



The “Flimsy” Davidic Dynasty?

On Sukkot, an enigmatic line is added near the end of *Birkat HaMazon*: הַרְחֵמֵנוּ הוּא יְקִיִּים לָנוּ – אֵת סֵכֶת דָּוִד הַנוֹפֶלֶת – may the Merciful One restore the fallen *sukkah* of David. While this short prayer has become a popular song, its meaning and place in the Sukkot liturgy is far from clear.

The origin of the phrase is Amos 9:11, part of Amos’ glorious epilogue of hope depicting the golden End of Days. The prophecy speaks of G-d raising up *Sukkat David*, closing up its breaches, raising up its ruins, and building it like in the good old days. The prophecy continues (v. 13) with the famous image of the plowman overtaking the reaper and the treader of grapes meeting the one who plants seeds, and the mountains dripping with sweet wine. Truly a beautiful vision, but it is not clear what the hapax legomenon¹ “*Sukkat David*” refers to. Most traditional commentators assume it refers to the Davidic dynasty’s rule over a united kingdom, as Amos was prophesying when there was a divided kingdom while the Temple still stood in Jerusalem and the Ten Tribes had not yet been exiled. Nonetheless, others interpret the phrase as referring variously to the Mikdash, Yerushalayim, or the *Shechina*.

Irrespective of its original intent is the question of how and why it entered the Sukkot liturgy. The list of “*HaRachamans*” that we say at the conclusion of *Birkat HaMazon* are post-Talmudic, first appearing in the Rishonim period. Yet the Sukkot addition was still not included. It is

not that people were not familiar with the verse from Amos. It was used, and continues to be used, poetically in rabbinic literature.²

The phrase from Amos did enter the liturgy in about the 12th century in a context not connected to Sukkot – and seemingly later falling into disuse – in an Ashkenazi Motzei Shabbat *piyut* recently printed from manuscript (by Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Stal in a Torah journal called *Segula* vol. 14, Tammuz 5780).

The earliest mention of reciting this *HaRachaman* on Sukkot seems to be the 17th century, when it was mentioned by Rav Jousep Schammes (1604-1678) in his book of customs of the Worms community and by Rav Eliyahu Spira (1660–1712) in his *Eliyahu Rabbah*. Neither of these early sources provides an explanation as to the connection between the *Sukkat David* and the holiday of Sukkot. The parsimonious explanation is simply the appearance of the word “*sukkah*” in the eschatological verse and hence its easy integration and acceptance in the Sukkot liturgy.

Rav Yehuda Amital, in explaining the Maharal, says that in general a monarchy is termed *bayit*, as in *beit David*, owing to its strength. But a house has an additional characteristic. If it falls down and is rebuilt it is no longer the same entity. If one makes a vow to not benefit from a house, if that house falls down and is rebuilt the person may benefit, as it is now a new house (Ran, Nedarim 7a). Conceptually, a *sukkah* is different. A *sukkah* is easily knocked down,

but owing to its inherently flimsy nature, it is considered the same *sukkah* when rebuilt. Such is the way with the Jewish people and with the Davidic dynasty – they have been blown around and knocked down by the vicissitudes of history, but they are rebuilt.

The rebuilt country of Israel in the Land of Israel is not a new entity, but rather a continuation of the previous “*sukkah*” that stood here. So too, when the Gemara (Sanhedrin 96b) says the verse in Amos is referencing the Mashiach, it will not be a new dynasty, but a restoration of the same Davidic dynasty.

The inclusion of this request based on the verse from Amos specifically on Sukkot may be related to its immediately following Yom Kippur. The Davidic dynasty endures because King David – unlike King Shaul – was able to admit he sinned and repented. Having just come through Yom Kippur, we as a nation are saying to G-d that we can emulate King David in that regard, and therefore are deserving to have his dynasty, the *Sukkat David*, and the Temple, restored in our renewed country.

1 A term of which only one instance of use is recorded.

2 For example, the 11th-century Machzor Vitry, when mentioning Tisha B’Av, invokes this optimistic verse from Amos. Similarly, the 15th century Leket Yosher concludes his introduction with this verse of optimism.

Rabbi Ari Z. Zivotofsky is a Professor of Neuroscience and a tour guide in Ir David.