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בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

SUKKOT, SHEMINI ATZERET, HOSHANA RABBAH, SIMCHAT TORAH

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INTRODUCTION

The festival of Sukkot (sometimes translated as “Booths” or “Tabernacles”) is one of the three pilgrimage festivals (*shalosh regalim*). Celebrated for seven days, from the 15th to 21st of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, Sukkot is followed immediately by the festival of Shemini Atzeret (the “Eighth-day Assembly”), on the 22nd of Tishrei, thus creating an eight-day festival in all. In post-Talmudic times in the Diaspora, where the festivals were celebrated for an extra day, the second day of Shemini Atzeret, the 23rd of Tishrei, became known as “Simchat Torah” (“The Rejoicing for the Torah”) and developed a new festival identity.

Like the other pilgrimage holidays, Pesach and Shavuot, Sukkot, includes both agricultural and historical dimensions, and the festival’s name can be explained with reference to either. The Torah connects the name “Sukkot” to the “booths” in which the Israelites dwelled throughout their desert sojourn:

You shall live in *sukkot* seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in *sukkot*, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord.¹

As such the commandment to reside in booths links the festival to the historic exodus from Egypt and commemorates the experience of the Israelites as they wandered through the desert.

Apart from this, Sukkot coincides with the end of the agricultural year in Israel, a time when many fruits, olives and grapes ripen. These and other crops had to be harvested before the arrival of the winter rains, and since in ancient times farmers’ fields were often located some distance from their villages, it was difficult for workers to return to their homes each evening. Scholars believe that the agricultural laborers therefore often spent the night in *sukkot* amidst the fields that were also used throughout the summer to provide shade and shelter from the hot Mediterranean sun. The festivities commemorating the completion of the harvest would have taken place in those same booths, and thus the festival received its name.

A second biblical designation for Sukkot is *Chag HaAsif* (“The Festival of the Ingathering”), which connects it more directly to the final harvest of the year when all remaining crops were gathered in before the winter.²

Throughout biblical and Second Temple times, Sukkot was the most important festival of the Israelite year. Both the Bible and rabbinic sources refer to Sukkot simply as *he-chag*, “the festival” (i.e., the festival *par excellence*). Although the Torah commands Israelites to travel to the Jerusalem temple on each pilgrimage festival, it seems that in practice most of the population could only make the journey once a year – typically after the autumnal harvest that marked the close of the agricultural cycle. Their labors complete, the pilgrims flocked to the temple to offer thanksgiving for the bounty of the harvest and to pray for rain and fertility for the coming year.

In the Temple precincts the priests led the people in an elaborate complex of rituals over the course of the festival week. Sacrifices were brought in great abundance throughout the festival, while on the second night an all-night celebration known as *Simchat Beit Ha-Sho’eva*, the “Rejoicing at the Place of Water-Drawing,” was observed in the Temple courtyards with dancing, feasting and songs of praise. At dawn priests drew water from the nearby Siloam pool and walked in festal procession, followed by throngs of celebrants, to the temple and altar, upon which they poured the water as a libation. This “water libation” (*nisuch ha-mayyim*) was repeated on each succeeding day of the *chag*, as was a procession that circumambulated the altar with willow branches (*hoshanot*). These were then set beside the altar as adornments. On the seventh day, *Hoshana Rabbah* or “The Great Hoshana” day, the worshippers circled the altar with their willows seven times. The purpose of these and other rituals was to tap into the Temple’s powers of fertility and to entreat God to provide rain. The Mishna relates that on Sukkot God “judges the world” with respect to

¹ *Leviticus 23:42-43.*

² *Exodus 23:16.*



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the quantity of rain that would fall in the coming next year, and much of the temple festival was oriented to that end.

The festival of Sukkot, therefore, possesses a dual sensibility. On the one hand, it is the most joyous festival of the entire year, a time when the crops have been harvested, the storehouses are full, and thanks are given for the gift of sustenance. In the rabbinic liturgy, Sukkot is designated “the time of our rejoicing” (*zeman simchateinu*), and the rabbis nostalgically recalled the temple celebrations that occurred at Sukkot as the happiest times when the entire people joyously celebrated in harmony. On the other hand, Sukkot is tinged with anxiety over the coming rains and uncertainty regarding the harvest of the following year. In this respect it resembles the “Days of Awe” (the period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur), a season when fates are decided and one prays in fear and trembling for a favorable judgment. On Sukkot it is not the individual’s fate that is decided, as is the case on Yom Kippur, but the collective fortune of the community, which always depends on rain and on the fertility of the earth.

The destruction of the Temple brought an end to this elaborate series of cultic rites. However, two rituals survived until the present day and are now the focal points of Sukkot observance: the *sukkah* and the *lulav*. Throughout the seven days of the festival Jews are commanded to leave their houses and to reside in *sukkot*. The *sukkah* is characterized by special roofing or *schach*, which must come from a natural substance such as branches, leaves or plants. While various rules pertain to the walls of the *sukkah* (for example, there must be at least two full walls and part of a third wall, and they must conform to prescribed minimum and maximum heights), there are many more laws governing the *schach*. This is because the essence of the ritual is to reside in the shelters and experience the shade produced by the *schach*. Ideally one should eat all meals, sleep and spend leisure time in the *sukkah*, essentially making the *sukkah* his or her habitation for the festival week. However, if it rains or the weather is inclement, it is permitted to return to one’s house, and, in fact, in contemporary times sleeping in the *sukkah* has become increasingly rare.

While the ritual of the *sukkah* commemorates the wanderings of the Israelites during the Exodus, the nature of the symbolism was debated by the rabbis. A prominent stream of rabbinic thought believed that the *sukkot* in which God sheltered the Israelites³ were not literal “booths” but rather “clouds of glory,” ethereal clouds in which the presence of God appeared. Indeed, the Hebrew word *sukkah* is occasionally used to refer to clouds in the Bible (see e.g. Isaiah 4:5-6, Psalms 18:12), and some rabbis considered it more plausible to explain the verses from Leviticus 23 in terms of divinely bestowed clouds that have would provide the Israelites supernatural protection in the harsh desert climate. According to this view, the ritual booths we occupy today *symbolize* the cloud-booths of the desert experience, while the shade of the *schach* evokes — and helps us experience — the shade of the protective clouds with which God graced our ancestors. Conversely, from the perspective of those who believe that the Israelites literally dwelled in “booths,” the ritual of dwelling in *sukkot* today *reenacts* the fragile habitations occupied throughout the exodus, while the shade of the *schach* recreates the rudimentary shelters of the desert travelers.

The *sukkah* thus possesses a dual symbolism analogous to that of the festival itself. It symbolizes divine shelter and protection; the *sukkah*’s shade even recalls the divine shade mentioned in Psalms as the outstanding image of protection and intimacy: “O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shade of Shaddai.”⁴ At the same time, the *sukkah* is by nature a frail and fragile structure, defined in the Babylonian Talmud as a “temporary dwelling.” Dwelling in the *sukkah* thus imparts a sense of the fragility of life, of human vulnerability, impermanence and mortality. In this respect one could say that both the festival and the *sukkah* point to two dimensions of human experience.

The *lulav* is a ritual bouquet made up of four plant species (*arba minim*) prescribed by Leviticus:

On the first day you shall take the product of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.⁵

³ Leviticus 23:42-43.

⁴ Psalms 91:1.

⁵ Leviticus 23:40.



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The rabbis interpreted this verse as follows: the “product of goodly trees” is the *etrog* or citron; “branches of palm trees,” are the *lulav*, immature palm fronds; the “boughs of leafy trees” are branches of myrtle; and “willows of the brook” are what we recognize as willows. A bouquet (also referred to as a “*lulav*”) is made by flanking the palm frond with three myrtle sprigs on its right side and two willow sprigs on the left. The ritual which is then enacted on each day of the festival (except for the Sabbath) is as follows: the participant recites a blessing (“Blessed are you, Lord, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to take up the *lulav*”), while holding the *lulav* in the right hand, the citron in the left, then brings his or her hands together and waves the *lulav* thrice in each of the six directions: forward, right, back, left, up and down. In addition, the *lulav* is held during the recitation of the *Hallel*, a sequence of psalms which are included in the morning service, and waved in this way at several points during the prayers.

The meaning and symbolism of the commandment of the *lulav* is somewhat obscure. As opposed to the *sukkah*, the Torah does not explain the reason for the *lulav* other than stating that one “rejoice before Lord.” Most scholars suggest that the *lulav* is a fertility symbol, and like the other temple rituals, it originally functioned as a means of propitiating God for rain. This meaning was not lost on the rabbis, who state in the Talmud:

These four species only come to obtain the favor [of God] about water. Just as it is impossible for these four species [to subsist] without rain, so it is impossible for the world [to subsist] without water.⁶

However, the rabbinic imagination also attributed many other meanings to the *lulav*; ironically the absence of a clear and authoritative explanation in the Torah allowed for a proliferation of interpretations. For example, the rabbis proposed that the four species symbolize the four patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph), the four matriarchs, and four components of the rabbinic court.⁷ They also suggested that the four species represent four different types of Jews: the citron, which has a good taste and pleasing fragrance, represents those who are learned in Torah and perform good deeds; the palm, which has a good taste (dates) but no fragrance, represents those who are learned in Torah but lack good deeds to their credit; the myrtle, which has fragrance but lacks taste, represents those who perform good deeds but are not learned in Torah; and the willow, which has neither good taste nor fragrance, represents those who have neither knowledge of Torah nor good deeds. Holding the four species together during the *lulav* ritual represents the fundamental unity of the Jewish people, and allows the vicarious merit of the righteous to save those without merits.

The *lulav* is also carried during the *hoshanot* ritual, which is carried out as part of the morning service on each day of Sukkot. A Torah scroll is removed from the ark, and all the worshippers circle the Torah with their *lulavim* while reciting a special prayer whose refrain is “*Hosha na*” (“Save us!”) This ritual is modeled on the willow procession that circled around the altar during Temple times, in which context the refrain “Save us!” referred to rain: save us by sending rain. On Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh day of Sukkot, the *lulav* procession circles the Torah seven times, and culminates with many additional prayers. At the ritual’s conclusion, a bunch of five willows is beaten on the floor several times. The origins and rationale for this ritual are obscure; it was probably intended to ward off evil spirits which were thought to bring harmful winds and rains, and therefore was part of the complex of rituals directed to ensuring optimal weather for the next year.

SHEMINI ATZERET

Shemini Atzeret, although technically an independent festival, is also linked to Sukkot, as the name “Eighth-day Assembly,” suggests. In Temple times, Shemini Atzeret probably functioned as the climax of the festival week and involved an important assembly replete with prayers and rituals for rain. Today, however, Shemini Atzeret is almost devoid of ritual practices: one no longer dwells in the *sukkah*, nor waves the *lulav*, and the day is marked almost

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 2b.*

⁷ *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 30:7.*



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exclusively by special inclusions in the liturgy and during the grace after meals (*birkat hamazon*). The most significant liturgical change on Shemini Atseret is a special prayer for rain that is incorporated into the *Amidah*. From this point onway in the year the line “[God] who causes the wind to blow and rain to fall” is included in each recitation of the *Amidah*. The rabbis also suggest that Shemini Atseret is an “extra” day of celebration granted by God to the Jews to rejoice with Him in special intimacy. The sacrifices and prayers for rain which are recited on Sukkot, were understood by the rabbis to have a universal function and bring benefit to all the nations of the world. The additional day of Shemini Atseret, on the other hand, is a time designated for God to celebrate with the chosen people alone.

SIMCHAT TORAH

Simchat Torah developed in post-Talmudic times to provide “festival content” so to speak, for the second day of Shmini Atseret. The festival of “Rejoicing with the Torah” brings to a fitting conclusion a week of joyous celebration. The annual Torah reading cycle is concluded with the reading of the final section of Deuteronomy and the begins again immediately with the reading of the first chapter of Genesis. During both the evening and morning services, the Torah scrolls are removed from the ark and carried around the synagogue seven times with dancing and singing. These seven *hakafot* (“circumambulations”) are modeled on the circumambulations around the altar with willow branches in Temple times. In this development one can see in a microcosm the overall shift which occurred with the rise of rabbinic Judaism from a religion focused on the Temple to one centered around the Torah. It is also customary that all worshippers receive *aliyot* during the Torah reading, which is accomplished by re-reading the final section of the Torah repeatedly until all those present have been called up to recite the blessings. In another widely practiced custom, all the children are called up for an *aliyah*, standing under prayer shawls held aloft by the adults.



SUKKOT – TEXT 1

משנה מסכת סוכה ב,ט

כָּל שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים עוֹשֶׂה אָדָם אֶת סוּכּוֹתוֹ קִבְעָה, וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ עֲרָאִי. יֵרְדוּ גְשָׁמִים, מֵאִמְתַּי מוֹתָר לְפָנוֹת--מִשְׁתַּרְחַח הַמִּקְפָּה. מוֹשְׁלִים אוֹתוֹ מְשָׁל, לְמָה הַדָּבָר דּוֹמֶה--לְעֶבֶד שֶׁבָּא לְמִזּוּג כּוֹס לְרַבּוֹ, וְשִׁפֵּךְ לוֹ הַקִּיתוֹן עַל פָּנָיו.

MISHNAH, MASECHET SUKKAH 2:9

Throughout the seven days one should make his *sukkah* his fixed residence and his house a casual residence. Should rain fall, when is he permitted to go inside? When the food will become spoiled. This is learned by analogy – and to what can it be compared? To a slave who comes to fill his master's cup and he spills the jug on his face.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does it mean both literally and metaphorically to identify a given location as your “fixed” residence?
- What is the purpose in giving people an “out” from residing in the sukkah in the case of rain (or other inclement weather)? Does this exemption enhance or detract from the significance of the ritual?
- What is the analogy that is being drawn in the parable cited in this mishnah? Do you find it apt?



SUKKOT – TEXT 2

ויקרא רבה (מרגליות) פרשת אמור פרשה ל
מהו נְעִימוֹת בִּימִינְךָ נְצַח, אָמַר רַב אֲבִין זֶה לְוֵלֵב כְּמִי שֶׁהוּא נוֹצֵחַ וְנוֹטֵל בֵּינָו. מְשַׁל לְשָׁנִים
שְׂנַכְנְסוּ אֶצֶל הַדַּיָּין וְלִית אֲנִי יְדַעִין מֵאֵן הוּא נְצוּחַ, אֲלֵא מֵאֵן דְּנָסַב בְּאַיִן בִּידֵיהּ אֲנִי יְדַעִין דְּהוּא
נְצוּחַ. כִּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאוּמוֹת הָעוֹלָם בְּאִין וּמְקַטְרָגִים לְפָנֵי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּרֵ אֵשׁ הַשָּׁנָה וְלִית
אֲנִי יְדַעִין מֵאֵן נְצַח, אֲלֵא בְּמָה שִׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל יוֹצֵאִין מִלְּפָנֵי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְלִלְבִיָּהּ וְאַתְרוּגִיָּהּ
בְּיָדָן אֲנִי יְדַעִין דִּישְׂרָאֵל אֵינֶנּוּ נְצוּחִיא. לְפִיכֵךְ מ'שָׁה מְזַהֵיר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְאוֹמֵר לְהֵם וּלְקַחְתֶּם לְכֶם
בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן.

VAYIKRA RABBAH, EMOR 30

“Delights are ever in your right hand” (Ps. 16:11): Rabbi Avin said: This verse pertains to the lulav, that one who holds it is forever intoxicated. A story is told of two men who came before the judge and when they emerged it was not known (to the public) which of them was victorious. But if one of them holds aloft a palm branch, then we know that he was the victor. In the same way, on Rosh Hashanah Israel appears before the Holy One Blessed Be He along with the nations of the world, who bring their accusations (against Israel) and it is not known on whose behalf God has decided. But because Israel comes out of the New Year’s period with their lulavs and their etrogs in their hands, it is known that Israel has been victorious and was pardoned. Therefore Moses warned Israel saying, “Take for yourselves on the first day ... [the branches of the palm tree]”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What significance does this midrash ascribe to the lulav? Is the lulav actually *doing* anything according to this text?
- What role does this midrash ascribe to the other “nations of the world” during the High Holiday season? Is there basis for assigning them this role? What is the text’s presumption about relations between Jews and non-Jews?
- Why would (or should) it matter to us how we are perceived by the other “nations of the world”?



SUKKOT – TEXT 3

ויקרא רבה (מרגליות) פרשת אמור פרשה ל

וְלִקְחֶתֶם לָכֶם. רַבִּי מָנִי פָתַח כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי תִּ' אִמְרָנָה. לֹא נֶאֱמַר הִפְסוּק הַזֶּה אֶלָּא בְּשִׁבִיל לִוְלָב. הַשְּׁדָרָה שֶׁל לִוְלָב דּוֹמָה לַשְּׁדָרָה שֶׁל אָדָם וְהַהֲדָס דּוֹמָה לְעֵיִן וְהָעֶרְבָה דּוֹמָה לְפִה וְהָאֶתְרוֹג דּוֹמָה לְלֵב. אָמַר דָּוִד אֵין בְּכָל הָאֵיבָרִין גְּדוֹל מִהֶן וְאֵילוּ שְׁהֵן שְׁקוּלִין כְּנֶגֶד כָּל הַגּוּף. הֵנּוּ כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי תִּ' אִמְרָנָה.

VAYIKRA RABBAH, EMOR 30

“Take for yourselves ...”: Rabbi Mani said “All of my bones will say [Lord who is like unto Thee].” This passage is speaking specifically about the *lulav*: The rib of the *lulav* (palm) is like the spine of a man; the myrtle is like his eye; the willow is like his mouth; and the etrog is like his heart. King David said: Amongst all the organs there is none greater than these, for they outweigh the entire body. Thus we say (in our prayers): All of my bones will say ...”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In what ways are the Four Species here compared to the human body? Why does Rabbi Mani single out these particular organs?
- What does this comparison add in terms of our appreciation of the ritual of the lulav?
- To what other human characteristics might the Four Species be compared (be creative!)?

¹ The general rule is that a civil case is to be decided by three judges.



SUKKOT – TEXT 4

פסיקתא דרב כהנא (מנדלבוים) פיסקא כח - ביום השמיני עצרת

אלכסנדרי למלך שבאת לו שמחה, כל שבעת ימי המשתה היה בנו של מלך טרוח עם האורחים, וכיון שיצאו שבעת ימי המשתה אמר המלך לבנו, בני יודע אני שכל שבעת ימי המשתה היית טרוח עם האורחים, ועכשיו אני ואתה נשמח יום אחד ואיני מטריח עליך הרבה אלא תרנגול אחד וליטרא אחת של בשר, כך כל שבעת ימי המשתה ישראל עסוקים בקורבנותיהם של אומות העולם, דאמר רב פנחס כל אותן שבעים פרים שהיו ישראל מקריבין בחג כנגד שבעים אומות העולם שלא יצדא העולם מהם, מה טעמא, תחת אהבתי ישטנוני ואני תפילה (תהלים קט: ד), בטוחים אנו בתפילה, וכיון שיצאו שבעת ימי החג אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל בניי יודע אני שכל שבעת ימי החג הייתם עסוקים בקורבנותיהם של אומות העולם ועכשיו אני ואתם נשמח יחד ואיני מטריח עליכם הרבה אלא פר אחד איל אחד, וכיון ששמעו ישראל כך התחילו מקלסין לקדוש ברוך הוא ואומר זה היום עשה ה' נגילה ונשמחה בו.

PESIKTA D'RAV KAHANA 28 – “ON SHEMINI ATZERET”

Rabbi Alexandri told the story of a king who had occasion for rejoicing. Throughout the seven days of the feast the king's sons were fully occupied with their guests. So, at the conclusion of the seven days the king said to his sons, “My sons, I know that throughout the seven days of the feast you were burdened by the guests, so now I will not trouble you further. I want from you only one cock and a portion (pound) of meat with which I will rejoice with you.” In the same way, throughout the seven days of festivities (for Sukkot), Israel is occupied with the sacrifices of the nations of the world, which prevent the world from being destroyed (as punishment for the nations' sins). However, as we are told: [My enemies] answered my love with accusations ... but I [carried on, for I] am all prayer (Ps. 109:4), because Israel trusts in prayer. So, at the conclusion of the seven days of the festival (Sukkot), God said to Israel, “My children, I know that throughout the seven days of the festival you were burdened with making sacrifices for the nations of the world. Now you and I will celebrate together, and I will not burden you so, I require just one bull and one ram.” When Israel heard this they began to praise God and said, “This is the day that God has made, let us exult and rejoice in it” (Ps. 118:24).

STUDY QUESTIONS

- This midrash provides a metaphorical explanation for the significance of Shemini Atzeret. What is the holiday's significance according to this text?
- How does this midrash characterize the experience of Sukkot in Temple times? Do you see this as a generally positive or negative characterization?
- What are the implications of God's special relationship with Israel according to this text? In other contexts?



SUKKOT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

ספרא אמור פרשה יב

לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דוֹרוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בְּסוּכוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר סוּכּוֹת מִמֶּשׁ הֵיוּ, רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר בְּסוּכּוֹת עֲנִי כְבוֹד הָיוּ.

SIFRA, EMOR, XII

In order that your generation should know that I caused the Children of Israel to live in booths (Sukkot) during their exodus from Egypt: Rabbi Elazar explains that there were actual (literal) “booths”, while Rabbi Akiva says these “booths” were the clouds of glory in which the Israelites were enveloped.

תוספתא מסכת סוטה (ליברמן) פרק ז הלכה ב

באברהם הוא אומר והשענו תחת העץ אף המקום נתן לבניו שבעה ענני כבוד
במדבר אחד מימינם ואחד משמאלם אחד לפניהם ואחד לאחריהם ואחד למעלה מראשיהם
ואחד לשכינה שביניהם ועמוד ענן שהיה מקדים לפנייהם הורג נחשים ועקרבים ושורף
סירים וקוצים ואטד משפיל להם את הגבוה ומגביה להם את השפל ועושה להן את הדרך
מיושר דרך סרט מושך והולך שנאמר וארון ברית ה' נוסע לפנייהם וגו'

TOSEFTA, MASECHET SOTAH, 12:2

Of Abraham it is said: And rest yourself under the tree (Gen. 18:4). So the Holy One gave his children seven glorious clouds in the wilderness: one on their right, one on their left, one before them, one behind them, one above their heads and one as the Shechinah, which was among them. And the pillar of cloud that preceded them would kill snakes and scorpions and burn off thorns, brambles and prickly bushes and level for them high places and raise up for them low places and make their path straight, a path flowing and moving them along, as it is written: And the Ark of the Covenant of God traveled before them ... (Num. 11:33).

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What are the understandings of “sukkot” that are being debated in the first text? Which do you find more appealing or convincing and why?
- In what ways do each of the descriptions of *sukkot* in the Sifra text correspond to your understand of the sukkot we construct today?
- How do these rabbinic texts describe the relationship between God the Children of Israel during their journey through the wilderness? How does it compare to the relationship that exists between God and the Jewish people today?





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