

The Sukkot Miracle of Peace

Hanukkah isn't the only holiday celebrating miracles. In fact, the eight-day winter celebration is based on Sukkot. And the harvest festival's themes of contingency and dependence, gratitude and joy all color Sukkot as the original holiday of miracles.

As a reminder, Sukkot is called by the Bible and the Rabbis *he-chag*, "the festival,"¹ underscoring its importance in the ancient world. Though Passover and Shavuot were also pilgrimage feasts, Sukkot earned pride of place among Israel's sacred occasions. Whether or not the entire country actually assembled at the Temple as ancient sources claim, the mythic conception of all Israel gathered together for this celebration of bounty captures our religious imagination.

Perhaps this is why the Bible recounts the dedication of Solomon's temple during Sukkot,² and Sukkot is the occasion for its rededication after the exile in Babylon.³ And thus, when the Maccabees finally wrested control of the Temple back from the Greeks, "they kept the eight days with gladness, as in the Feast of the Tabernacles Therefore they bore branches and fair boughs and palms also [the makings of a lulav], and sang psalms unto God who had given them good success in cleansing the place" (2 Maccabees 10:6-7). As much as Sukkot is a day to remind us of our connection to nature, it is also a reminder of our connection to God, a connection made real through contact with sacred spaces on earth, and a connection made miraculous through the transcendence of the divine into the physical realm.

And this is why, I believe, the long-lost antihero of Rabbinic Judaism sought to use Sukkot as the model for the Hanukkah lights. The more famous sage, Hillel, taught that we should light one flame on the first night, two on the second, and so on because "in matters of sanctity, we increase [rather than decrease]" (BT Shabbat 21b). But his intellectual sparring partner, Shammai, taught the opposite — we should start Hanukkah with a full menorah and reduce one light each day because the sacrifices of Sukkot, as described in this week's Torah reading, also decrease by one each day (*ibid*⁴). It seemed natural to Shammai, as it seemed natural those who rededicated the despoiled temple, to link one holiday of miracles with the other.

¹ See 1 Kings 8:2, 12:32 and, for only one example, M. Bikkurim 1:6.

² *Ibid.*

³ See Ezra 3:4.

⁴ And see Num. 29:12ff.

The notion that the temple would be restored was considered by those who witnessed it “as like a dream” (Ps. 126:1), and the fulfillment of this miracle was occasion for celebration ever after. What better vessel for such a commemoration than an ancient festival dedicated to thanking God for giving us our life and the earth’s yield to sustain it. Indeed, the shelters of our spiritual ancestors in the wilderness,⁵ the booths we replicate with our holiday today, might have been made of sticks and twigs – but one Rabbinic opinion suggests that they were actually Clouds of God’s Presence, *an’nei hakavod*, that protected the Hebrews in their wanderings (BT Sukkah 11b). Thus on Sukkot, we recall and give thanks for the sheltering presence of God, a protective cover that reminds us that – while strong winds remains always a threat – we are given the strength to endure long periods of displacement and distress.

And our prayers on *this* Sukkot are also directed at these sheltering protective clouds. Two long years after the horrific attacks in Israel launched a brutal and devastating war in Gaza, the dawning of peace may be just over the horizon. We wait with bated breath as international actors across the globe pressure these bitter enemies to reconcile, to bring an end to open hostility, and to allow the long process of healing to finally begin. Our hopes have been dashed before – but this is a season of miracles, and as lovers of peace, we cling ardently to hope.

The many branches of our Reform movement join us in our prayers that this tentative agreement will lead, one day, to peace. They write with clear eyes and supreme hope:

The prophet Micah dreamt of a time when all will one day “sit under their vines and fig trees, and none shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:4). While we imagine he doubted that his prophecy would be realized in his lifespan, he also recognized that people could not live without hope. Despite the remaining details that need to be worked out, we are buoyed by the thought that this blood-soaked patch of land might know a better tomorrow, in which none will fear the other. We will never stop working for that secure future.⁶

In this, we stand together. We pray always, and today especially hard, for God to extend *sukkat shalom*, the shelter of peace, over those ravaged by war. We recall the miracles of our ancestors and summon the faith to see them emerge in our own world today. And we commit ourselves to being instruments of collaboration and compromise, dignity and respect, generosity and goodwill so that we and our children may one day know the sweetness of a lasting peace.

⁵ See Lev. 23:42-43.

⁶ <https://www.ccarnet.org/reform-movement-joint-statement-on-hostage-and-ceasefire-plan/>