As both a rabbi and a mechina (educator), I often feel that the chag of Sukkot does not get its proper due. Understandably, there is a tremendous amount of focus on the Yamim Noraim, but as a result, there is often little time devoted to fully appreciating the chag that follows. There are many beautiful aspects of Sukkot that are deserving of exploration, but I would like to highlight two components.

We refer to this Yom Tov as "Z’man Simchateinu." Why, of all the chagim, does Sukkot receive this title? Are we not joyous when we relive the events of Yetziat Mitzrayim? Isn’t the revelation at Har Sinai a more appropriate time to express intense happiness? Let us put those questions in abeyance and note a second observation.

In contrast to the other two regalim (pilgrimage festivals) that match up with historical events, the timing of Sukkot seems almost arbitrary. We did indeed sit in Sukkot in the desert on the dates that the chag is observed, but we also did so throughout the year, so why is the designation of this Yom Tov linked to this period? Could it not have been celebrated at almost any point in the calendar?

While there are many answers to these queries, perhaps we can take the following approach: While we often think of Sukkot as being in the beginning of the year – after all, it occurs at the start of the school year in chutz laaretz and after yeshivot and midrashot have resumed in Israel – in the eyes of the Torah it clearly comes at the close of our cycle of chagim. As such we need to look at the entire pattern of chagim to understand both the joy of Sukkot and its deliberate placement.

Despite the fact that we refer to the first of Tishrei as Rosh Hashanah, Nissan is chodesh harishon (the first month) which means that our holiday cycle begins with Pesach. It is then that we became a nation forming our identity as Am Yisrael. However, we were a people without a purpose and so the chag that follows immediately afterward is Shavuot, Z’man Matan Torateinu, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. At that moment we were given our directive, the next step is for Hashem to examine if we have successfully accomplished what He asked of us, both collectively and individually. This is why Rosh Hashanah follows, as we recognize Hashem’s malchut (kingship) and acknowledge that we are being judged on our observance of Torah and mitzvot.

Fortunately, even if we are found lacking, there is an opportunity to repair our shortcomings and reconnect with our creator. Yom Kippur is a unique day for both meanings of teshuvah – repair and return – when we pour out our hearts to Hashem and He is eager to forgive us.

Hopefully, we have navigated all these chagim successfully and that brings us appropriately to Sukkot. By now, we fully understand who we are as a nation and what our mission is, and we have corrected our errors and regained our closeness to Hashem; now, we are ready to celebrate and bask in this incredible relationship.

This is why Sukkot comes directly after Yom Kippur and it is the chag designated for expressing simcha. Can there be any greater joy than appreciating and experiencing this feeling of purpose and this incredible bond with Hashem? The joy is intense and that is why even Hashem suggests that we stay an additional day, Shemini Atzeret, before departing.

Let us reflect on the deeper meaning of Sukkot, and may we all be blessed with a chag sameach.

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