

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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Parashat Emor

Why is the Spiritual experience of the Holidays only complete in Eretz Yisrael?

Why is it so challenging to celebrate Jewish Holidays Properly Outside the Land of Israel?

When we lived in Memphis, Tennessee, back in 1990-1991, celebrating the Jewish holidays properly was not only a challenge – it often felt like something vital was missing. The holidays lacked the deep spark of connection and excitement we had experienced in the Land of Israel. There was no blossoming almond tree to greet us on Tu B'Shevat, and the awakening of nature had yet to arrive on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, when it was time to bless Hashem for the flowering trees. Celebrating the birth of the State of Israel felt hollow in the Diaspora, and we longed for the charged energy and exhilarating dancing at the Kotel on Yom Yerushalayim. I remember trying to celebrate Sukkot in our plexiglass sukkah, with its green plastic siding, set up in the communal parking lot behind our condominium. It stood in stark contrast to our memories of Sukkot in Israel, where joyous singing and music flowed from every neighboring sukkah, and you could feel how the entire people were dwelling together in one vast, unified sukkah.

And then came the rains – heavy downpours that flooded our sukkah and soaked our sleeping bags, furniture, and food. We tried spreading out our drenched blankets on nearby parked cars, only to be met by a shouting neighbor: “What are you doing, you crazy Jews? Is this how you try to relive the Israelites’ desert experience? Do you think they dwelt in plexiglass booths with green plastic walls?” We felt quite ridiculous and very much out of place. Ironically, there was one hidden blessing in that moment: this same non-Jewish neighbor, appalled by our dripping sleeping bags, decided to throw them in her washer and dryer. And needless to say, we didn’t protest.

How are the Mitzvot of Sukkot Synchronized with the Land of Israel?

It is not coincidental that our holiday experience in the Diaspora especially clashed with Sukkot, whose celebration is linked with entering and dwelling in the Land of Israel. As it is written, “...when you gather the produce of the land.”

ספר ויקרא פרק כג פסוק לט אך בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת תְּבוּאֵת הָאָרֶץ תַּחֲגֹגוּ אֶת חַג יְהוָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן שִׁבְתֹּן וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שִׁבְתֹּן: (מ) וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ עֵבֶת וְעַרְבֵי נַחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

“But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the festival of Hashem for seven days; the first day shall be a rest day, and the eighth day shall be a rest day. Then you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the hadar tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Hashem your G-d for seven days.” (Vayikra 23:39-40).

The mitzvah of rejoicing before Hashem with the Lulav and its bunch is a tangible expression of joy and gratitude for the good land to which Hashem has brought us, and for the ingathering of its produce. These four species are more than symbolic – they embody the transition from a barren wilderness, “a place without figs, grapes, pomegranates, and water” (Bamidbar 20:5), to a fertile land rich in fruits, fragrance, and flowing rivers. That’s why, in memory of this transition, we take the most beautiful fruits with the most delightful fragrance, and the most attractive leaves the Land has to offer – readily available in Eretz Yisrael during the harvest season (Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:43). Thus, the mitzvot of Sukkot are deeply attuned to the Land’s agricultural and spiritual rhythm.

Why Does Parashat Emor Write the Mitzvot of Sukkot in Two Separate Sections?

The unique character of Sukkot as celebrated in the Land of Israel – distinguished from the festivals celebrated in the desert – is reflected in its dual mention in our parasha. While all the festivals share a common mitzvah of bringing sacrifices, commanded even in the wilderness, Sukkot includes mitzvot that are tied directly to life in the Land. The mitzvah of waving the four species contrasts with the desert experience, devoid of plant life, while the mitzvah of leaving our comfortable homes, bursting with goodness, and dwelling in the sukkah is specifically to remind us of the contrast to the past wilderness wandering, when we didn't have homes within which to settle in our own land.

Parashat Emor mentions Sukkot twice – first in verses 34-36, and again in verses 39-43 – with a summary of all the festivals placed in between (*Vayikra* 23:37-38). This split reflects the dual character of Sukkot: The first part pertains to every part of the world, whereas the second part is uniquely rooted in the experience of Eretz Yisrael.

The connection between the holiday of Sukkot and Eretz Yisrael is furthermore reinforced again in emphasized in *Parashat Ekev*: “You shall make the festival of Sukkot...when you gather in from your threshing floor and winepress” (*Devarim* 16:13), echoing “when you gather the produce of the land” (*Vayikra* 23:39). As the Rashbam explains, when our homes are filled with goodness – grain, wine, and oil – we are commanded to step out of that comfort and remember how Hashem had us dwell in Sukkot during our forty years in the wilderness, without homes or inheritance. By leaving our solid homes for temporary huts, on Sukkot, we give thanks to the One who gave us Eretz Yisrael and homes full of blessing (Rashbam, *Vayikra* 23:43).

How does Sukkot highlight the Connection between the Jewish People and Their Land?

The festival of Sukkot highlights the bond between the Jewish people and their land more than any other holiday. The mitzvah to dwell in the sukkah is especially synchronized with the climate of Eretz Yisrael. It falls during a season when it is just cool enough to make it clear that we are not simply ‘camping’ outdoors, but fulfilling a mitzvah. At the same time, it is usually not yet too cold or rainy to make the mitzvah burdensome, unlike our experience celebrating Sukkot in Memphis, Tennessee, where storms flooded our sukkah and dampened both our gear and spirits.

Chag HaAsif – the Festival of Ingathering – celebrates the harvest season in the Land of Israel. It teaches us how the physical can be elevated through joy and gratitude. Rav Kook emphasized that in Eretz Yisrael, the body meets the soul. The holiness of the land itself imbues the physical acts performed within it with spiritual meaning. The Four Species – the materials used for shaking the *lulav* – further amplify this bond. Each of them grows in the Land of Israel and reflects its beauty and bounty. As Rav Kook explains, the holiday of Sukkot is so deeply tied to the sanctity of the Land and to the joy of her fruits that Chazal required us to intercalate the year to ensure that Sukkot would always fall during “the time of the ingathering of the crops of the Land.”

What is the Connection between Living in the Land of Israel and Dwelling in the Sukkah?

The Vilna Gaon teaches (as cited in *Kol HaTor* 1:7) that there is a profound connection between the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel and the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah. In both cases, we enter the space completely, with our whole body. This concept is hinted at in the verse: וְיָהִי בְשָׁלֵם סֵכּוֹ וּמִעוֹנָתוֹ בְּצִיּוֹן – “His sukkah was in Shalem, and His dwelling place in Tzion” (*Tehillim* 76:3)

The Vilna Gaon further explains: “The sukkah must be *ta'aseh* – built intentionally and not from something already made. So too with Tzion – it must be actively built through our deeds.” This echoes the Midrash on the verse: וְבָא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל – “A redeemer shall come to Tzion” (*Yeshayahu* 59:20) – which teaches that as long

as Tzion is not built, the redeemer does not come. As our Sages say: “Once Jerusalem is rebuilt, the son of David will come.” In the Midrash: “The son of David does not come until Jerusalem is rebuilt” (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 17b*).

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa similarly taught: “There is no mitzvah as beloved as the sukkah, for we enter it with all our limbs, his clothing – even our shoes and boots.” He added: “So too with the mitzvah of settling the Land of Israel. We enter it entirely, and it encompasses every part of us. One who dwells in the Land fulfills this mitzvah constantly – day and night, whether awake or asleep – without interruption. That is why it is considered equal to all other mitzvot.”

May we all merit returning to the Land of Israel and celebrating Sukkot in the highest way – experiencing the joy of all of Am Yisrael dwelling together in one vast, unified sukkah. In the merit of returning to the Holy Land, may we soon witness the rebuilding of the fallen Sukkah of David – the Beit HaMikdash.