



# Hoshanot & Hakafot

## Circles and Salvation on Sukkot

Rabbanit Shani Taragin

Walking in circles is a key theme during the festival of Sukkot. The Mishnah (Sukkah 4:5) describes the Second Temple practice of taking the *arava* branches and circling the *mizbe'ach* once every day of Sukkot and seven times on the seventh day while reciting *Hoshanot*. We remember this practice by circling the *bima* with our *arba'a minim* every day of Sukkot and seven times on Hoshanah Rabbah, and also through the Simchat Torah custom to circle the *bima* while singing (Rema, OC 669:3). What is the significance of these circuits and why do they play a central role during Sukkot?

Rabbi Acha (Yerushalmi, Sukkah 4) states that the circling of the altar on Sukkot commemorates the battle of Jericho, when the Jewish people circled the walls of Jericho for seven days after which the walls miraculously collapsed. But what is the connection between the circling of the walls of Jericho and Sukkot?

Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (Sefer HaRokeach, Laws of Sukkot, 221) teaches that Sukkot is the time when we pray for rain. Just as at Jericho, where the Jewish people circled the walls for seven days and seven times on the seventh day and the walls came tumbling down, so too we circle the *bima* for seven days with prayers and praises to Hashem for rain, and on the seventh day, we circle seven times, asking Hashem to bring rain.

Rabbi Yakov Ettlinger (Aruch LaNer, Sukkah 45a) explains that the Jericho miracle was the first miracle our people experienced when entering the Land of Israel. Sukkot is *Z'man Simchateinu* (the time of our joy) when we recite the full Hallel, and so it is an appropriate time to commemorate the first miracle we experienced as a nation in the holy land.

A third connection can be based on the commentaries of Rabbenu Bachya and Alei Tamar, who understand the story of Jericho as a story of atonement, where the Jews repented while having judgment fall upon our enemies. Similarly, we take our *arba'a minim* and circle the *bima* as a petition to Hashem to cleanse us of sin and save us from our adversaries.



These seven circuits also remind us of the seven circles around Jericho, breaking the walls between bride and groom, *Am Yisrael* and *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Rabbi Dosa the Greek cites the custom of a groom to circle around his bride. The most common proof text cited for this custom is Yirmiyahu 31:21: "For Hashem has created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man." In the context of the prophet's allegory, the woman symbolizes the people of Israel, who will initiate the reconciliation with her beloved, the Almighty, by circling. These seven circuits also remind us of the seven circles around Jericho, breaking the walls between bride and groom, *Am Yisrael* and *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. As there are numerous parallels between the shofar-blowing ceremony around Jericho and the revelation of Sinai, the seven circuits re-establish our covenantal-marriage ceremony every Sukkot!

On Sukkot, we have an opportunity to break down walls – walls that separate us from Hashem, our spouses and community members. Jericho is described as completely enclosed, quarantined – "Jericho was shut up because of the children of Israel: None went out, and none came in." We, unfortunately, can relate to Covid quarantines that have

walled us in and away from others. Sukkot is a time to symbolically break down these walls as we circle the *bima*. These are circles of prayer for rain and prosperity, circles of praise for miracles of salvation in the Land of Israel, circles of atonement, and circles of marriage – breaking down barriers and rebuilding a covenant of commitment with our Beloved.

Masechet Ta'anit concludes with a description of Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur, the happiest days of the year, when the daughters of Israel would circle-dance in anticipation of marriage. Ulla of Bira'a assures us that in the future Hashem will arrange a circle-dance for all the righteous "and He will be sitting among them in the Garden of Eden, and every one of the righteous will point to G-d with his finger, as it is stated: 'And it shall be said on that day: Behold, this is our G-d, for Whom we waited, that He might save us. This is Hashem, for Whom we waited. We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation'" (Yeshayahu 25:9). Hashem will form a circle with equal proximity to the center for all the participants. Once we break down the walls through prayer on Sukkot, we anticipate the happiness of Simchat Torah which provides a glimpse of the future circle of solidarity, salvation and ultimate redemption!



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Rabbanit Shani Taragin is Educational Director of Mizrahi and the Director of the Mizrahi Matan Lapidot Educators' Program.