



Celebrating Now and Then:

THE CONTRASTING MESSAGES OF SUKKOT AND PESACH

Why is it that Pesach – rather than Sukkot – is known as the holiday when Jews relive and recreate their past? On Sukkot, we are commanded to take our furniture out of our house and eat and sleep for seven days in a hut covered only by *s'chach*, braving the elements, just as our ancestors did in the desert. The *beraita* in Masechet Sukkah elaborates and says we must do all of our activities in the *sukkah*. The obligation to reenact on Sukkot is more encompassing in both time (seven days vs. one for most Pesach *mitzvot*) and scope (all of life's activities vs. just eating). If observed correctly, Sukkot seems to be a far more intense recreation of our past history than Pesach. So why all the fanfare for Pesach?

Perhaps the answer can be found by solving another apparent mystery that separates the two *chagim*. Concerning Pesach, the Mishna states: "On this night one is obligated to imagine themselves as if they were personally leaving Egypt." On Seder Night, one must also bring one's imagination in addition to all the required physical items (Pesach, Matzah and Maror). Just eating *matzah* and *maror*, even *LeShem Mitzvah*, would not fulfill one's obligation. Rather, one must use one's imaginative faculties to actually envision oneself as if I personally was leaving Egypt.

In contrast, despite the intense demands of "living 24/7 in the *sukkah*," we are not asked to use our imagination. Eating and sleeping in the *sukkah* without imagining you are in a hut in the Sinai Desert having just

left Egypt is just fine. Why then, if the Torah goes to such lengths to recreate the Sukkot experience of the *midbar*, does it leave out the clincher? Namely, our obligation to imagine we are part of *Klal Yisrael* journeying through the desert, as we are obligated to envisage on Pesach?

Pesach and Sukkot evoke very different internal narratives and emphasize very different types of spiritual growth. Pesach is a holiday that emphasizes a one-time event that cannot and will not ever be duplicated. The *ahava* between *Klal Yisrael* and G-d expressed on the night of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* was so intense and powerful that it echoes through time. Once a year, the Torah demands we try our best to "remember" that special night using physical activities to arouse our imagination and connect with this moment. We are obligated to do our best to escape our present reality and go back to a time many years ago. By going back and touching that distant moment – albeit in our imagination – we are fulfilling the *Avodat HaYom* (the duty of the day) of feeling the echoes of that incomparable event.

On Sukkot, however, we are not asked to leave our present reality at all. The powerful recreations of Sukkot are not meant to jar our imagination and transfer us to a distant past. Sukkot does not demand *זְכוּרָה*, remembrance, but *דְּיָעָה*, knowledge. In fact, the recreations of Sukkot are not reenactments at all. They are so real they are actually reality.

We do not have to imagine our past to feel the internal messages of Sukkot. We are asked to simply be sensitive to our present reality. For sitting in a *sukkah* circa 2020 is just the same as sitting in a *sukkah* circa 3300 BCE. Both cases involve sitting in a flimsy temporary shelter (דִּירַת עָרָאִי) open to the elements, aware of our tenuous physical existence in *עוֹלָם הַזֶּה*, in this world, which is ultimately an *עוֹלָם עָרָאִי*, a transient world dependent upon G-d. There is no need for imagination or connecting to a borrowed experience from our collective past.

All that is necessary for Sukkot is openhearted existential awareness of the present. It is through that openness we are to connect to G-d by embracing our present and the ever-present connection to *Hashem* built into the fabric of life. Sukkot represents the timelessness of our connection to G-d while Pesach is all about a moment in time.

LeZecher Nishmat Mrs. Esther Scheinfeld z"l, a woman whose personality and love of Torah and Eretz Yisrael touched and inspired so many lives. Niftara Rosh Chodesh Elul 5780, August 21, 2020.

Rabbi Benzion Scheinfeld is Director of Camp Kanfei Nesharim and a high school educator.