



Radical Uncertainty

There is something very strange about the festival of Sukkot. On the one hand, it is the festival supremely associated with joy. In the whole Torah, joy is *not mentioned* at *all* in relation to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or Pesach, *once* in connection with Shavuot and *three times* in connection with Sukkot. Hence its name: *zman simchateinu*, the festival of our joy.

Yet what it recalls is one of the more negative elements of the wilderness years: “You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that future generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the L-rd your G-d” (Vayikra 23:42-43).

For 40 years, the Israelites lived without permanent homes, often on the move. They were in the wilderness, in no man’s land, where it is hard to know what to expect and what dangers lie in wait along the way. The people certainly lived under Divine protection. But they could never be sure in advance whether it would be forthcoming and what form this protection might take. It was a prolonged period of insecurity.

How then are we to understand the fact that of all festivals, Sukkot is called *zman simchateinu*, the festival of our joy? It would have made sense to call Pesach – freedom’s birthday – the festival of joy. It would have

made sense to call Shavuot – the day of revelation at Sinai – the festival of joy. But why give that title to a festival that commemorates 40 years of exposure to the heat, cold, wind and rain. Remembering that, why should we feel joy?

Besides which, what was the miracle? Pesach and Shavuot recall miracles. But traveling through the wilderness with only temporary homes was neither miraculous nor unique. That is what people who travel through the wilderness do. They must. They are on a journey. They can only have a temporary dwelling. In this respect, there was nothing special about the Israelites’ experience.

It was this consideration that led Rabbi Eliezer to suggest¹ that the *sukkah* represents the Clouds of Glory, *ananei kavod*, that accompanied the Israelites during those years, sheltering them from heat and cold, protecting them from their enemies, and guiding them on the way. This is a beautiful and imaginative solution to the problem. It identifies a miracle and explains why a festival should be dedicated to remembering it. That is why Rashi and Ramban take it as the plain sense of the verse.

But it is difficult, nonetheless. A *sukkah* looks nothing like the Clouds of Glory. It would be hard to imagine anything *less* like the Clouds of Glory.

Rabbi Akiva dissents from Rabbi Eliezer’s view and says that a *sukkah* is

what it says it is: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. What, according to Rabbi Akiva, was the miracle? There is no way of knowing the answer. But we can guess.

If a *sukkah* represents the Clouds of Glory – the view of Rabbi Eliezer – then it celebrates G-d’s miracle. If it represents nothing other than a *sukkah* itself – Rabbi Akiva’s view – then it celebrates the *human* miracle of which Yirmiyahu spoke when he said: “Thus said the L-rd, ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown’” (Yirmiyahu 2:2).

The Israelites may have complained and rebelled. But they followed G-d. They kept going. Like Avraham and Sarah, they were prepared to journey into the unknown.

If we understand this to be the miracle, we can infer a deep truth about faith itself. *Faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty.* Almost every phase of the Exodus was fraught with difficulties, real or imagined. That is what makes the Torah so powerful. It does not pretend that life is any easier than it is. The road is not straight and the journey is long. Unexpected things happen. Crises suddenly appear. It becomes important to embed in a people’s memory the knowledge that we can handle the unknown. G-d is with us, giving us the courage we need.

Each Sukkot it is as if G-d were reminding us: don't think you need solid walls to make you feel safe. I led your ancestors through the desert so they would never forget the journey they had to make and the obstacles they had to overcome to get to this Land. He said, "I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Vayikra 23:43). In those booths, fragile and open to the elements, the Israelites learned the courage to live with uncertainty.

Other nations told stories that celebrated their strength. They built palaces and castles as expressions of invincibility. The Jewish people were different. They carried with them a story about the uncertainties and hazards of history. They spoke of their ancestors' journey through the wilderness without homes, houses, protection against the elements. It is a story of spiritual strength, not military strength.

Sukkot is a testament to the Jewish people's survival. Even if it loses its Land and is cast again into the wilderness, it will lose neither heart nor hope. It will remember it spent its early years as a nation living in a *sukkah*, a temporary dwelling exposed to the elements. It will know that in the wilderness, no encampment is permanent. It will keep traveling until once again it reaches the promised land: Israel. Home.

It is no accident that the Jewish people is the only one to have survived 2,000 years of exile and dispersion, its identity intact and energy unabated. It is the only people who can live in a shack with leaves as

a roof and yet feel surrounded by clouds of glory. It is the only people who can live in a temporary dwelling and yet rejoice.

In *Radical Uncertainty*,² the book recently published by John Kay (economist) and Mervyn King (former Governor of the Bank of England), a distinction is made between *risk*, which is calculable, and *uncertainty*, which is not. They argue that people have relied too much on calculations of probability while neglecting the fact that danger may appear from a completely unexpected source. The sudden appearance of the Coronavirus proved their point. People knew there was a possibility of a pandemic. But no one knew what it would be like, where it would come from, how rapidly it would spread, and what toll it would take.

More important than the calculation of probabilities, they say, is *understanding the situation*, answering the question, "What is going on?"³ This, they say, is never answered by statistics or predictions but rather by narrative, by telling a story.

That is exactly what Sukkot is about. It is a story about uncertainty. It tells us that we can know everything else, but we will never know what tomorrow will bring. Time is a journey across a wilderness.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pray to be written into the Book of Life. On Sukkot, we rejoice because we believe we have received a positive answer to our prayer. But as we turn to face the coming year, we acknowledge at the outset that life is fragile, vulnerable in a dozen different ways.

We do not know what our health will be, what our career or livelihood will be, or what will happen to society and to the world. We cannot escape exposure to risk. That is what life is.

The *sukkah* symbolizes living with unpredictability. Sukkot is the festival of radical uncertainty. But it places it within the framework of a narrative, exactly as Kay and King suggest. It tells us that though we journey through a wilderness, we as a people will reach our destination. If we see life through the eyes of faith, we will know we are surrounded by clouds of glory. Amid uncertainty, we will find ourselves able to rejoice. We need no castles for protection or palaces for glory. A humble *sukkah* will do, for when we sit within it, we sit beneath what the Zohar calls "the shade of faith."

I believe the experience of leaving the protection of a house and entering the exposure of the *sukkah* is a way of taming our fear of the unknown. It says: we have been here before. We are all travelers on a journey. The Divine Presence is with us. We need not be afraid. That is a source of the resilience we need in our interconnected, hazardous, radically uncertain world.

1 Sukkah 11b.

2 John Kay and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty*, Bridge Street Press, 2020.

3 The authors derive this idea from Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, Crown, 2011.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.