation; Shavuot clearly commemorates our spiritual birth - the laws that would rule our lives in the most ethical way. So we have our physical nation and its spiritual underpinnings. What message does Sukkot add? The importance of the concept that life here is temporary is one message. But is it on the scale of the other two major ideas? I decided to look into the idea of simcha to see if I could find anything there. There are basically two kinds of simcha: the happiness caused by a specific event, e.g., Aharon was indeed happy to meet again with his brother (Sh'mot 4:14); similarly, there certainly was reason for the Jews to be happy after being saved from the clutches of Haman (Esther 8:15). But these were tempo-

rary periods of happiness and, with the passage of time, the happiness dissipated. The other form of simcha is the permanent kind. It's not necessarily something characterized by a smile on your face; it is more a sense of contentment, of satisfaction, e.g., EIM HABANIM S'MEICHA (T'hilim 113:9); BEN CHACHAM Y'SAMACH AV (Mishlei 10:1). Obviously, the more desirable simcha is one that lasts, that impacts your life.

It seems to me that there is something about the sukka itself that leads to, or smacks of, this kind of simcha because I don't believe the Torah is limiting our celebration and our simcha simply to the performance of the mitzvot related to the chag. That would be "temporary". I would suggest that the simcha is related to the sukka itself. The message it gives us is what teaches us how a physical nation with spiritual guidelines can achieve a permanent joy from it. The sukka is referred to as TZILA D'MEHENUTA - the shade of Emuna. We live in a hut knowing that it cannot protect us from anything and we are forced to look above, beyond the s'chach and be reminded of the One Who protects us always. The One on Whom our happiness depends. Is it merely a coincidence that on Sukkot we have a cause for this feeling of permanent simcha since it comes upon the heels of Yom Kippur, when we were forgiven?

The message the sukka gives us is the crux of the issue. If our lives here are, indeed, temporary, then we are required to live those lives in such a way that makes them worthwhile. In order to do this, we, as the Jewish nation (Pesach) are to lead lives according to the Torah and the mitzvot commanded by Gd (Shavuot). And that is the source of the simcha. As Rav Menachem Tzion Zaks points out, V'SAMACHTA B'CHAGECHA can't be a command to be happy. One cannot be commanded to 'feel' a certain way. As Rashi says, this is a promise, not a requirement. The joy that comes from one who does the will of HaShem, this joy produces the feeling of spiritual contentment. A feeling of this sort, this kind of simcha, can only come from the awareness that you are always in His presence and under His hashgacha. Sitting in a sukka, knowing that your success - or failure - is not up to you but up to Gd.

But what about the multiple usage of the word CHAG? What is the reason, the message of this emphasis? We need to remind ourselves of the real meaning of CHAG. The original meaning, from the root CHAGOG, is to encircle. It came to mean a celebration by describing the circle of joyful dancers. And of what importance is this circle? Rav S.R. Hirsch offers an insight. When Moshe asks Par'o to let the Jews go to serve

HaShem, he says because it is a CHAG LASHEM. Rav Hirsch defines this as a "circle about Gd. Gd calls us to gather to crown Him". The emphasis on CHAG and TACHOGU literally draws a picture in our minds of all the people celebrating "around" HaShem. It is all about being with Him. What other greater way is there to express the simcha that the sukka gives us?

T'hilim (33:21) tells us: KI VO YISMACH LIBEINU, KI V'SHEIM KOD'SHO BATACHNU. It is only the realization that He is with us, that gives us joy. We can rejoice because we trusted in Him and He helps and saves all who do so. Our bitachon (as in the sukka) creates this simcha. As the S'fat Emet says - there is no happiness like the happiness of one who truly relies on HaShem. ❀