What We Celebrate

Zman Simchateinu

A
tough there is a mitzvah of simcha on all Yanim Tovim, only Sukkot is described as 'zeman simcha'. This is because three of the Torah’s four Yom-Tov-related mentionings of simcha refer to Sukkot. The famous words שמחת בתה ימי אֵין צֶמֶח refer specifically to Chag HaSukkot.

The simplest explanation of the Sukkot simcha is that we are celebrating a successful harvest. This is why Sukkot is also called זמנים ו proprié, the harvest festival.

Lifnei Hashem – Before G-d

The Rambam points out that our celebration of a successful harvest is similar to that of other cultures. However, ours differs in its focus – on the Beit HaMikdash. The Torah mandates this with the words וְשָׂמַחְתָּ בְּחַגֶּךָ וְהָיִיתָ אַךְ שָׂמֵחַ, Him for our success. We recount how we cared for us in the desert and Hashem cares and provides for us. Most people celebrate their success but have no real reason to assume it will continue. Because we know that our success signifies the strength of our relationship with Hashem, we are confident that success will continue.

When we pour our precious water on the Mikdash’s mizbeach we are like Eliyahu HaNavi at Har HaCarmel who poured out four large jugs of their last remaining water (after years of drought) on Hashem’s mizbeach.

A Deeper Level Of Simcha

The focus on the Simchat Beit HaShoeva expresses a deeper level of the simcha. We are happy not only because of our success but also because of our realization that Hashem cares and provides for us. Most people celebrate their success but have no real reason to assume it will continue. Because we know that our success signifies the strength of our relationship with Hashem, we are confident that success will continue.

We express this confidence by not only pouring the last of our water but by also celebrating when we do so. We reflect on our success of the past year, appreciate where it emanates from, thank and praise Hashem for it, and celebrate the fact we are confident moving forward.

Like Eliyahu HaNavi whose actions and tefillot at Har HaCarmel were answered with rain, our proper celebration and show of faith make us worthy of receiving rain and Hashem’s other berachot.

This year is one in which we can easily focus on what we are missing and unhappy about. It is critical we use Chag HaSukkot to focus upon and celebrate all of Hashem’s blessings (that we often take for granted). May this celebration help strengthen our confidence and merit us continued good health, happiness and hatzlacha in the coming year.

1 See also Rambam (Sukkah 8:12), who speaks of a ‘simcha yeireta’ on Sukkot as opposed to the regular level of simcha on other Yanim Tovim.
2 Vayikra 23:40, Devarim 16:14,15.
3 Vayikra 23:39. See also Sefer HaChinuch 324. Chazal also link the celebration to our receiving Hashem’s forgiveness during the first part of the month of Tishrei (See Midrash Tehillim 102, Sukkah 53a, Vayikra Rabbah Emor 30).
4 Lifnei Hashem 3:43.
5 This verse is the basis for the fact that the Four Species are taken seven full days only in the Beit HaMikdash (Mishnah Sukkah 41a). See Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Asei 169, who connects the taking of the arba minim to the simcha of Sukkot.
6 Vayikra 23:39. See also Devarim 16:15.
7 Note the parallel between the verses that describe the simcha of Sukkot with the arba minim (Vayikra 23:40) and those that describe the bringing of bikkurim (Devarim 26:2,11).
8 This is why we take the arba minim during and integrate them within Hallel.
9 See Rashbi, Sukkah 50a.
10 Rabbi Reuven Taragin is Educational Director of Mizrachi and Dean of the Yeshivat HaKotel Overseas Program.
For many months now, Covid-19 has disrupted our civilization. The whole of humanity has found itself contending with a common threat to life as we know it, and it behooves us to re-explore universal messages of our past in the Torah and the words of the Prophets.

As we open the Tanach, we find numerous precedents for plagues and pandemics that have stricken either the Jewish people and/or specific nations, ranging from plagues in Egypt through pandemic punishments in the wilderness. Both the Plishtim and people of Yehuda suffer pandemics due to improper interaction with the Aron Kodesh, and David HaMelch faces national disease after conducting a census. However, there is only one מַגֵּפָה (plague) mentioned in Tanach with parallel global ramifications and fatalities – and we read its messages on the first day of Sukkot!

Sukkot is celebrated as a holiday of nature, as we enjoy our harvest through the Four Species and dwell in Sukkot (Ibn Ezra, Vayikra 23:43). Yet Chazal teach us to simultaneously recognize Hashem’s miraculous supervision, in the form of the Clouds of Glory that sheltered us in the wilderness.

The haftarah on the first day of Sukkot revisits these existential themes as we hear Zecharia’s eschatological prophecy (chapter 14). He continues to detail miraculous changes in the political and natural realms as victory will ensue and Yerushalayim will be safe. The climax, however, will be a global plague that will not be overcome through natural means and will elicit a recognition of Hashem’s powers.

He concludes his vision with a poignant description of horses and pots – symbols of man’s efforts to control natural forces through warfare and cooking, which will be transformed into sacred objects dedicated to Hashem’s Mikdash. Even household pots will be treated as holy as we recognize Divine immanence in every aspect of our lives!

Sukkot is the time to relay this message to the global community. Hashem controls agricultural-natural forces and provides us with seasonal huts. On Sukkot we are meant to recognize and internalize mankind’s vulnerabilities and Hashem’s omniscient powers – which extend beyond the natural – providing us with Clouds of Glory and miraculously-supervised rainfall in Israel and throughout the world.

Perhaps if we do that this COVID-affected Sukkot, then together with the global community, we will merit And the L-rd shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall the L-rd be One, and His name one (ibid. v.9).

Zecharia and Sukkot:
Consolation for Corona

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1 See the Tannaitic dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, Sukkah 11b.

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