Sukkot Reader

Holiday Torah Readings And Mizmorim

with Laws and Commentaries

Sukkot Reader

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The festival of Sukkot commemorates the extraordinary care and protection that Hashem bestowed upon the Israelites during their perilous wandering through the wilderness. In the first instance it refers to their travels through the desert upon leaving Egypt. It also reminds us of the special providence Hashem extended Israel through its history traveling through the "Wilderness of the Nations" (Ezek. 20:35). Sukkot is one of the *shalosh regalim*, the three festivals prescribed in the Torah (the other two being Pesah and Shabu`ot), when the members of the nation went to the central sanctuary to celebrate.

The first day of Sukkot and the eighth day, called Shemini Asseret (essentially "a festival for itself" attached to Sukkot), are days of yamim tobim, full festival occasions on which work is prohibited except that connected to *okhel nefesh* (see our Halakhot of Yom Tob). The six intermediate days are hol hamo`ed, that is "non-holy" days of the festival, days on which work may be performed with certain restrictions. In the Diaspora, Sukkot begins with two days of yom tob and concludes with two days yom tob of Shemini Asseret, with five intermediate days.

II. Mitzvah of Sukkah

A commandment of the Torah is to reside in a sukkah all seven days of Sukkot. A sukkah – derived from *sekhakh* (covering) – refers to a booth generally constructed for temporary or modest dwelling, such as might be provided for cattle (Gen. 33:17) or an orchard watchman (Isa. 1:8). The *sekhakh* of the sukkah plays a critical role in determining its halakhic acceptability. Residence primarily comprises eating and sleeping but also includes other

activities one does at home such as reading, resting, social conversation, etc.

The *berakha* recited for this mitzvah is *lesheb basukkah*. Although one performs a mitzvah whenever residing in the sukkah during the seven days of Sukkot, the blessing is not recited except upon partaking of a significant minimum measurement of bread or mezonot.

Less than *kebessa* of bread (the volume of an average egg, see below) may be eaten outside the sukkah; more than that requires a sukkah and the berakha of *lesheb basukkah*.

Cake, crackers, cookies and other baked *mezonot* items may be eaten outside the sukkah as long as one does not eat an amount that is considered having "established a meal" of the mezonot. This measure is considered by some authorities to be the volume of three average eggs, which requires reciting *hamosi*, birkat hamazon and eating in a sukkah with the berakha of *lesheb basukkah*. The volume of four average eggs of such mezonot products definitely requires the above. In practical halakha there is a dispute concerning these measurements; some authorities consider a *kebessa* volume to be approximately two ounces of weight of bread or cake while others consider it to be not more than one and one-third ounces of weight of bread or cake.

In the case of cooked mezonot products such as pasta, when one eats the minimum measure they require sukkah and *lesheb basukkah* despite the fact that they never require the berakhot of *hamosi* and birkat hamazon, but mezonot and *al hamihya*, even when they comprise a "regular" meal.

Fruits, vegetables and drinks are permitted outside the sukkah in any quantity. Whoever is careful to eat and drink in the sukkah even when partaking of less than the minimum measure that requires sukkah is praiseworthy. It

is proper to eat mezonot items that are of at least a *kebessa* in the sukkah even though they do not require *lesheb basukkah*.

When reciting the blessings, one first recites *hamosi* then *lesheb basukkah*. On yom tob or Shabbat, since there is *qiddush*, *lesheb basukkah* is attached to the *qiddush*. If one forgot to recite it at the beginning of his meal, he may do so as long as he is still within the meal, even if he no longer intends to eat bread.

On the first night of Sukkot, one is required to eat at least a *kazzayit* of bread in the sukkah. (*Kazzayit* is dependent on the *kebessa*, but one ounce is surely adequate.) In the Diaspora this applies to the second night also.

There are four berakhot in the *qiddush* of the first two nights of Sukkot: the first is on the wine, the second commemorates the festival, followed by *lesheb basukkah* and *sheheheyanu*. On the second night the order of the third and fourth blessings are reversed as explained below.

The *sheheheyanu* in the *qiddush* on all first nights of festivals expresses gratitude for being alive to fulfill the mitzvah of celebrating the festival. On Sukkot it also applies to the mitzvah of construction of the sukkah (even if the individual reciting the *qiddush* did not build or does not own the sukkah). Therefore, on the first night it is recited after *lesheb basukkah*, to cover both mitzvot. On the second night, *sheheheyanu* is only for the festival, recited because of the "doubt of the day" that used to apply. As far as construction of the sukkah is concerned, the *sheheheyanu* of the first night would cover it even if the first night were not really the festival, as the sukkah was already completed. Although these considerations derive from a situation that

no longer obtains today we do not have the authoritative Bet Din to bring the halakha into alignment with the reality.

III. Exemptions From the Mitzvah

Women are not required to eat in the sukkah, as it is one of the positive commandments governed by time from which they are exempt. If they choose to eat in the sukkah they fulfill a mitzvah. However, they should not recite *lesheb basukkah*, as they cannot properly say *vesivanu* ("He commanded us"). This principle applies to all such cases in which women are exempt but choose to fulfill the mitzvah.

In cold or inclement climates one need not sleep in the sukkah. One should not sleep in the sukkah if it is dangerous, for "danger is more serious than a prohibition."

A sick person who is discomforted when eating in the sukkah, even if his illness is not life threatening, is exempt. The sick person's attendant is also exempt.

When it is raining hard enough to interfere with the normal use of the sukkah as a room in one's home, one is exempt and may eat bread outside the sukkah. If, nonetheless, one chooses to eat in the sukkah, he is not allowed to recite the berakha on the sukkah. The rabbis consider a person who does so *hedyot*. Similarly, other adverse conditions in the sukkah that cause one significant discomfort, such as extreme cold or bad odor not under one's control, also exempt one from the sukkah.

If one began his meal indoors because it was raining, and the rain stopped while he was in the midst of the meal, he does not have to move to the sukkah or refrain from bread during the rest of the meal. Once he was exempt at the beginning of the meal he is exempt for the whole meal.

If it rains the first night of Sukkot before one fulfilled the mitzvah of eating in the sukkah, and the individual is prepared to begin his meal, he should wait a half hour or so to see if the rain stops or if there is a sign of stopping. If it does not stop, and there is no sign of stopping, he may then eat with bread in the house. Even the first night there is no mitzvah to eat in the sukkah while disturbed by rain.

However, on the first night, since eating in the sukkah is a specific mitzvah from the Torah, if the rain stopped after one began or completed his meal, he should enter the sukkah to eat at least a measure of bread with the berakha of *lesheb basukkah*. If the rain stopped after one went to bed to sleep for the night, it is not then necessary to go to the sukkah.

Travelers during Sukkot are exempt from sukkah during their journeying times and may eat bread outside a sukkah providing they are traveling for purposes of business or mitzvah. Those traveling for pleasure are not exempt from sukkah and even if a sukkah is not available in their vicinity they should refrain from eating the measure of bread that requires a sukkah.

IV. The Sukkah

A sukkah must be at least ten *tefahim* (handbreadths) high, approximately thirty-five inches. In times past, when it was common to sit on the floor, this height was adequate. The maximum height for a sukkah is twenty *amot* or "cubits" (an average person's forearm, approximately twenty-one inches). Thus, the maximum acceptable height for a sukkah is about 35 feet. If it were higher, an individual sitting in the sukkah might not sense being under the *sekhakh* covering.

A sukkah must have at least two walls and part of a third. In a standard rectangular sukkah, two walls must extend for at

least seven *tefahim* each (24½ inches) while the third must extend at least over four *tefahim* (14 inches).

Sukkah walls may be constituted of any material providing they are strong enough to withstand a wind normal for the particular locale during the Sukkot season. The commercial canvas walls common in our times are acceptable providing they are fastened well all along their width on top and bottom. It is preferable they not flutter more than three *tefahim* off center.

The Sukkah must be covered with *sekhakh* that shades the majority of the area of the sukkah.

Sekhakh must be:
a. Of a material that grows from the ground
b. Detached from the ground
c. Able to remain for seven days without decomposing
d. Not subject to the laws of ritual impurity, thus excluding receptacles, vessels and foodstuffs.

The most usual materials for *sekhakh* are bamboo, evergreens and thin wooden slats. It is acceptable to use bamboos spliced into thin strips and interlaced to make a "mat", providing it was made for overhead covering or at least not for a floor mat (which involves a technical point of association with a potential defilement).

Sekhakh should not be so solid that heavy rain cannot penetrate the sukkah. It is preferred to be sufficiently thin so that some stars may be visible from the sukkah.

An air gap in the sekhakh of less than three *tefahim* (10½ in.) does not invalidate the sukkah, but one should not eat under such a gap. Invalid *sekhakh* of less than four *tefahim* (14 in.) in the midst of kosher *sekhakh* does not invalidate

the sukkah and one is permitted to eat underneath such a spot. In a minimum-size sukkah (of seven *tefahim*) these two lenient regulations are inapplicable, as there would not be enough space remaining for a kosher sukkah.

An area that extends into the sukkah from a side wall may have invalid *sekhakh* (such as a regular roof) up until four *amot* (seven feet) without invalidating the sukkah. The reasoning is that the part of the ceiling connected to the wall may be considered a continuation of the wall (a curved wall). However, the invalid sekhakh area is not considered part of the sukkah; thus, there must be a minimum size of sukkah without it. When eating in such a sukkah one must be under the valid *sekhakh*.

A sukkah should not be built under any projection (e.g. a ledge, an overhang or trees). If part of the sukkah is under a projection, that part is invalid and one should not eat in that spot.

It is a mitzvah to decorate the sukkah. Decorations may be attached to the *sekhakh* even though the decorations are made of material that is invalid for *sekhakh*. Decorations within four *tefahim* of the *sekhakh* are annulled to it and one may eat under them.

V. The Four Species - Lulab, Etrog, Hadas and Araba

The Torah prescribes to take (lift up) the four species on the first day of Sukkot and rejoice. The Talmud defines these as etrog (citron), lulab (palm branch), hadas (myrtle branches) and araba (willow branches). In the central sanctuary the mitzvah was performed all seven days of Sukkot. The rabbis extended the mitzvah to all seven days everywhere.

The mitzvah is performed once daily during daytime only. It is not performed on Shabbat as the rabbis feared it would lead to carrying.

Women are not obligated in this mitzvah as it is a positive mitzvah governed by time. They may choose to perform the mitzvah, but without a berakha.

One lulab, three hadasim and two arabot should be bound together, so that the three species comprise a single unit. It is customary to bind them with lulab leaves. The binding should preferably be done before yom tob so that the binding material can be cut to size and knots made. If it was not done before yom tob, it may be done on yom tob in an inferior manner, without cutting and without proper knots.

In fulfilling the mitzvah, one takes the three species bound together in his right hand, recites the berakha, then takes the etrog in his left hand (even if left-handed) and holds the four species together, and waves them. The central spine of the lulab (*shidra*) should face towards the person. The berakha is recited just before taking the etrog in hand in accordance with the rule that berakhot on mitzvot are recited just before fulfillment. If preferred, one may hold the etrog upside down before the berakha and turn it right side up after the berakha, as the mitzvah is not fulfilled until the four species are held right side up. Right side up means the point of detachment from the tree is to the bottom.

On the first day two berakhot are recited: *al netilat lulab* and *sheheheyanu*. On the rest of the days only the first berakha is recited.

While waving, one should silently request G-d to provide beneficial rains and dew and helpful winds during the coming year. One should have kavana (focused thoughts)

for the land of Israel, the country he is in and, in a general way, the world-at-large.

The Torah indicates that we should each take our own set of four species. This applies to the first day (in the Diaspora the first two days). If one does not have his own set, someone may present him with a "gift" with the understanding that it will be returned. If the congregation owns its own set, each member is considered a partner and each is understood to relinquish his share on behalf of whoever wishes to use it.

There is a technical problem involved with the giving of the lulab set to children on the first day. Halakhically, a child can acquire property when an adult gives it to him, but cannot give over property. Therefore, if a child does not have his own set, an adult should be careful not to transfer his to the child as a "gift" on the first day before all the adults who intend to use that set that day have done so.

The lulab must measure at least four *tefahim* (14 in.); hadas and araba stalks must measure at least three *tefahim* each (10½ in.). An etrog must be at least the volume of an average egg.

An etrog from which even a small amount is missing is invalid. This includes the node from which the *pitum* protrudes. Etrogim that grow naturally without such a node are acceptable. The upper portion of an etrog (the upper slope until the top) should be very presentable, without flaws such as discoloration or "scales." Flaws on the lower portion of the etrog are not as serious and its acceptability depends on the extent.

Proper hadas has three or more leaves protruding from the same horizontal line all along its stem. At the minimum, it

should be "tripled" for at least four and one-half inches along its stem, which is the majority of the *bedi'avad* measurement of hadas. If all the leaves dry up to the extent that they no longer are green but "whitish," it is invalid.

Proper araba has smooth-edged leaves. If the majority of the leaves dry up or fall off, it is invalid.

Whatever is invalid because of "missing," poor appearance or blemishes is only invalid the first day.

Hadas and particularly araba spoil relatively quickly. To preserve them, it is helpful to wrap them in a large sheet of aluminum foil, wet newspaper or a damp towel and refrigerate.

A halakhic principle is to "beautify the mitzvot." As the etrog is defined as the Biblical *hadar*, it is especially appropriate to seek an especially presentable etrog.

VI. Shemini Asseret

The festival of the eighth day (and the ninth day in the Diaspora), Shemini Asseret, is a separate festival in many respects. Thus, the halakhot of sukkah and the "four species" do not apply to it.

It is customary to eat in the sukkah on the first day of Shemini Asseret without reciting the berakha on the sukkah. This is based on the practice of conducting as they did before establishment of a set calendar, when they had the doubt regarding the day, i.e. perhaps the eighth day is really the seventh day and still Sukkot.

The reason we do not recite the berakha on sukkah because of the "doubt" that they had is that in the evening it would

be recited in the *qiddush*, thus creating a totally inappropriate situation: we would mention Shemini Asseret and explicitly contradict our declaration with the blessing of *lesheb basukkah*. Merely sitting in the sukkah, however, does not create a contradiction as we may choose to eat outdoors independently of the festival.

However, since we now know the day is Shemini Asseret and there is no requirement to sit in the sukkah, slight discomfort permits eating indoors, as the mitzvah to be joyous in celebrating the festival is from the Torah and the custom to comport in accordance with the "doubt of the day" that they had before the set calendar cannot override it.

We begin reciting *mashib haru'ah umorid hageshem* in the amida of musaf of Shemini Asseret. If one mistakenly recited *morid hatal* during the days of *mashib haru'ah umorid hageshem*, he does not repeat the amida, since dew is appropriate all year long. We do not begin *barekh alenu* (the blessing in the amida that includes the tal umatar request for rain) until December 4th or 5th, depending on the year.[1]

VII. Simhat Torah

Simhat Torah is celebrated on Shemini Asseret; in the Diaspora it is celebrated on the second day. On this day we conclude the reading of the Torah and begin reading it anew. It is then appropriate to focus our intentions on increasing our study of the Torah this time around.

We read from three *Sifre Torah*. In the first we conclude the Torah, in the second we begin Beresheet and in the third we

[1] See Rabbi Moshe Shamah's "*Regarding the Date to Begin Reciting Tal Umatar*." Halakhic Guide: Vol. I (New York: Tebah, August 2008), pp. 139-147. [Available online at tebah.org.]

read the maftir for the day. Although we normally recite *qaddish* after a required reading of each Sefer Torah of yom tob or Shabbat, the custom is not to recite *qaddish* after concluding the Torah so as not to interrupt between concluding it and beginning it again.

Three *hatanim* (grooms of the Torah) are designated for the readings. The *Hatan Me`ona* reads the portion of the Torah that precedes the concluding portion, the *Hatan Torah* concludes, while the *Hatan Beresheet* begins from the beginning of the Torah.

It is customary to give many aliyot on this day, including to children to increase their love for the Torah. Very young children are sent up in groups with an older child leading them in the berakha. The extra aliyot are generally given before the aliya of *Hatan Me`ona*, although some have the custom to send up the *Hatan Me`ona* as hamishi (before the extra aliyot).

A special celebration is made in honor of the Torah. The rabbis and the public dance with the Torah and circle the Torah seven times with singing and dancing both at night and by day. If indicated, it is permitted to take the Sefer Torah outdoors to increase the celebration.

VIII. Prayers

*Ya`ale veyabo* is recited in each amida. If it was omitted during the intermediate days (hol hamo`ed, when a weekday amida is recited), and the individual did not realize it until having concluded, he repeats the amida, for he made no mention of the special day. If he realized the omission before concluding the amida, he should return to *rese* and repeat from that point on, which includes *ya`ale veyabo*. On yom tob, if mention of the festival was made in the amida

independently of *Ya`ale Veyabo*, one does not need to repeat.

Complete Hallel with a berakha is recited after the amida of *shahrit* each day for all nine days. The lulab set is waved in all six directions on each of the days of Sukkot except Shabbat (that is, on six days) during the recital of certain verses in Hallel. While waving, one should silently pray for a year of adequate rain and dew.

Hosha`not are recited daily for the seven days of Sukkot after Hallel. A Sefer Torah is placed on the tebah and each individual circles around it while holding a set of the four species. Our custom is to bring the Sefer Torah to the tebah before *Barukh She'amar*. On Shabbat, as the four species are proscribed, Hoshanot are not recited. Some recite Hoshanot composed especially for Shabbat but do not bring out a Sefer Torah for it.

Specified selections are read from the Torah each morning. The minimum number of aliyot on yom tob is five plus maftir. The number of aliyot on hol hamo`ed is four.

Each day of Sukkot, before arbit and in the morning prayers, we recite Psalms 42 and 43 that connect to the theme of the occasion. For Shemini Asseret we recite Psalm 12.

Musaf is said daily.

The last day of hol hamo`ed is *Hosh'anah Rabbah*. There is a custom to stay up all night and read the complete books of Debarim and Tehillim. We pray for one more chance.

On Hoshanah Rabbah seven sections of hosh'anot are recited, during each of which the congregants circle the Sefer Torah on the tebah.

At the conclusion of musaf, five arabot, bound together, are beaten five times on the ground with a silent prayer that G-d should grant us a year during which the earth yields its produce abundantly.
Tefillin are not donned for all nine days.

Ya`ale veyabo is recited in birkat hamazon throughout the festival including the intermediate days.

Perashat Emor and Sukkot

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

In its account of the festivals of the Jewish year, perashat Emor contains the following statement:

> You shall dwell in thatched huts [sukkot] for seven days. Everyone included in Israel must live in such thatched huts. This is so that future generations will know that I caused the Israelites to live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d. (Leviticus 23: 42-43)

What precisely this means was the subject of disagreement between two great teachers of the Mishnaic era, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. According to the Talmud Bavli (Sukkah 11a), Rabbi Eliezer holds that the reference is to the clouds of glory that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the verse is to be understood literally (*sukkot mammash*). It means "huts" – no more, no less.

A similar difference of opinion exists between the great medieval Jewish commentators. Rashi and Ramban favor the "clouds of glory" interpretation. Ramban cites as proof the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the end of days:

> Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter [sukkah] and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain. (Isaiah 4: 5-6)

Here the word sukkah clearly refers not to a natural but to a miraculous protection.

Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, however, favor the literal interpretation. Rashbam explains as follows: the festival of Sukkot, when the harvest was complete and the people were surrounded by the blessings of the land, was the time to remind them of how they came to be there. The Israelites would relive the wilderness years during which they had no permanent home. They would then feel a sense of gratitude to G-d for bringing them to the land. Rashbam's proof text is Moses' speech in Devarim 8:

> When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your G-d for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your G-d… Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery… You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your G-d, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, confirming his covenant which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (8: 10-18)

According to Rashbam, Sukkot (like Pesach) is a reminder of the humble origins of the Jewish people, a powerful antidote to the risks of affluence. That is one of the overarching themes of Moses' speeches in the book of Devarim and a mark of his greatness as a leader. The real challenge to the Jewish people, he warned, was not the dangers they faced in the wilderness, but the opposite, the sense of wellbeing and security they would have once they settled the land. The irony – and it has happened many times in the history of nations – is that people remember G-d in times of distress but forget him in times of plenty.

That is when cultures become decadent and begin to decline.

A question, however, remains. According to the view that sukkot is to be understood literally, what miracle does the festival of Sukkot represent? Pesach celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people experienced an unmediated revelation of G-d. On the "clouds of glory" interpretation, Sukkot fits this scheme. It recalls the miracles in the wilderness, the forty years during which they ate mannah from heaven, drank water from a rock, and were led by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (In 1776, Thomas Jefferson chose this image as his design for the Great Seal of the United States). But on the view that the sukkah is not a symbol but a fact – a hut, a booth, nothing more – what miracle does it represent? There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. Where then is the miracle?

A surprising and lovely answer is given by the prophet Jeremiah:

> Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how, as a bride, you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown." [2:2]

Throughout Tanakh, most of the references to the wilderness years focus on the graciousness of G-d and the ingratitude of the people: their quarrels and complaints, their constant inconstancy. Jeremiah does the opposite. To be sure, there were bad things about those years, but against them stands the simple fact that the Israelites had the faith and courage to embark on a journey through an unknown

land, fraught with danger, and sustained only by their trust in G-d. They were like Sarah who accompanied Abraham on his journey, leaving "his land, birthplace and father's house" behind. They were like Tzipporah who went with Moses on his risk-laden mission to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. There is a faith that is like love; there is a love that calls for faith. That is what the Israelites showed in leaving a land where they had lived for 210 years and traveling out into the desert, "a land not sown", not knowing what would befall them on the way, but trusting in G-d to bring them to their destination.

Perhaps it took Rabbi Akiva, the great lover of Israel, to see that what was truly remarkable about the wilderness years was not that the Israelites were surrounded by the clouds of glory but that they were an entire nation without a home or houses; they were like nomads without a place of refuge. Exposed to the elements, at risk from any surprise attack, they nonetheless continued on their journey in the faith that G-d would not desert them.

To a remarkable degree Sukkot came to symbolize not just the forty years in the wilderness but also two thousand years of exile. Following the destruction of the second Temple, Jews were scattered throughout the world. Almost nowhere did they have rights. Nowhere could they consider themselves at home. Wherever they were, they were there on sufferance, dependent on a ruler's whim. At any moment without forewarning they could be expelled, as they were from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, Cologne, 1424, Bavaria 1442, Perugia, Vicenza, Parma and Milan in the 1480s, and most famously from Spain in 1492. These expulsions gave rise to the Christian myth of "the wandering Jew" – conveniently ignoring the fact that it was Christians who imposed this fate on them. Yet even they were often awestruck at the fact that despite everything,

Jews did not give up their faith when (in Judah Halevi's phrase) "with a word lightly spoken" they could have converted to the dominant faith and put an end to their sufferings.

Sukkot is the festival of a people for whom, for twenty centuries, every house was a mere temporary dwelling, every stop no more than a pause in a long journey. I find it deeply moving that Jewish tradition called this time *zeman simchatenu*, "the season of our joy". That, surely, is the greatness of the Jewish spirit that, with no protection other than their faith in G-d, Jews were able to celebrate in the midst of suffering and affirm life in the full knowledge of its risk and uncertainty. That is the faith of a remarkable nation.

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once explained why the festival of Nissan has two names, Pesach and *Chag haMatzot*. The name Pesach represents the greatness of G-d who "passed over" the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. The name *Chag haMatzot* represents the greatness of the Israelites who were willing to follow G-d into the wilderness without provisions. In the Torah, G-d calls the festival *Chag haMatzot* in praise of Israel. The Jewish people, however, called it Pesach to sing the praise of G-d. That, it seems, is the argument between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva about Sukkot. According to R. Eliezer, it represents G-d's miracle, the clouds of glory. According to R. Akiva, however, it represents the miracle of Israel – their willingness to continue the long journey to freedom, vulnerable and at great risk, led only by the call of G-d.

Why then, according to Rabbi Akiva, is Sukkot celebrated at harvest time? The answer is in the very next verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah. After speaking of "the devotion of

your youth, how, as a bride, you loved me," the prophet adds:

> Israel is holy to G-d, The first fruit of His harvest. [Jeremiah 2: 3]

Just as, during Tishri, the Israelites celebrated their harvest, so G-d celebrates His – a people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to heaven's call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

What Human Beings Have Created, Human Beings Can Rectify

The following is an excerpt from Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks' book "To Heal a Fractured World," pages 35-36.

The whole tenor of the Torah is based on the idea that G-d is to be found in the physical world and its blessings. We are commanded to serve G-d in joy out of the abundance of good things, not through self-denial. One Talmudic teacher went so far as to say that in the world to come a person will have to face judgment for every legitimate pleasure he denied himself in this life. Asceticism – always a temptation in the religious life – was never embraced by the Jewish mainstream. To the contrary, it was an implicit disavowal of this world, which G-d created and pronounced good. Jewish teachings on poverty have a refreshing directness and sense of reality. Having regard for the poor did not mean in Judaism embracing poverty oneself. No poor person was ever helped by knowing that a saint had joined his ranks. He was helped by being given the chance not to be poor.

Equally robust was the rabbinic refusal to see inequalities in society as the will of G-d. On this, the Talmud records a

fascinating debate between Rabbi Akiva and the Roman governor of Israel, Tineius Rufus:

> Tineius Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, 'If your G-d loves the poor, why does He not provide for them?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'So that we may be saved through them from the punishment of Gehenna [i.e., charity atones].'
>
> Rufus said, 'On the contrary, it is this that will condemn you to Gehenna. I will make my point clear by a parable. A king of flesh and blood became angry with his slave, put him in prison, and ordered that he be given neither food nor drink. A certain man went [to the prison] and gave him food and drink. When the king hears what the man did, will he not be angry with him? And after all you are no more than G-d's slaves, as it is written, "For to Me the children of Israel are slaves"' (Lev. 25: 55).
>
> Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I will prove my point with another parable. A king of flesh and blood became angry with his child, put him in prison, and ordered that he be given neither food nor drink. A certain man went [to the prison] and gave him food and drink. When the king hears what the man did, will he not reward him? And after all we are called [G-d's] children, as it is written, "You are children of the Lord your G-d"' (Dt. 14: 1).

There is nothing inevitable or divinely willed about social and economic inequality. Judaism rejects the almost universal belief in antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages that hierarchy and divisions of class are written into the structure of society. What human beings have created, human beings can rectify.

It followed that everyone should be provided with the basic requirements of a dignified life. The sages inferred this from the biblical phrase, ‘be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs’. Needs included food, housing, basic furniture, and if necessary, funds to pay for a wedding. To this end, each community organized tzedakah funds, contributions to which could be coerced by communal sanction. From earliest rabbinic times there were such institutions as the tamchui, or mobile kitchen, which distributed food daily to whoever applied, and the kuppah, or community chest, which distributed money weekly to the poor of the city, together with specific funds for clothing, raising dowries for poor brides, and providing burial expenses for the poor.

Post-biblical Judaism was faithful to one of the Bible’s most powerful imperatives, that a society is judged by what it contributes to the welfare of the least advantaged, ‘the widow, the orphan, the poor and the stranger’.

Sukkot Teaches Joy

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Each Jewish festival has a distinct appellation. Passover is called the festival of our freedom, Shavuot the festival of the giving of the Torah, both apt descriptions. But how are we to understand Sukkot as the festival of our rejoicing? Does "joy" define Sukkot in the way that "freedom" defines Passover?

The major commandment of the festival - to live in a sukkah (temporary dwelling booth) for seven days - seems a far cry from rejoicing. How does leaving one's spacious home for a small hut express a specific time of joy?

One answer is suggested by Maimonides, who in the Laws of Repentance (Chapter 2), describes the stages of a person undertaking penitence. He explains that the process of repentance concludes with the need to be *golah mimkomo* (exiled from one's own home to a strange place). Since Sukkot falls only four days after Yom Kippur, the day of repentance and purity, our exile into a fragile, temporary dwelling may represent the final stage in our own penitential and redemptive process. And if penitence ultimately leads to a rejoicing of the soul, therein may lie the special joy of the sukkah hut.

Secondly, the sages may be teaching a lesson concerning the fundamental nature of joy. Many people define joy in terms of what they have, while in reality, joy can only be measured by who we are, what we have accomplished and the relationships we have developed. In effect, the sukkah teaches, joy has little to do with the size, spaciousness and decorations of our dwelling place. As the Talmud teaches: "When love between two individuals is strong, they can

sleep on the edge of a plow; when their love is not strong, a bed of 60 cubits is not large enough" (B.T. Sanhedrin 7a).

A third explanation for the unique joy of Sukkot may become clear through recounting a story about Rav Aryeh Levin. One year, Rabbi Levin went out to buy an etrog (lemon-like fruit used in a Sukkot prayer ritual). Since the Torah identifies this fruit with the phrase *pri etz hadar* (fruit of a tree which is beautiful), we traditionally seek out the most nearly perfect etrog, thereby fulfilling the commandment of *hidur* (to beautify). Yet the venerated rabbi made his choice in less than two minutes.

An onlooker followed the rabbi to try to understand the reason for his haste. When the rabbi reached his destination, a nursing home, the man explained his dilemma. He could understand Rabbi Levin's acting in haste if he had an emergency call, but since the person in the nursing home "was not going anywhere," couldn't the visit have been put off for another 20 minutes to allow for a more effective choice of an etrog?

Rabbi Levin explained that the word *hidur* appears in the Torah in regard to only two commandments - the *pri etz hadar* of the etrog (Leviticus 23:40) and *v'hadarta pnai zakain* of paying honor to the elderly (Deuteronomy 19:32). Since joy is biblically defined as making other people, especially those who are less fortunate, happy, then honoring an old person takes precedence over choosing an etrog.

Throughout the Torah, the command to rejoice is accompanied by an injunction to display concern for those who are less likely to be happy: "You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female

slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities" (Deuteronomy 16:14).

Maimonides ruled that a person who makes a feast on the festival but invites only his family, disregarding the stranger, the poor, the widow and the orphan, is expressing the joy of the *keres* (belly) but not the divinely mandated joy of the festival. When a homeowner leaves his spacious house for the sukkah, a fragile hut exposed to the discomforts of wind, rain and sun, he can identify with those who lack protective surroundings, with the poor and the homeless. Such an experience should lead to heightened sensitivity for the have-less and have-nots, and to more invitations and sharing, especially with the less fortunate. The commitment to give from whatever we have to those who have less, this fundamental identification with the less fortunate, is the essence of Jewish joy.

Sukkot and the Twin Towers

Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo

In memory of Rehavam Ze'evi z.l.,
A great lover of the land of Israel

When contemplating the festival of Sukkot, we are confronted with a remarkable paradox. As is well known, the Sukkah visualizes our life span in the world. For what is a Sukkah? It is a frail structure in which we need to dwell for seven days. Many commentators remind us that these seven days represent man's average life span, which is about seventy years. This is well stated by King David when he wrote: "The span of his years is seventy and with strength eighty years." (Tehilim 90:10) Indeed under favorable circumstances, we may prolong our stay in this world into our eighth day, which is symbolized by Shemini Chag Atzereth, (a separate festival immediately following the seven days of Sukkot).

Indeed how frail our life is! Not only is it short but also most unreliable. As long as we live under favorable and healthy circumstances, life is a pleasant experience and, just like the Sukkah, it seems to protect us and we feel safe. But once life uncovers serious problems or turns against us, we realize how little protection it is really able to offer and how unstable our lives actually are. Like the Sukkah it is far less reliable than we had imagined.

Perplexing however is the fact that the festival of Sukkot is seen as the highlight of joy and happiness. Speaking specifically about Sukkot, the Torah states: "And you shall be happy on your festival" (Devarim 16-14). This means that we should experience the most exalted form of happiness at a time when we have to dwell in a structure, which is far from secure!

In fact Jewish law makes it utmost clear that the Sukkah must be built in such a way that it is not able to stand up against a strong wind, that its roof must be leaking when it starts to rain and that it must contain more shadow than sunlight. These conditions should make us feel distressed since the Sukkah seems to represent the vulnerability of man. So why command us to be joyful, precisely at the time when one is confronted with all that what can go wrong with life?

Here another question comes to mind. Since the Sukkah teaches us about life's handicaps, we would expect that Jewish law would also require the interior of the Sukkah to reflect a similar message. As such, the Sukkah should be empty of all comfort. It should just contain some broken chairs, an old table and some meager with which cutlery to eat one's dry bread.

However Jewish law holds a great surprise. It requires that the Sukkah's interior should reflect a most optimistic lifestyle. Its frail walls should be decorated with beautiful art, paintings and other decorations. The leaking roof, made from leaves or reeds, should be made to look attractive by the hanging of colorful fruits. One is required to bring one's best furniture into the Sukkah, if possible to put a carpet on the ground and have nice curtains hanging in its windows. One should eat from the most beautiful plates and use one's best cutlery. Meals should be more elaborate, including delicacies. Singing should accompany those meals. All this seems to reflect a feeling that this world is a most pleasant place, made for our enjoyment and recreation!

So why simultaneously sit in a frail hut?

The message could not be clearer: however much the outside walls and the leaking roof reveal man's vulnerability and uncertainty, inside these walls one needs to make one's life as attractive as possible and enjoy its great benefits and blessings.

This should not be lost on us. Instead of becoming depressed and losing faith in life after the great tragedy in NY and the ongoing terrorist attacks in Israel, we should continue to approach life with the optimistic note which is conveyed to us by the beautiful interior of the Sukkah. True, the ongoing guerrilla attacks on Jews in the land of Israel and the collapse of the Twin Towers, in the heart of a country which believed it could offer its citizens a great amount of security, proves how vulnerable modern man really is and how shaken the outer walls of his "Sukkah" are! But this should not hold us back from enjoying life as much as possible. To be happy when all is well is of no great significance. But to be fully aware of the dangers which surround us and simultaneously continue our lives with "song and harp" is what makes humans great and proud.

We would therefore do well to discourage people from speculating about "the end of days" or reading kabbalistic and other sources informing us that the messianic days are very close and that the wars preceding its coming are immanent. There is no way of knowing. Just as in the days of Shabbatai Zvi*, such speculations, however tempting, could cause a great backlash and do a lot of harm. Instead we should stay with our feet on the ground and make sure we live up to our moral and religious obligations.

The collapse of the Twin Towers should encourage people to be more united and to show more sensitivity to each other's needs. It should encourage Jew and gentile to build

strong family ties and create, just as in the case of the Sukkah, strong and pleasant homes. It should inspire people to go to synagogue and church and create strong communities, because these are some of the decorations in our lifelong Sukkah.

Indeed, the walls of our worldly Sukkah may be shaking, but let us not forget that we have an obligation to decorate its interior.

* Shabbatai Zvi was a self-declared messiah who brought about a great upheaval in the European Jewish community in the seventeenth century. After it became clear that he was a fraud, many Jews no longer trusted the Jewish traditional sources, which they believed, were proving that Shabbatai Zvi was indeed the Messiah. Consequently they left the fold.

Psalm 42-43 and Sukkot

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

In the tradition of the Sephardic Jews these Psalms are recited throughout the holiday of Sukkot.* The connection to Sukkot, specifically, is somewhat tenuous, yet the psalm clearly shows the yearning of the psalmist to join the throngs of people on their way to the Bet Hamiqdash on the festival. The choice of these psalms as part of the liturgy reflects the yearning of those who recite it to once again be amongst the masses of people who are celebrating on their way to the Temple.

Two Psalms or One

These two psalms should be considered as one, even though the division into two psalms is quite ancient, and found in most of the manuscripts (the Septuagint even begins psalm 43 with the words Mizmor Ledavid). The unity of these two psalms can be seen most clearly from the refrain that is repeated twice in Psalm 42 and at the end of Psalm 43. There are other phrases that occur in both psalms. As far as the content is concerned when thinking about the experience of the psalmist, Psalm 42 lacks a resolution, which Psalm 43 provides. Psalm 43 lacks a beginning that gives some idea of the circumstances for the psalm's composition. Although it is not clear why the psalm was divided into two, Psalm 43 does represent a significant turn in the psalmist's attitude. Perhaps it was this change of attitude that prompted the division into two psalms. In our comments we will treat the two psalms as one.

Overview and Structure

The psalmist begins by bemoaning his situation of being far away from the Temple ("bet Elohim" – "the house of God"). He recalls with extreme sadness the times when he

would lead the throngs who would go to "appear before God." The taunts of his enemies about the absence of his God do not help his situation. The psalmist, after complaining to God for forgetting and ignoring him, assures himself that he will once again be brought to the Temple with to thank God with rejoicing and song.

The psalms divide into three sections, each of which ends with the refrain, "Why so downcast my soul, why disquieted within me…" These sections show a progression in the psalmist's emotional state, from a doleful recollection to a hopeful future. The change in the emotional state despite the presumed unchanged situation is the message of the psalm.

Analysis

Section I (Psalm 42:1-6, NJPS)

For the Leader. A maskil of the Korahites.
Like a hind crying for water,
my soul cries for You, O God;
my soul thirsts for God, the living God;
O when will I come to appear before God!
My tears have been my food day and night;
I am ever taunted with, "where is your God?"
When I think of this, I pour out my soul:
how I walked with the crowd, moved with them,
the festive throng, to the House of God
with joyous shouts of praise.
Why so downcast, my soul,
why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
for His saving presence.

This psalm begins the second book of Psalms and the first of seven psalms that begin with an attribution to the sons of

Qorah**. The sons of Qorah were a levitical clan that served in the Temple.

> For the singing in the House of the Lord, to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres, for the service of the House of god by order of the king (1 Chronicles 25:6 NJPS).

The first verse of the psalm (after the title verse) has the psalmist speaking directly to God describing his yearning for Him. This yearning is compared to that of an animal thirsting for water. By the second verse the psalmist's distance from God becomes apparent. He cannot "appear before God" and by this verse does not even address Him directly. The first section does not contain another direct address to God.

The psalmist's need for water expressed in the first two verses is met with a kind of water-tears. The psalmist's tears were his response to the repeated taunt "where is your God?" His God is distant–in place, time and experience.

At this point in the psalm, his God is in his memory. He recalls the joy of leading the throngs to the festive pilgrimage to the Temple. God was apparent to him there and then. Not now. This memory causes him to "pour out his soul." This is another image of water. His soul has become like water, but this water is of no use because it is poured out.

Verse 6 is the refrain in which the psalmist addresses his "self." The psalmist encourages his self to not mire in depression, but to have hope in God. The psalmist's hope is that the he will once again be able to thank Him for His salvation.

Recalling the past did not help the psalmist feel close to God. It just led to his feeling more depressed. Deciding to hope for the future and goading his soul not to be downcast is the psalmist's way out of his depression.

Section II (42:7-12, NJPS)

O my God, my soul is downcast;
therefore I think of You
in this land of Jordan and Hermon,
in Mount Mizar,
where deep calls to deep
in the roar of your cataracts;
all Your breakers and billows have swept over me.
By day may the Lord vouchsafe His faithful care,
so that at night a song to Him may be with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock,
"Why have You forgotten me,
why must I walk in gloom,
oppressed by my enemy?"
Crushing my bones [with murder in my bones]
my foes revile me,
taunting me always with, "where is your God?"
Why so downcast, my soul,
why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
my ever-present help, my God.

The psalmist is closer to God in this section. The psalmist's direct call to God that opens the section is continued throughout the section. In every verse except one (the central verse of this section and of these psalms) the psalmist addresses God with direct speech. Even though the content of the address is accusations and complaints, the fact that the psalmist is addressing God is an improvement

over the first section, in which God is so distant that he cannot be addressed in a sustained way.

The psalmist's complaint against God is that "All Your breakers and billows have swept over me." The psalmist interprets all his troubles as ultimately emanating from God. His feeling is one of being forgotten by God.

The conversation with God allows him to react differently to the taunts of his enemies. Now he has "murder in his bones." His anger at the enemy is felt but not expressed. Contrast this reaction with the psalmist's reaction in the first section. The psalmist cries at the taunts in the first section, accepting them and pitying himself. The response of inner anger at the enemy is a more self-affirming one.

This section also gives us some information about the psalmist's situation. He is in the north of Israel, where the sources of the Jordan River are. He hears the sounds of the rushing water and possibly waterfalls and associates his relationship to God with those sounds. An oppressive enemy is also driving the psalmist.

Section III (Psalm 43:1-5, NJPS)

Vindicate me, O God,
champion my cause
against faithless people;
rescue me from the treacherous, dishonest man.
For you are my God, my stronghold;
why have you rejected me?
Why must I walk in gloom,
oppressed by the enemy?
Send forth Your light and Your truth;
they will lead me;
they will bring me to Your holy mountain,
to Your dwelling place,

that I may come to the altar of God,
God, my delight, my joy;
that I may praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.
Why so downcast, my soul,
why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
my ever-present help, my God.

The connection to God in this section is even greater. The psalmist's anger of the second section is turned into a call for help and justice from the hands of the unjust nation.

Even in the psalmist's repeated complaint to God, God is referred to in an amplified way. He is now the psalmist's "stronghold," whereas in section II he was the psalmist's rock.

It is this realization that allows the psalmist to imagine a brighter future – one in which he is restored to his service of singing in the Temple. In this section, the gloom of walking to and fro in the oppression of the enemy is responded to by God's light of truth. It is that truth that will eventually bring the psalmist to his hoped for future.

This last section allows the psalmist to develop the idea "I will yet praise Him" that is found in the refrain. Even though the refrain is the same as in the second section, it is the element of praising God for his help that comes into sharper focus in this section. His hope has been fleshed out by his imagination. He sees himself coming to the altar with his instruments. He is no longer focusing on the past in grief, eating his tears as his meal, but is now hearing the music of the Temple service that he is sure he will participate in once again.

The Progression

The three sections of this work progress from a state of despair and grief, where the psalmist feels very far from God (section I), to a state of complaint and anger (section II), and ultimately to a state of hope and joy as the psalmist imagines his future salvation. The three sections also have the psalmist focusing on different time frames. The focus on past glory causes him to grieve. The focus on his present situation angers him. The focus on his future vindication and return to the Temple fills him with joy and closeness to God. The psalmist fulfilled his initial desperate yearning for God at the outset by changing his focus. True, he is not able to be in the Temple, but God is with him. The verse before the last refrain poignantly illustrates the closeness that he feels.

> God, my delight, my joy; That I may praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

Psalm 42-43 and Sukkot

Sukkot was the most joyous of the pilgrimage festivals. In the Second Temple times the joy was such that the Mishnah says that any one who has not seen the joy of the water drawing on Sukkot has never seen rejoicing in his life. The psalmist at the end, although he is far from the Temple, imagines himself serving there in joy. Using this psalm liturgically allows for a similar imagination and hope.

[Other connections to Sukkot and to *simhat bet hashoeba* (the joy of the water drawing) are made by the Midrash Pesiqta rabbati. That Midrash connects the phrase "I come to appear before God" to the *simhat bet hashoeba* (the phrase definitely echoes the command of pilgrimage found in the Torah). Also the word "throng" (basach) in 42:5, is explained by the Midrash as having to do with the "sekhakh" the thatch covering of the booth, the sukkah.]

Endnotes

* In the liturgical tradition that is associated with the GR"A (R. Eliyahu of Vilna) these psalms are recited on the second day of Sukkot (in the diaspora only).

** There are 11 psalms that begin with an attribution to Qorah. They come in two groups. The first group is Psalms 42-49 (except psalm 43, which does not have an attribution at its beginning) and the second is Psalms 84-88 (except psalm 86, which begins with "A prayer by David").

***Thanks to Ronnie Benun, Joey Namer and Elliot Laniado for their help in learning these psalms.

Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

Tanakh is intended to shape and guide our lives. Therefore, seeking out *peshat*—the primary intent of the authors of Tanakh—is a religious imperative and must be handled with great care and responsibility.

Hazal recognized two major hazards inherent to learning. First, nobody can truly be objective, and some have agendas foreign to our sacred texts. Take the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man" in the creation narrative (Bereshith 1:26):

> R. Shemuel b. Nahman said in R. Yehonatan's name: When Moshe was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let Us make man," etc., he said: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics' (for maintaining a plurality of gods)? 'Write,' replied He; 'And whoever wishes to err will err' (*Bereshith Rabbah* 8:8).[1]

In this extreme example, some derived support for their theology of multiple gods from the Torah! This Midrash places a premium on the integrity of the Torah. God would not compromise Truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that people can find pretty much anything to support their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

[1] Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah (with minor modifications) from Soncino.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of God:

> It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, 'Translate for me the Torah of Moshe your master.' God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, God created in the beginning, I shall make man in image and likeness… (*Megillah* 9a).

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the "plural" form of "Let Us make man." For this anticipated audience, God inspired the elders to deviate from Truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

While this educational discussion is central to all Tanakh, Kohelet probably raised more concern by *Hazal* and later commentators than any other Book. With its inclusion in Tanakh, whatever Kohelet says is Truth in our tradition. Some will draw the conclusions they want to draw; Tanakh cannot worry about those who wish to err. However, even the most sincerely religious people may draw conclusions antithetical to the Torah. *Hazal* worried that Kohelet might cause greater religious harm than good, and consequently considered censoring it from Tanakh:

> R. Yehudah son of R. Shemuel b. Shilat said in Rav's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Kohelet, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching… (*Shabbat* 30b).

Hazal discerned *internal* contradictions in Kohelet, but they also worried that Kohelet contained *external* contradictions, i.e., verses that appear to contradict the values of the Torah. They addressed this alarming prospect by concluding that since Kohelet begins and ends with religiously appropriate teachings, those verses set the tone for the remainder of its contents. If one reaches anti-Torah conclusions from Kohelet, it means that something was read out of context. A striking illustration of this principle is a midrashic teaching on Kohelet 11:9. The verse reads:

> O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things (11:9).[2]

To which *Hazal* respond:

> R. Binyamin b. Levi stated: The Sages wanted to hide the Book of Kohelet, for they found in it ideas that leaned towards heresy. They argued: Was it right that Shelomo should have said the following: O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth (Kohelet 11:9)? Moshe said, So that you do not follow your heart and eyes (Bemidbar 15:39), but Shelomo said, Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes (Kohelet 11:9)! What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said, But know well that God will call you to account for all such things (Kohelet 11:9) they admitted that Shelomo had spoken well (*Vayikra Rabbah* 28:1; cf. *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:3).

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[2] Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

Were *Hazal* genuinely worried about people not reading the second half of a verse and consequently adopting a hedonistic lifestyle? Based on the midrashic method of reading verses out of their natural context, this verse likely posed a more serious threat than it would be for a *pashtan* who reads verses in context. The best defense against such egregious errors always is good *peshat*. In this essay, we will briefly consider the challenges of learning *peshat* in Kohelet, and then outline a means of approaching Kohelet as the unique Book it is.[3]

Methodological Considerations

At the level of *derash*, many of *Hazal*'s comments on Kohelet appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. Such Midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Kohelet to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to *peshat*, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual-responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational

[3] For this essay, I have consulted the classical commentators: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Seforno in *Mikra'ot Gedolot*; *The commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth*, edited and translated by Sara Japhet & Robert B. Salters (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985); Mordechai Zer-Kavod (*Da'at Mikra: Hamesh Megillot* [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973]). Contemporary academic works include: Gavriel H. Cohn, *Studies in the Five Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 221-281; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans, 1999); Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Kohelet appears to threaten traditional values.[4]

For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success, i.e., wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising; but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning:

> For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache (1:18).

Sforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the *parshan* himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is *peshat*, i.e., does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the talmudic passage cited above.[5]

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[4] For a survey and analysis of some of the distinctions between the readings of Rashi and Rashbam on Kohelet, see Robert B. Salters, "The Exegesis of Rashi and Rashbam on Qoheleth," in Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age, Dahan, Nahon, Nicolas (eds.) (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), pp. 151-161.

[5] For a discussion of the interplay between text and commentary regarding the faith of Avraham Avinu, see my article, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: the Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, Jeffrey Saks & Susan Handelman (eds.), (Jerusalem, Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 192-212. Reprinted with minor modifications in my book, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127-154.

Some commentators attempt to resolve certain internal and external contradictions in Kohelet by attributing otherwise troubling (to these commentators) statements to other people—generally evil people or fools. Take, for example, one of Kohelet's most life-affirming declarations:

> Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun (9:7-9).

Ibn Ezra—the quintessential *pashtan*—writes, "This is the folly that people say in their hearts." Thus, Ibn Ezra maintains that Kohelet's own view is the opposite of what this passage says.[6] However, such attempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.

Commentators also devote much energy to reconciling the internal contradictions of Kohelet. See, for example, the lengthy discussions of Ibn Ezra (on 7:3) and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (introduction in *Da'at Mikra*, pp. 24-33). Some reconciliations are more textually convincing than others. Regardless, it is critical to ask *why* there are so many

[6] Precisely because he is so committed to *peshat*, Ibn Ezra occasionally resorts to this method of attribution of difficult (to Ibn Ezra) verses to other speakers instead of radically reinterpreting those verses. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Habakkuk 1:1, 12; Tehillim 89:1; Kohelet 3:19. It should be noted that Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative interpretation in Kohelet for these verses.

contradictions in the first place.[7] That so many strategies were employed to bring Kohelet in line with the rest of Tanakh and with itself amply demonstrates that this Megillah is unusual. Kohelet needs to be understood on its own terms rather than being reinterpreted away. *Pashtanim* also developed a methodology for confronting Kohelet's challenges directly, to be discussed presently.[8]

Attempting a Peshat Reading: Guidelines

In order to approach Kohelet, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. First, Kohelet is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression "*tahat ha-shemesh*" (beneath the sun) appears 29 times in Kohelet, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha-shamayim* (under heaven), appears three times. Rashi and Rashbam maintain that this expression is synonymous with *tahat ha-shemesh,* which would total 32 appearances. People are even called "*ro'ei ha-shemesh*" (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. Similarly, the word "*ani*" (I) appears 29 times, and its appearance is not even grammatically necessary.

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[7] Ibn Ezra and those who followed his approach assumed that intelligent people do not contradict themselves: "It is known that even the least of the sages would not compose a book and contradict himself" (Ibn Ezra on Kohelet 7:3). However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik considered this perspective Aristotelian. Jewish thought, in contrast, accepts dialectical understandings of humanity and halakhah (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, Eli D. Clark et al [eds.] [Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2007], p. 29). Cf. Michael V. Fox (*A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up*, p. 134): "Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them."

[8] See further discussions in Gavriel H. Cohn, *Studies in the Five Megillot*, pp. 253-258; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up*, pp. 1-26.

The this-worldly perspective is heightened by the personal style of Kohelet's presentation. Michael V. Fox notes the difference between how 1:12-14 is written:

> I, Kohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind.

And he then contrasts these verses to how they could have been written:

> Studying and probing with wisdom all that happens under the sun is an unhappy business, which God gave men to be concerned with! All the happenings beneath the sun are futile and pursuit of wind.

In the latter hypothetical series of dogmatic pronouncements, we lose the personal reflections that are central to Kohelet's thought. Kohelet's presentation allows readers into his mind as he goes through this personal struggle and process of reflection.[9]

Given this starkly anthropocentric perspective, Kohelet *should* reflect different perspectives from the theocentric viewpoint of revealed prophecy. In fact, *we* perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. Based on this observation, R. Shimon ben Manasia maintained that Kohelet was not inspired altogether:

> R. Shimon ben Manasia says: Shir HaShirim defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Kohelet does not defile the hands

[9] Michael V. Fox, The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes, introduction, p. xvii.

> because it is only Shelomo's wisdom (*Tosefta Yadayim* 2:14).[10]

Though his minority view was rejected by our tradition (which insists that Kohelet is divinely inspired), R. Shimon ben Manasia's understanding of Kohelet as written from the perspective of human wisdom is accurate.[11]

The word "*adam*" appears 49 times in Kohelet, referring to all humanity except for one instance in 7:28 which refers specifically to males. Kohelet speaks in a universal language and does not limit its discourse to a Jewish audience. Torah and other specifically Jewish themes do not appear in Kohelet, which focuses on more universal *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *yirat Elokim* (fear of God).

Similarly, God's personal name—the Tetragrammaton—never appears in Kohelet. Only the generic name *Elokim* appears (40 times), signifying both the universalistic discourse of Kohelet and also a distant, transcendant Deity, rather than a close and personal relationship with God. In Kohelet, God appears remote, and it is impossible to fathom His means of governing the world. For example, Kohelet warns:

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[10] See discussions of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Siz Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 104-120; Michael J. Broyde, "Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs," *Judaism* 44 (1995), pp. 65-79.

[11] Bet Shammai opposed the sanctity of Kohelet and ruled that it does not ritually defile the hands, whereas Bet Hillel supported the sanctity of Kohelet and ruled that it does ritually defile the hands (see Mishnah *Eduyot* 5:3; Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5). Given our ruling in favor of Bet Hillel as a result of their being more humanly sensitive in halakhah, their insistence on the inclusion of Kohelet in Tanakh appears to fit their worldview in the realm of religious thought.

> Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few (5:1).

Since God is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose (and much harm) in protesting against God (cf. 7:13-14). Contrast this approach with the venerable history of prophetic protests, beginning with Abraham and Moshe, and proceeding through the entire Tanakh! Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks about God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience.

Tying together these strands of evidence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) attempts to explain why Kohelet is read (primarily by Ashkenazim[12]) on Sukkot:

> It is written in Zechariah 14 that in the future the nations of the world will come [to Jerusalem] on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot to bring offerings…And this was the custom in King Shelomo's time. This is why Shelomo recited Kohelet on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot in the presence of the wise of the nations…This is why it contains only the name *Elokim*, since [non-Jews] know only that Name of God… (*Harhev Davar* on Bemidbar 29:12).

Needless to say, this means of justifying a *minhag* is anachronistic from a historical vantage point. Nonetheless, Netziv's keen perception of Kohelet's addressing all humanity with universal religious wisdom captures the unique flavor of this book. All religious people—not only Jews—struggle along with Kohelet.

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[12] In Tractate *Soferim* chapter 14, the practice is not mentioned when the other Megillot are. The first references to the custom of reading Kohelet on Sukkot are in the prayer books of Rashi and *Mahzor Vitry* (11th century).

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Kohelet's contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted human condition. Significantly, Kohelet's inclusion in Tanakh elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious Truth.

While Kohelet is the Truth, and nothing but the Truth; it is but one aspect of Truth, rather than the whole Truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality:

> I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun (4:1-3).

Kohelet never calls on God to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop this oppression. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in chapter 1 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra, Zer-Kavod).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. Prophecy insists that all of human history is a line (and not a cycle) from the Garden of Eden to the messianic era, and we should be doing everything in our power to move that process along. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history, prophecy persistently reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

Kohelet grapples with the realities that wise/righteous people do not necessarily live longer or better lives than the foolish/wicked; and that wisdom itself is limited and fallible:

> Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration…For I have set my mind to learn wisdom and to observe the business that goes on in the world—even to the extent of going without sleep day and night—and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them (8:14-17).

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: God is just, but there are injustices. While Kohelet cannot answer this dilemma,[13] he discovers a favorable response absent a solution. Once we can accept that the world appears unfair, we should realize that everything is a gift from God, rather than a necessary consequence for our righteousness (Ramban quoted in Zer-Kavod on 9:11; cf. Rashbam on 3:12-13).[14] We ultimately cannot fathom how God governs this world; but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly,[15] even though wisdom is limited and the wise cannot guarantee themselves a better life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.[16]

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[13] The Talmud (*Berakhot* 7a) debates whether Moshe Rabbenu was able to fathom this contradiction at the level of revealed prophecy.
[14] Cf. e.g., Kohelet 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9.
[15] Cf. e.g., Kohelet 7:12, 19; 8:1; 9:18; 10:10; 12:9.
[16] Cf. e.g., Kohelet 1:18; 2:13-15; 6:8; 7:15-16, 23; 8:17; 9:1, 11, 16.

On a deeper level, Mordechai Zer-Kavod (on 3:14) observes that the human psyche is profoundly attracted to being godlike. This tendency lies at the heart of the sins of Eve (Bereshit 3:5, 22) and the builders of the Tower of Bavel (Bereshit 11:1-9).[17] Kohelet blames God for creating us with this desire while limiting us, rendering this innate drive impossible (7:14; cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra on 1:13). Confrontation with our own limitations leads to the extreme frustration manifest in Kohelet. However, once we can accept that we really cannot be God, this realization should lead to humility and awe of God:

> I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore: Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him (Kohelet 3:14).[18]

Michael V. Fox summarizes Kohelet's purpose as follows:

> When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of the matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason.[19]

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[17] Coming full circle with the introduction of this essay, one contemporary scholar proposes that the "plural" form of God that appears three times in Bereshith expresses the rhetorical purpose to create boundaries between God and humanity. The first ("Let Us make man") distinguishes between God and the godlike human; the other two are when the boundaries threatened by Eve and then the builders of the Tower of Bavel. See Lyle Eslinger, "The Enigmatic Plurals Like 'One of Us' (Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7) in Hyperchronic Perspective," *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 171-184.

[18] Cf. e.g., Kohelet 5:6; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13.

[19] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up*, p. 49.

While Kohelet challenges us at every turn, he simultaneously provides us the opportunity to find meaning beneath the unsolvable dilemmas. This approach is the hallmark of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's approach to evil. It is impossible for human wisdom to fathom evil. However, the Torah calls upon us to respond actively to crisis in an ethical-halakhic way, rather than a speculative-metaphysical way. When people ask "why did God do this to me," they are left miserable and frustrated with a passive fate. When people ask "how shall I respond to this crisis," they transform into people of destiny.[20]

Similarly, the universality of death tortures Kohelet. Once Kohelet accepts death, however, he concludes that it is preferable to attend funerals rather than parties, since focus on our mortality will encourage us to live a more meaningful life:

> It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart (7:2, cf. Rashbam).

In the words of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

> The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[21]

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[20] See *Fate and Destiny: From the Holocaust to the State of Israel* (lecture given originally in 1956 at Yeshiva University entitled "*Kol Dodi Dofek*," translated by Lawrence Kaplan) (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1992, 2000), pp. 1-11.

[21] *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, p. 33.

Certain paradoxes and limitations are inherent to human existence, and not even the wisest of all men can make them disappear. Instead, Kohelet teaches us how to honestly confront these challenges and then embark on a process of intense existential frustration that ultimately leads to a greater recognition of the infinite gap between ourselves and God, leading in turn to humility and fear of God, leading in turn to living more religiously in every sense.

Conclusion

> A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims (12:9).

Kohelet relentlessly challenges received wisdom rather than blindly accepting it. This process is accompanied by formidable dangers and responsibilities; but ignoring that pursuit comes with even greater dangers. Kohelet never abandons his beliefs nor his normative sense of what all God fearing people should do; yet he also never abandons nor solves his questions and struggles with human existence. By presenting this process through a personal account with inspired wisdom, he becomes the teacher of every thinking religious individual.

One Midrash suggests that Shelomo made the Torah accessible in a manner than nobody had done since the Torah was revealed. He taught those who are not prophets how to develop a relationship with God:

> He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (*oznayim*) to the Torah…R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So until

> Shelomo arose no one could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Shelomo arose, all began to comprehend the Torah (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:8).

Ultimately, Tanakh needed Kohelet to represent the human perspective; and it needed prophecy so that we could transcend ourselves and our limited perspectives to aspire to a more perfected self and world—and to reach out across the infinite gulf to God. Kohelet teaches us how to have faith from the human perspective, so that we may grow in our Fear of Heaven and observe God's mitzvot in truth.

Zecharia 14 and the Significance of Sukkot

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

The end of Zecharia 14, the chapter chosen as the haftarah for the first day of Sukkot (Megillah 31a), describes the universal obligation to worship God on Sukkot. This obligation is connected with the universal need for rain.

> All who survive of those nations that came up against Jerusalem shall make a pilgrimage year by year to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts and to observe the feast of booths. Any of the earth's communities that does not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts shall receive no rain.

The nations will come to the realization that God must be worshipped after the stunning military defeat that God will bring upon them. The miraculous military defeat will bring the nations to realize that everything in the world, including the life-giving rain, is dependent upon HASHEM's will. Although the prophet has made explicit certain ideas latent in the Pentateuch's description of Sukkot (that historical and natural events are caused by God), the novel idea of extending the obligation to worship HASHEM internationally is highly significant - then and now.

The two biblical obligations associated with the festival, that of dwelling in Sukkot and of taking the four species of vegetation, are intended to inculcate this same realization—that it is only God who provides protection and prosperity.

The Torah expresses the spiritual objective of dwelling in the Sukkot as follows:

> "You shall live in booths for seven days; all citizens in Israel should live in booths, in order that future

> generations may know that I made the Israelite people dwell in sukkot (booths) when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God." (Leviticus 23:42-43)

But why is the fact that God had the Israelites dwell in booths so memorable? R. Eliezer (Sukkah 11b) believed that the Sukkot provided were made of clouds. Such an apparent manifestation of divine assistance would surely be memorable. Yet if R. `Aqiba is correct and the booths were not clouds, but were actual booths, what is so memorable?

The answer to this question is bound up with the season when Sukkot is celebrated – fall. At this time of year, after completion of all the harvests, it is most spiritually necessary to dwell in Sukkot. As Hirsch explains:

> Sukkot is the time when the year's harvest is almost completed and your granary and house are full. No longer do you turn your eyes anxiously to heaven for a blessing, for you have already gathered in your blessing, and, relying upon what you have stored, you face the winter with equanimity. . . . Leave your sound and solid house; dwell under the sparse ceiling of foliage, and learn its lesson: HaShem, your God, caused your ancestors to dwell in booths for forty years, when He led them out of Egypt; and He sustained them in their booths and so revealed Himself as the Divine providence Who sustains all… It is through His loving kindness alone that you have not only obtained your possessions but are enabled to keep them. (Horeb p. 125)

One might be tempted to have an attitude of self-sufficiency independent of God, because of the harvest. Dwelling in booths teaches awareness that only God sustains (even

though you did the labor). Dwelling in booths teaches us not to take nature for granted but to recognize the providential, and, even miraculous goings on in nature.

We can now consider the issue of the wilderness booth's composition. According to R. `Aqiba, even if the booths were actual booths it is still memorable, because even the natural is miraculous. God provided the Israelites with the materials to build booths to protect themselves, and that is worthy of grateful memory, even if the booth was not of clouds. Whether booths or clouds, it makes little difference. Whereas clouds might be the more apparent miracle, the technical (and aesthetic) ability of man in constructing his shelter is as great an attestation of the divine.

The taking of the four species is also connected with the theme of recognizing the providential hand in "nature." According to R. Eliezer the four species come to "appease [God] concerning water, just as these species cannot exist without water, so the world cannot exist without water" (Ta'anit 2b).

[The second temple pharisaic practice of the water libation was also connected specifically with the blessing of rains. As the Tosefta writes:

> …bring the water libation of the "hag" (pilgrimage festival) in order that the rain water will be blessed. It is said: Any of the earth's communities that does not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts shall receive no rain....(Tosefta Sukka end of chapter 3).]

The realization that God controls nature is implicit in the prayer to Him concerning the rain. That realization is also part of the message of Zecharia 14.

Zecharia 14 begins with the defeat of Israel in Jerusalem. The nations will be gathered to Jerusalem by God. Jerusalem's defeat might initially be understood by the nations as based on their own military strength. However, the prophet informs us that it will be God who gathers them to battle Jerusalem. His purpose is to catch them "red-handed" in order to punish them more (R. Yosef Qara, 11th century).

When the city is roundly defeated and half its inhabitants exiled, God will appear as a warrior and defeat the enemies of Jerusalem. It is the military victory along with (or caused by) the "natural" cataclysms that will bring about the realization amongst the nations that,

> ". . . Hashem shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one HASHEM with one name. (14:9 NJPS)

The nations will be made aware of the divine hand in history. They will then learn to see HASHEM in the natural order like the rain. That is why they will be obligated to celebrate Sukkot, specifically. They will then be aware that all mankind must see their dependence upon HASHEM and worship Him. Even those that don't need rain, like Egypt, will be obligated to serve HASHEM, because He controls all nature (even the Nile flood).

The message of Sukkot, to be acknowledged by all man, is to see the divine in the commonplace; the gracious hand of God in the "natural"; the unbounded beneficence that God rains down to all mankind. In this nationalistic secular age, where the capabilities and knowledge of man have been expanded so greatly, but are being used in national contention, the universal spiritual message of Sukkot found in Zecharia 14 is as needed today as then.

Shemini Asseret – Simhat Torah

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

The Hebrew calendar is a direct product of the Torah, the Biblical directives, as to the precise month, days and agricultural seasons in which we celebrate the various festivals (Leviticus chapter 23). The climax of the Hebrew calendar is this seventh month, which opens with Rosh Hashanah and concludes with Shemini Atzeret – Simchat Torah. And if the Hebrew year begins with the creation of the Jewish nation on Pesach, the festival of the first month of the Jewish calendar, and continues on to the Revelation of the Jewish religion on Shavuot, the festival of the third month of the Jewish calendar, then it must reach its apogee with the perfection of the world and its redemption as expressed by Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret on the seventh month of Tishrei.

Rosh Hashanah is the day of the coronation of G-d as King of the entire world, accepted by all as the G-d who wants life, love and peace. Yom Kippur is the Day of Forgiveness – personal, national and universal repentance that extends even to Nineveh, Assyria, archenemy of Israel, as testified to by the Book of Jonah, which is read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Sukkot, replete with the rich fragrance of the four species of fruit and vegetation identified with the Land of Israel, heralds the return of the people of Israel to the Land of Israel, certainly the beginning of the sprouting of world freedom and redemption. After all, it is only from the backdrop of our own land and State, it is only when we are free of subjugation by any host government and must deal with the very real and complex issues of peace and war, economic and social disparities within our citizenry, medical advancement and ethics, scientific, business and cultural development, that we will truly be in a position to influence the other nation-states towards a non-terrorist,

democratic government and a moral way of life based upon the seven Noahide laws of conduct. And indeed, we are Biblically ordained to bring a total of seventy bullocks as offerings to the Holy Temple on Sukkot, symbolizing our concern for and commitment to the proverbial seventy nations of the world.

But within this context and line-up, Shemini Atzeret seems to be an anomaly, a misfit. The only "commandment of the day" is our mention of rain for the first time after the hot, dry spring and summer months, the declaration by the Cantor of special praise to the Almighty "who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain." The first Mishnah in the Talmudic Tractate Ta`anit ordains that we begin reciting this statement of praise from the additional Amidah on Shemini Atzeret until Passover, some seven months later – and it is added to the second blessing of the Amidah, in which we praise G-d for "quickening the dead." What does rain have to do with redemption, and what has rain to do with causing the dead to rise to life? And then, in later Gaonic times (from the eighth to tenth centuries), the custom was established to celebrate our yearly reading of the entire five Books of the Bible on Shemini Atzeret (or on the day after, in the diaspora) – since we start reading from the beginning of the Torah once again on the Sabbath following Shemini Atzeret. But what does rain or even rejoicing by dancing with Torah Scrolls, have to do with redemption, the apparent theme of the Tishrei festivals? Doesn't Simchat Torah seem to be a mere "tack-on", a ploy to give Shemini Atzeret some content and significance in addition to our declaration of rain? Indeed, Shemini Atzeret seems to be more anti-climactic than climactic, more perplexing than promising.

In order to understand the message of Shemini Atzeret, it is important that we analyze the symbolism of water as it

appears throughout the festivals of Tishrei. The Code of Jewish Law mandates that we immerse ourselves in mikveh water on the day before Rosh Hashanah and that we go to a river on the first day of Rosh Hashanah in order to cast away our sins; we also go to the mikveh right before Yom Kippur (Orah Haim, 581:4 and 583). Water is the symbol par excellence of birth – or rebirth – since all of life originally emerged from water ("And the spirit of the Lord hovered over the face of the waters" Genesis 1:2) and no form of life as we know it can exist without water. The embryo is surrounded by water, and the sign of birth is the "breaking of the water," in the modern parlance. Hence conversion as well as repentance require ritual immersion – an active plunge on the part of the participant to recreate him/her self.

But sometimes it becomes inordinately different for an individual to truly transform himself, to change his fundamental personality. Sometimes an individual is so removed from G-d – and even from life, if he has been intimately touched by death – that he requires the special grace and love of a beneficent G-d to change him, to save him/her from his/her stubborn nature, to rescue him/her from the abyss of death. Torah law ordains that if one becomes defiled by contact with death, the Kohen-priest, acting as G-d's special agent, sprinkles the special waters of the ashes of the red heifer and the individual becomes purified. In this act of purification it is G-d who is the active purifier, it is G-d who is the active healer.

On the Day of Atonement, it is this second aspect of purification which is emphasized. We read again and again the words of the prophet Ezekiel, who tells us how in order to bring about the ultimate redemption – the Almighty Himself "will sprinkle upon you the waters of purification and they shall be purified." (Ezekiel 36:25) Throughout the

festival of Sukkot we continue to invoke the symbol of water with the *arava* (or willow-plant) – which can only grow around riverbeds or areas of plentiful water – that becomes a veritable expression of our prayer, and with water – in addition to the usual wine libation – which is offered in the Holy Temple. "And you shall draw forth water with joy from the waters of salvation" is the great song of Sukkot celebration.

Shemini Atzeret is the culmination of these prayers. The imagery of G-d's rain descending upon us from the heavens is reminiscent of Ezekiel's prophecy of the Divine actually sprinkling us with the water of purification and salvation. In a world threatened by homicidal terrorism and nuclear destruction, such a redemption is tantamount to "quickening the dead," offering us newfound life. And the salvation can only come when we remove the Torah from the Scrolls, teach the lessons of a G-d of justice, compassion and peace to the entire world, and the nations of the world "turn their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning-hooks," and "the world becomes filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the seas." It is through G-d's loving and purifying waters that ultimate peace and salvation will come to Israel and the world. This is the vision and the hope of Shemini Atzeret – Simchat Torah.

Shemini Asseret in the Torah

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

The first thing to realize is that there is no festival named "Shemini `Asseret," in the Tenakh. The festival that occurs on the day following the seventh day of "hag hassukkot" (Lit. The pilgrimage festival of Booths) is not named in the two places that the Torah speaks about it. It is referred to as an "`asseret," which is not really a name but a generic description of a kind of day (see below for more on the meaning of "`asseret").

The festival that immediately follows the sukkot festival is referred to in the talmudic tradition as "yom tob aharon shel hag" (the concluding holiday of the festival) or "shemini shel hag" (the eight day of the festival) all this while asserting that "shemini, regel bifne `assmo hu" ("the eighth day as a pilgrimage festival unto itself"). The reference to the festival in the liturgy varies. The Sephardic tradition refers to the day as "yom shemini hag `asseret". The Ashkenazic tradition refers to the day as "yom hashemini hag ha`asseret" (*see note for translations). There is another tradition (nusach sfard) that refers to the day as, "shemini `asseret hehag" (the eighth day, the solemn gathering of the festival).

In short, "shemini `asseret" as the name of the festival that immediately follows sukkot is a very late development. The name, however, does come from the tenakh, even though it is not used as a name of the festival. We will now examine the verses where the festival is mentioned.

The "Festival Following Sukkot" in the Torah

Although there are five places in the Torah that refer to the festivals, only two of them are "complete," Leviticus 23 and

Numbers 28-29 (the other places, Exodus 23:14-17; Exodus 34:18-24 and Deuteronomy 16:1-18, lack "shemini `asseret" as well as yom kippur and what we call "rosh hashanah" **).

At the end of a list of the "appointed times of Hashem, which you are to proclaim to them (as) proclamations of holiness" (mo`ade adonai asher tiqre'u otam miqra'e qodesh"), Leviticus 23 writes:

> The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of
> Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day after this seventh New-Moon: the pilgrimage festival of Huts (hag hasukkot), for seven days, to Hashem. On the first day (is) a proclamation of holiness, any kind of servile work you are not to do. For seven days you are to bring-near a fire-offering to Hashem; on the eighth day, a proclamation of holiness shall there be for you, you are to bring-near a fire-offering to Hashem—it is (a day of) Restraint (`asseret hee)—any kind of servile work you are not to do. (Leviticus 23:33-36; SB)

The festival is characterized by a separate "fire-offering" and by a prohibition of doing "servile work". It is referred to as the eighth day following sukkot but is clearly not part of the sukkot festival, which lasts only seven days.***

Numbers chapters 28 and 29 is concerned with the details of the sacrificial offerings on every day of the year. It begins with the daily sacrificial offering, continues with the offering to be brought on shabbat and the New Moon and then describes the offerings to be brought on each of the festivals. The list ends with the festival on the "fifteenth day of the seventh month" (sukkot), describing the offerings to be made on each of the seven days of the festival, as each day has a different number of animals offered. From the

second day on, each of the days is introduces with "Now on the second (third, fourth, fifth, etc.) day.." The description of the eighth day is:

> On the eighth day (shemini): Restraint (`asseret) there is to be for you, any-kind of servile work you are not to do! You are to bring-near an offering-up, a fire-offering of soothing savor for Hashem: one bull, one ram, lambs a year in age seven, wholly-sound, their grain-gift as well as their poured-offerings, for (each) bull, for (each) ram, and for the lambs, by their number, according to the regulation, and one hairy-one as a hattat-offering, aside from the regular offering-up, its grain-gift and its poured offering. (Numbers 29:35-38; SB)

Although this day is called the "eighth day" here, it is also distinguished from the preceding days. Not only by the fact that the introduction to the day begins with the words "on the eighth day" ("bayom hashemini") as opposed to "Now on the second (third, fourth) day" ("ubayom hasheni"), but by the break in the downward progression of the bulls offered on each of the days of sukkot. On the first day there were to be 13 bulls offered. On each subsequent day one less bull was offered so that on the seventh day there were 7 bulls offered. On the eighth day there was only one bull offered. This break in the progression along with the designation "`asseret" indicates that the festival is not connected to the seven day sukkot festival (the holiday is listed as a seven-day festival in Numbers 29:12).

Incidently, it is from this Torah portion that the contemporary name of the festival derives. Ignoring the punctuation of the verse (which derives from the meaning), the words "shemini" and "`asseret" are adjacent to one another.

The Day Following Sukkot in Tenakh

There are three other places in Tenakh that refer to this day. Two of the sources give differing traditions concerning the same event, the inauguration festival of Solomon's temple. At the conclusion of the inauguration festival the book of kings relates:

> So Solomon and all Israel with him–a great assemblage, [coming] from Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt–observed the feast at that time before Hashem our God, seven days and again seven days, fourteen days in all. On the eighth day he let the people go. They bade the king good-bye and went to their homes, joyful and glad of heart over all the goodness that Hashem had shown to His servant David and His people Israel. (1 Kings 8:65; NJPS)

Although the timing of the two seven-day periods is not very clear, most of the commentators take them as referring to a seven-day inauguration festival that immediately preceded sukkot and seven days of sukkot. Understanding the verse this way means that the people did not fast on Yom Kippur (as Rashi points out) and that they were sent home on the day following sukkot, "Shemini `Asseret." ***

The account in 2 Chronicles is clearer:

> At that time Solomon kept the Feast for seven days – all Israel with him – a great assemblage from Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt. On the eighth day they held a solemn gathering (`asseret). They observed the dedication of the altar seven days, and the Feast seven days. On the twenty-third day of the seventh month he dismissed the people to their homes, rejoicing and in good spirits over the goodness that the Hashem had shown to David and Solomon and His people Israel. (2 Chronicles 7:8-9;NJPS)

Although the account does specify when the two festivals were celebrated, it also differs with regards to the "solemn gathering" celebrated on the eighth day. It is as if this account is "correcting" the earlier 1 Kings account to bring it in line with the practice known to its author.

The third place where the festival on the eighth day is mentioned is in the book of Nehemiah. That source describes the celebration of the holiday of Sukkot that was done by those that returned to Zion in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra the Scribe.

> The whole community that returned from captivity made booths and dwelt in the booths – the israelites did not do so from the days of Joshua son of Nun to that day – and there was a very great rejoicing. He [Ezra] read from the scroll of the Teaching of God each day, from the first to the last day. They celebrated the festival seven days, and there was a solemn gathering on the eighth, as prescribed. (Nehemiah 8:17-18; NJPS)

Meaning of "`Asseret" in the Tenakh

The word that is consistently associated with this festival is the word " `asseret." The word means gathering (Jer. 9:1), specifically for the sake of prayer or sacrifice (2 Kings 10:20; Amos 5:21). Sometimes the gathering was for the sake of fasting as in Joel 1:14, 2:15), "Solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly (`assarah)." The prohibition of doing work on the `asseret is found in Deuteronomy 16:8 where the seventh day of Pesah is called an `asseret. The attribute of prohibition of work is also found concerning the day following sukkot. The day following sukkot is the one that most often is associated with the word "`asseret" in the Tenakh.

Significance of the Festival

The portions of the Torah that speak about this festival are silent as to its meaning. This silence has led to various rabbinic attempts to derive the festival's meaning from the meaning of the word " `asseret," from scriptural hints and from the seasonal needs. The following passages from Pesikta Derab Kahana reflect the kinds of derivations that are commonly made in the rabbinic literature and classical commentators.

> Why were they restrained ("ne`essru" similar to the Hebrew word "`asseret" –RT) for another day? To what can this be likened? To a king who had a festive day. His laborers and his children came to honor him. The matron told them since the king is happy make sure to ask for your needs. Since they did not understand she forced them to stay another day so that they can ask their needs from the king. This is the way the Torah hints to the children to ask for their needs. (by spelling the Hebrew word for water, mayim, through the minor variations in the list of sacrifices offered on sukkot. –RT) Since they did not understand she restrained them another day –that is the eighth day.
>
> "You shall present a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to Hashem; one bull, one ram, ..."—R. Pinhas son of Hama said: The seventy bulls that Israel would offer on the festival were for the seventy nations of the world that they should sit in serenity. (The sum of the bulls offered on the sukkot festival is seventy--the same number as the "nations of the world" as seen from the list of Noah's descendants in Genesis chapter 10. –RT) The Holy one said: My children all the days of the festival you were busy

with the guests lets me and you have one meal together, that "is one bull, one ram."

The present-day celebration of Shemini `Asseret includes a prayer for abundant rains, as this is the festival immediately preceding the beginning of the rainy season in Israel. (In addition, in Israel, Shemini `asseret, doubles as the day when the cycle of the annual Torah reading is completed, Simhat Torah.)

Endnotes

*The translation of the phrase "beyyom shemini hag asseret hazzeh" that occurs in the Sephardic liturgy is somewhat ambiguous. One possible translation is, "the eighth day of the festival, a solemn gathering." This translation reflects the attested rabbinic usage of shemini shel hag (or treating it as a kind of semichut, shemini hag). The punctuation of the phrase according to this translation would be shemini hag, `asseret. An alternative translation, "eighth day, a festival of solemn gathering," (punctuating, "beyom shemini, hag `asseret hazzeh"), refers to the day as "a festival of solemn gathering," a name that does not appear in the rabbinic writings regarding this day. This is the meaning of the festival's name in the more common Ashkenazic tradition (the addition of the definite articles resolves the ambiguity).

** Deuteronomy 16 does in fact have an "`asseret," but it is the seventh day of "pesah," and not the eighth day of sukkot. Although, all of these three Torah portions refer to pesah (or "hag hammassot"--"feast of the unleavened bread") as lasting seven days, only Deuteronomy 16 refers to Sukkot as lasting seven days. As stated above, there is no reference to the eighth day in Deuteronomy 16.

***The fact that the day is referred to as the "eighth day" should not cause us to think of it as necessarily connected to

the hag in any other way than numerically. For example, Leviticus 8:33-36 prescribes a period of seven days of their inauguration into the mishkan service. It is followed by an "eighth day" which is of a clearly different character.

****Traditional commentaries attempting to reconcile Shelomo's practice with Jewish practice explain that prophets in Shelomo's time made an emergency ruling to allow them to eat and celebrate on the "Day of Atonement." They also explain that Shelomo took his leave of them on the eighth day but that they did not actually leave until after the eighth day.

Moses: Man of God

Nehama Leibowitz

This article was on pages 71 to 76 in the Sukkot Reader

Reflections on Deuteronomy 33[1]

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

1. Context

The Rashbam explains the "*vav*" that begins "*Vezot Haberakha*" as linking this chapter (Deut. 33) to the previous one, complementing the chastisements foreseen in the *Shira* with blessings for the future, as if to say, "Moshe concluded transmitting *Ha'azinu* (see 31:30) and now the Blessing." The blessings – essentially prayers – invoke G-d's intervention to hopefully preclude national backsliding and the chastisements they would trigger. In a literary dimension, namely, as concerns the effect the reading of the blessings have on the audience, they counteract the negative feelings that the preceding dire visions would have induced.

An alternative approach to the "*vav*" sees the first two words as responding to the hope the people surely had that Moshe would bestow a blessing upon the nation before his death in accordance with the then widespread practice of great leaders. The "*vav*" serves to render the phrase as, "And now, the [awaited] *berakha*."

Moshe is here termed "*Ish HaElokim*" ("man of G-d"), the only time he is so described in the Torah. This appellation – recalling his status as a prophet – suggests an extra measure of potency to his prayers.

G-d's command to Moshe to ascend Mount Nebo where he would pass away precedes the account of the blessings while the narrative of his compliance with that order succeeds it. Both passages are narrated with a degree of similar phraseology. This creates an envelope around the

[1] Excerpted from Rabbi Shamah's study on perashat Vezot Haberakha.

blessings and may have been intended to highlight the fact that they constitute Moshe's very last words that were recorded in the Torah. Perhaps he had delayed stating them until he received those final closing instructions. (This is contrary to the view of Ibn Ezra, who assumed the blessings were recited when he "went and spoke" to Israel (Deut. 31:1), but were presented in the written text afterwards, presumably to provide an optimistic conclusion to the Torah.)

2. Prologue and Epilogue

After an introductory third-person verse (33:1), the blessings begin with a four-verse prologue relevant to the nation as a whole followed by the blessings of the individual tribes. At their conclusion a four-verse epilogue that complements the prologue closes the overall passage. This poetic composition is difficult to explicate precisely due to its archaic terms, compact expressions and abstruse allusions. The prologue may perhaps be understood as follows.

Moshe begins with reference to Hashem's having come to the Israelites from His earthly "home base" in Sinai, ה' מִסִּינַי בָּא.* His purpose was to take the Israelites as His people and to establish a relationship with them, a matter Moshe will define toward the end of the prologue as installing Hashem as king over a righteous Israel. (It is to Sinai from whence He came that Hashem directed the Israelites shortly after the Exodus to formally establish His covenantal relationship with them. When He led them from that location to the Promised Land, He "moved" with them and Sinai's distinction became historical.) Since G-d is not to be thought of as restricted to just one mountain, the continuation of the verse depicts His coming to the

Israelites as also radiating forth from the neighboring regions all around, וְזָרַח מִשֵּׁעִיר לָמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מֵהַר פָּארָן וגו'.

The second verse of the prologue (אַף חבֵב עַמִּים) begins with acknowledgment of Hashem's love for the nation's tribes. (The plural עַמִּים appears to be an acceptable term for tribes within the nation similar to Gen. 28:3 and 48:4.) Hashem's love explains His election of Israel, similar to Moshe's earlier statement on the subject מֵאַהֲבַת ה' אֶתְכֶם (Deut. 7:8). The next clause asserts that "all His holy ones" are "in Your hands" (כָּל קְדֹשָׁיו בְּיָדֶךָ), meaning they are under His direct care, recalling Moshe's statement of כִּי עַם קָדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, also stated in the context of election (Deut. 7:6). The shift to second person in mid-verse may reflect the intimate bond being described. Further, "they are smitten at Your feet" (וְהֵם תֻּכּוּ לְרַגְלֶךָ), that is, they submit to following Him, and are committed to abide by His words (יִשָּׂא מִדַּבְּרֹתֶיךָ), characteristics that set the stage for the Lawgiving.

The following verse cites the Lawgiving: "The teaching Moshe transmitted to us is the heritage of *Qehillat Yaaqob*" (תּוֹרָה צִוָּה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה וכו'). This pronouncement was stated by the Israelites, a declaration of both their loyalty to the Teaching and their acknowledgement of its foundational nature to the nation, indeed, its being an essential aspect of national identity.

The final prologue verse then asserts – now that the bond between Hashem and Israel was established, with their acceptance of the Torah as their national heritage – that He became king of a righteous Israel (וַיְהִי בִישֻׁרוּן מֶלֶךְ). The nation is here termed "*Yeshurun*," a play on "*Yisra'el*," highlighting the stem יָשָׁר, "straight," the root of both terms. (When in *Parashat Ha'azinu* it states, וַיִּשְׁמַן יְשֻׁרוּן וַיִּבְעָט (32:15) it should be translated as "the nation that had been upright grew fat and rebelled.") The verse continues – and

closes the prologue – with the statement that the status of Hashem being king of Israel (with the Covenant understood to be established) was celebrated (or ratified) at a united national leadership assembly (בְּהִתְאַסֵּף רָאשֵׁי עָם יַחַד שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). The latter may refer to the original Covenant "cutting" or to the assembly they were then at (described in the immediately preceding chapters), at which they had just reaffirmed the Covenant.

The blessings of the individual tribes follow. Some see the flow from prologue to blessings proper as, "Hashem, You who came forth from Sinai, etc., etc., bless Reuben, etc." However, it appears that the prologue can stand as an independent unit linked to the epilogue.

The epilogue begins with a pronouncement directed to "*Yeshurun*," proclaiming the incomparability of G-d who "rides the heavens as your help, and in His majesty the skies" (v. 26). (Imagery depicting G-d traveling through the heavens is common in Tanakh such as in Psalms 68:5, 34-35 as well as in pre-Torah Near Eastern literature. In Tanakh, Cassuto points out, G-d's purpose is always to rescue His servants and punish the evildoers.)

In the next verse G-d is described as "*me`onah*," Israel's "safe haven" (an extension from the word's basic meaning of "a dwelling place") and as its support וּמִתַּחַת זְרֹעֹת עוֹלָם, "and from beneath are the everlasting arms," ever sustaining (v. 27a). In the continuation of the verse, Moshe foresees G-d "having driven out the enemy before you, having said 'Destroy'" (v. 27b), speaking of it as having already occurred. At that point, Israel is envisioned as dwelling securely (וַיִּשְׁכֹּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּטַח) in an agriculturally productive land "whose heavens drip dew" (v. 28). The epilogue closes with a declaration of how fortunate and unique Israel is to have such a relationship with Hashem,

"מִי כָמוֹךָ עַם נוֹשַׁע בַּה'" who is "your protecting Shield, your Sword triumphant" (v. 29, NJPS).

Besides poetic parallels throughout, the epilogue's opening and closing verses contain artistic motifs of correspondences: "there is none like G-d" (v. 26) is coupled with "fortunate are you, Israel, who is like you..." (v. 29); בְּעֶזְרֶךָ and וּבְגַאֲוָתוֹ (v. 26) reappear in another application in עֶזְרֶךָ and גַּאֲוָתֶךָ (v. 29).

The prologue and epilogue blend together; indeed, the latter can almost be read as a continuation of the former. Five words are common to both and they appear in two chiasmus formations. The prologue has "Hashem" (v. 2), "Ya`aqob" (v. 4) and "Yeshurun" (v. 5), while the epilogue has "Yeshurun" (v. 26), "Ya`aqob" (v. 28) and "Hashem" (v. 29). Also, in verse 5 the prologue has "`am" followed by "Yisrael" while the epilogue has those two words in the reverse order in verse 29.

The epilogue, which concludes the Torah except for the account of Moshe ascending Mount Nebo, has a parallel of sorts in Psalm 144. That 130-word composition concludes the Book of Psalms proper, succeeded only by the 80-verse unit of Psalms 145-150, which constitutes a type of coda. Both our epilogue and that psalm speak in a concluding manner about G-d supporting Israel in its battles and providing it material success and security. Both close with similar expressions about how fortunate Israel is to be in its relationship with Him: אַשְׁרֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וכו' here, and אַשְׁרֵי הָעָם שֶׁכָּכָה לּוֹ וכו' there.

3. Came From Sinai, Etc.

The prologue's first verse describes an aspect of Hashem's manifestation, often rendered in modern translations as:

"Hashem came from Sinai and shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran and approached from *Ribebot-Qodesh*, from His right (or south) אשׁדת לָמוֹ."

Many classical commentators – including Saadia, Rashi, Rashbam and Ramban – had a very different approach to this verse and interpreted it as referring to the Lawgiving at Mount Sinai. Ibn Ezra disagrees. The "*mem*" prefix of the various place-names meaning "from," continuous use of a verb denoting Hashem "came" or a similar notion, mention of the various locations in the areas near Sinai as well as the parsing of the prologue as a whole, provide strong general support to the view of Ibn Ezra and the modern translations on this matter.

Regarding the locations cited in the opening verse, Saadia views both Seir (as Mount Seir) and Mount Paran as referring to Mount Sinai, each to a different side of it. He postulates that mountains were named for adjacent territories, hence the Sinai, Seir and Paran territories are all projections out from a different side of the same mountain. (In *Olam Hatanakh* a view is expressed that they all refer to Sinai, positing that poetic license permits places to be called by nearby locations.) These seem to be strained interpretations.

Saadia takes *MeRibebot-Qodesh* as Israel's "holy myriads" to whom G-d brought the "אֵשׁ דָּת," the latter word meaning "law" or the Torah. (This latter interpretation follows the traditional "reading" of what is written אשׁדת as two words.) Onqelos translates *MeRibebot-Qodesh* as "the holy myriads" of angels [the Deity's heavenly entourage] that accompanied Him (see Zech. 14:5, Ps. 89:8) when He transmitted the *esh dat* to Israel. However, the "*mem*" prefix of "*MeRibebot*" renders "the holy myriads" translation problematic. As regards the word "*dat*," present-day

scholarship recognizes it as having entered Hebrew late, from the Persian (its only Tanakh attestations being in Esther, set in Persia). In *peshat*, it appears that it should be understood according to the way it is written in the Masoretic Text, as one word, "*eshdat*." We will return to this.

Others take the place-names as referring to different sides of the Sinai Peninsula: Sinai the South, Seir, the East and Paran the North. Alternatively, taking *Ribebot-Qodesh* as a place-name, possibly reading "Qadesh" as does the Septuagint, or referring to it, Qadesh would be the North, Paran the West, as the Paran desert stretches to the west in the northern part of the peninsula. In this way, Moshe begins with a description of G-d radiating forth from all sides of this distinctive area. We will elaborate on this shortly.

Some take מִימִינוֹ as meaning "from the south," similar to Habakuk's usage regarding G-d's coming forth מִתֵּימָן יָבוֹא (Hab. 3:3), in accordance with the ancient practice of naming directions while facing the sun. "*Eshdat*" may refer to "*Ashdot Hapisga*," the area around which the nation was then centered (Deut. 3:17, 4:49; and particularly see Josh: 12:3 - וּמִתֵּימָן תַּחַת אַשְׁדוֹת הַפִּסְגָה). In this view the verse is providing five successive clauses referring to G-d's coming forth, the last one declaring that He has come to the present location of *Ashdot*. (Omission of a verb equivalent to "came" or "shone forth" in the final clause is possible in Biblical poetry, since the verb may be understood from the previous clauses. By providing the information of *where* He came to in the final clause, information not mentioned in the previous clauses, the verse is balanced.)

Some take אשדת to mean light rays or lightning, derived from אָשַׁד, "flowing smoothly" (see Num. 21:15), based on

Habakuk's portrayal of G-d's manifestation as including radiating light rays as well as on the fact that such imagery was then common in the ancient Near East. The NJPS translates "Lightning flashing…from His right." Schocken translates: "A fiery stream."

Isaac Sassoon interprets the verse as composed of two segments, each of which concludes with "*lamo,*" and with each segment constituted of two verbal clauses. The two words "*mimino eshdat*" are parenthetical, describing *Ribebot Qodesh* (taking the latter word as the place-name Qadesh), identifying it by a neighboring site, as there likely was more than one Qadesh, stating that it is the Qadesh to whose south is Ashdot.

4. Ibn Ezra's View

Ibn Ezra has a distinctive approach. He cites the three other Scriptural passages that contain descriptions somewhat analogous to that of our verse. It is noteworthy that these passages employ a number of common words and phrases.

> **Judges 5:4-5:** "Hashem, when You came forth from Seir, when You marched forward from the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked at the presence of Hashem – this Sinai, at the presence of Hashem, the G-d of Israel."
>
> **Habakuk 3:3-4:** "G-d comes forth from Teman, The Holy One from Mount Paran, *selah*; His glory covers the heavens, His praise fills the earth. There is brilliance like the light, light rays coming forth from His hand, there His might is enveloped."

> **Psalms 68:8-9:** "G-d, when You came forth before Your people, when You marched through the desert, *selah*. The earth trembled, the heavens dripped at the presence of G-d – this Sinai, at the presence of G-d, the G-d of Israel."

He maintains that just as each of the latter three sources is embedded in a battle context, describing Hashem as leading Israel to victory – the heavenly and earthly cataclysmic events depicted signifying His intervention – so, too, should we understand our verse. Further, he argues, as these other passages indicate the Divine manifestations being described are chronological, we should so interpret our verse. G-d's presence entered Israel at Sinai but did not become manifest to the rest of the world until Israel began battling its enemies years later and winning wondrous victories, when it traveled by Seir and Mount Paran.

In any event, in the above-cited Judges and Psalms passages that celebrate battle victories and seem linked to our prologue verse, the Sinaitic Revelation is apparently invoked with the words "this Sinai." Rabbi S. D. Sassoon pointed out that this phrase does not appear to be merely stating that the earth or mountains trembled as at the Lawgiving on Sinai or to be limited to any such allusion. He explained the phrase as follows. The Tablets – the stones of which surely were quarried out of Mount Sinai – and the Ark in which they "resided," were called "Sinai," and the presence of the Ark was called the presence of Hashem. When the Ark was taken to battle, those who viewed it were required to relate to it as to the Mount Sinai Revelation. They would receive inspiration from the experience, renew their commitment to the Covenant and hence merit Divine intervention. The wondrous victories Israel enjoyed were performed in the presence of the Ark or "Sinai," as "Sinai" was carried to those locations and observers could point to

the Ark and say "this Sinai" (cf. *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, pps. 71-72).[2]

5. Regarding Distinction of the Sinai Area

Some present-day commentators have interpreted our verse, which refers to Hashem coming forth from Sinai and from various areas around it, as indicative of His being perceived as having His "home base" there. When Moshe first led his sheep to Sinai it was termed הַר הָאֱלֹקִים, "the Mount of G-d" (Ex. 3:1). At the burning bush, which was in that location, Hashem informed Moshe that His plans were for Israel, upon exiting Egypt, to worship Him at that site (3:12). Yitro came to meet Moshe, very possibly before the Lawgiving in accordance with the order of the Torah's narratives, at הַר הָאֱלֹקִים (18:5). Although it may have been so called because of the future event that occurred there, it appears likely that it was considered holy from previously. (Calling it the "Mount of G-d" based on the future event of the Lawgiving would signal a successful conclusion to the tense narrative, contrary to the literary style of the Torah.)

Some scholars claim to have detected some apparently non-pagan religious developments percolating in that region prior to the time of the Lawgiving. The name of the Deity associated with that development may also have some similarity to Y-H-V-H. (See the JPS commentary on Deut., p. 319.)

The inhabitants of that region were apparently Midianite nomadic tribes. Midian, fourth of Abraham's six sons from Qetura (Gen. 25:2), would thus have preserved some of the heritage bequeathed him by the patriarch, the "matanot" (v.

[2] Also see Ronald Benun's "*Psalm 68 – The Ark of the Covenant."* Shabuot Reader. (New York: Tebah, June 2008), pp. 52-72. [Available online at tebah.org.]

6). When Moshe married the daughter of Yitro the priest of Midian, after having lived by him for a period of time and, we surely should assume, having got to know him well (Ex. 2:21) – ascertaining that he was essentially not part of the pagan world (very possibly signified by his having seven daughters) – he would have been connecting with Abraham's legacy. This might be a case of Abraham's spiritual input setting the stage for Israel's revolutionary religious growth in yet another way, not an unexpected phenomenon.

G-d's "home base" being at Sinai is consistent with the most likely interpretation of the reference made to Him later in our chapter, that He is שֹׁכְנִי סְנֶה (Deut. 33:16), "the Dweller in the bush." Undoubtedly, "the bush" alludes to the bush (סְנֶה) at Mount Sinai where Moshe experienced his first Divine revelation. שֹׁכְנִי סְנֶה is probably related to the name of the mountain, סִינַי. It is noteworthy that שֹׁכְנִי סְנֶה is at the exact center of the *Berakha's* words (excluding the introductory superscription), שֹׁכְנִי being word number 162 from the beginning and סְנֶה word number 162 from the end, a feature invariably found consequential in Biblical poetry.

6. Regarding Reuben and Shimon

Moshe blesses all the tribes except Shimon. One wonders if this exclusion was a result of Shimon's deep involvement in the *Ba`al Pe`or* apostasy (Num. 25), a backsliding that occurred well into the fortieth year, a short time before Moshe's bestowing his blessings. True, the tribe had apparently received great retribution – its Year 40 population was more than sixty percent less than it had been in the Year 2 census, a far greater reduction than that of any other tribe. And it undoubtedly had repented from its transgression, for it is inconceivable that G-d would have

proceeded to lead the nation to the Promised Land with an idolatrous element in its midst.

But the Torah does not explicitly state the extent of Shimon's culpability nor does it address the issue of its retribution. (The 24,000 who died in the plague associated with the Ba`al Pe`or transgression are unidentified.) We surmise our information about the Shimeonite tribe's guilt from the fact that it was a Shimeonite prince who flaunted the Midianite princess in front of his brethren before entering the tent with her, and from the population figures. We do not know how far that tribe's guilt went nor what its retribution entailed. However, there are additional considerations.

The *Sifre* explains Shimon's omission by pointing out that this tribe received its land portion in the Promised Land within the portion of Judah (Josh. 19:1-9). Indeed, many of Shimon's cities mentioned in Joshua 19 are also considered cities of Judah in Joshua 15 (vv 20-32), a circumstance that seems to highlight Shimon's great dependence on Judah from the time of the entry to the land. Shimon's precipitous decline to 22,200 in the Year 40 census (from 59,300 in the Year 2 census), which rendered its population the lowest of the tribes by a great margin, may have weakened it to the extent that it could no longer maintain its standing as a completely independent tribe.

In any event, when the northern tribes split from Reḥab`am, only Benjamin is mentioned as remaining attached to Judah (1 Kings 12:21-23), despite Shimon's proximity. It appears that at some early point Shimon lost its national standing and was mostly absorbed by Judah. Since Moshe's blessings were directed to the tribes at a future time, perhaps at the historical juncture that he was then focused on, Shimon did not qualify as a full-fledged tribe.

Yaaqob's deathbed statement concerning Shimon and Levi, "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel" (Gen. 49:7), comes to mind.

Moshe's blessing to Reuben opens with, "Reuben should live and not die" (v. 6); this may be a prayer that a fate such as befell Shimon not befall that tribe. The clause that follows – וְיִהְי מְתָיו מִסְפָּר – may perhaps be providing an explanation for the prayer, "though few be his numbers" (NJPS). However, it appears more likely that it expresses a prayer parallel to the first clause and means, "its members should be of sufficient number," that is, its population should maintain the necessary minimum to retain tribal viability. Being the southernmost tribe on the Jordan's eastern bank, Reuben's position was continually vulnerable, much more than most, if not all, of the other tribes. As it turned out, Reuben persevered on its land until the beginning of the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom in the late 8th century (1 Chron. 5:6).

How the blessings, prayers and prophecies of the Torah relate to the nation's history and to the Books of the Prophets and the Writings are subjects of great profundity and importance; however, they are not directly the subject of these studies.

7. Levi's Berakha

The blessing for Levi is extensive and detailed; with fifty-two words it far surpasses the word count of any other tribe except for that of Yosef, which also is fifty-two words.

Moshe recounts to G-d some of the tribe's praiseworthy characteristics and the religious service privileges it has proven itself worthy of. He begins with: תֻּמֶּיךָ וְאוּרֶיךָ לְאִישׁ

חַסִידֶךָ, G-d, "Your *tumim v'urim*" (those oracular instruments that assist in gaining insight into Your will), "should be with Your *ḥasid*," meaning "Your devoted one," (the one who does *ḥesed* in accordance with Your will). Since the high priesthood had already been granted to Aharon and his descendants, some have translated this to mean, "should be successfully maintained" against anticipated contention.

The following words present a difficulty: אֲשֶׁר נִסִיתוֹ בְּמַסָּה תְּרִיבֵהוּ עַל מֵי מְרִיבָה, "whom You tested at *Masah* and strove with at *Mei Meribah*." However, *Masah u'Meribah* were places where Israel tested and strove with Hashem (Ex. 17:2,7; Num. 20:13; Deut. 6:16)! This statement may indicate that even when the nation complained and challenged G-d, the Levites, or at least the Levite leaders, remained faithful. With poetic license (on phrases that contain assonant poetic play: נִסִיתוֹ and מַסָּה; תְּרִיבֵהוּ and מְרִיבָה), Moshe makes a reversal. He speaks of those instances of Israel's complaints that resulted from material deprivation as G-d testing man, which of course they surely were, even if that dimension had not been explicitly brought out in the relevant narratives. This appears similar to the psalmist quoting Hashem, "I tested you at the Waters of Meribah" (Ps. 81:8). Although Hashem castigated Moshe and Aharon at *Mei Meribah* for a shortcoming they manifested there (Num. 20:12), that matter was independent of the basic test, which they had passed. The sin of Moshe and Aharon is here placed in clearer perspective.

The singular tense reflects on the whole tribe. (One wonders if the singular tense was to point to an individual after Moshe whose overarching spiritual eminence stands for the tribe, which Rabbi S.D. Sassoon thought was the prophet Yirmiyahu, a matter we will touch upon shortly.)

Moshe relates how Levi's commitment to G-d is absolute, overriding all other considerations including relationships with parents, siblings and children. This evidently refers to the aftermath of the golden calf apostasy, when the tribe of Levi distinguished itself by heeding Moshe's call to put all guilty parties to death regardless of personal relationships (Ex. 32:26-29). Such dedication is a critical feature of Israel's spiritual leaders. At this point Moshe turns to the plural tense: "for they have observed Your precepts, Your covenant they have guarded."

In the next verse he requests from Hashem that "they should teach Your ordinances to Ya`aqob and Your instruction to Israel," they should perform the incense service and offer the sacrifices. In the final verse (back to the singular tense), Moshe asks Hashem to "bless his substance and favor his undertakings." פּעַל יָדָיו may refer to all types of undertakings, but it appears to be particularly directed toward spiritual endeavors and productivity, especially as the verse continues: "smite the loins of those that rise against him and of those that hate him, that they not rise again." Moshe knew very well the threat to the authority of spiritual leaders; he had to contend with Qoraḥ, Datan and Abiram and others. Unfortunately, Biblical history is replete with instances of rebellions. The post-Mosaic individual from the tribe of Levi to whom these phrases seem to apply most is the priestly prophet Jeremiah.

Yaaqob's deathbed prophecies saw the future of the chastised Shimon and Levi tribes as subdued and distanced from leadership, especially from receiving Ya`aqob's personal blessings for their endeavors (Gen. 49:5-7). Here, Levi is seen to have risen to the highest level of prominence. The net effect of the two prophecies strengthens the notion that the destiny of a tribe (or a nation

or individual) is not finally determined in advance and the proper exercise of free will may overcome "the decree."

8. Yosef

The blessing to Yosef, directed to the two tribes Menashe and Ephraim that stemmed from him, contains the most elaborate description of material bounty and military prowess of all the tribes. Yosef is seen as a major leader of the nation, a provider and protector, consistent with the denouement of the Genesis narratives concerning him and his brothers.

The blessing begins with "blessed of Hashem is his land," and clause after clause details and enriches it. Irrigation will come "from the bounty of heaven, the dew, and from the depths that lie beneath" (v. 13). This leads to [blessed] "From the bounty of the crops brought forth by the sun" and of those nurtured by the moons [through the months] (v. 14). Then come the resources derived from "the top of the ancient mountains and the bounty of the everlasting hills" (v. 15), probably referring to wood and mineral wealth as well as to fruit trees. ("Ancient" implies well established and reliable.) An all-encompassing statement then concludes the first phase of the blessing, "From the bounty of the land and its fullness" (v. 16a), followed by וּרְצוֹן שֹׁכְנִי סְנֶה, "it should be with the favor of He who dwells in the bush" (v. 16b). The latter statement refers to the Divine presence that dwelled at Mount Sinai (see our *Vezot Haberakha Part I* study), which Moshe encountered at the burning bush on the occasion of his initial prophetic communication that launched him on his mission.

Why did Moshe cite this particular description of Hashem at this juncture, the only time Hashem is so described in Tanakh? It does seem to indicate that Moshe was recalling

his own selection and probably Hashem's extensive involvement with him, cajoling and enticing him to accept the responsibility to lead Israel into a Covenantal relationship with Him. Perhaps upon contemplating the future of Yosef, especially Ephraim (the more successful of the two Yosef tribes as foreseen by Yaaqob in his private blessing to Yosef), he recognized the enormous potential for proper leadership. (The Yosef narratives in the Torah brought this out very clearly.) But a glimpse into Ephraim's future would reveal the tremendous problems that eventually beset that tribe. So perhaps he prayed that Hashem would again be extensively involved to encourage that tribe to accept its responsibility to the Covenant.

Moshe followed with, "they should come to the head of Yosef," and, in the parallel clause, "וּלְקָדְקֹד נָזִיר אֶחָיו." The latter may mean "upon the brow of the [one who wears the] crown from among his brothers (based on a well-attested meaning of נֵזֶר (Lev. 8:9; 2 Sam. 1:10; 2 Kings 11:12) or "to the one set apart [distinguished] from his brothers," (related to the root from which "*nazir*" derives). In Yaaqob's blessing to Yosef he utters virtually the identical statement: תִּהְיֶיןָ לְרֹאשׁ יוֹסֵף followed by וּלְקָדְקֹד נָזִיר אֶחָיו. Yaaqob's blessing of Yosef contains other similarities to Moshe's, particularly invocation of the blessings of heavens and the depths lying beneath, far more than is the case with any other brother, indicating the constancy of that tribe's potential.

In Moshe's final verse regarding Yosef he employ's the metaphor of a firstling bull, perhaps alluding to Yosef's having received firstborn rights (see 1 Chrn. 5:1-2) and proceeds to prophesy about that tribe's military successes.

Endnote

* See Section 5 of this study for a discussion on this matter.