

## Sukkot II 5785 - Why Not Celebrate Sukkot in the Spring?

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Chag Sameach.

Is anybody else tired?

We've had a lot of shul and a lot of Chagim, and now we have Sukkot. Are we ready for that, or is there a better time of year for this Festival? Maybe a season not as busy.

We celebrate this holiday now, in the fall, because the Torah tells us to. It instructs us to observe this holiday in the 7th month on the 15th day because of its connection to the agricultural cycle. It's the holiday of ingathering, the end of summer/start of fall when crops are harvested before the rainy season starts in Israel. We got that.

But this is a little odd because the Torah also gives a historical explanation of the holiday: Lv. 23:43: We live in a Sukkah because "I G-d made the Israelites live in Sukkot - booths - when I G-d brought them out of the land of Egypt."

If that's the case, if it's about leaving Egypt, why don't we celebrate the Sukkot holiday in the springtime, when we actually left Egypt? Shouldn't we celebrate it around the time when the event occurred?

I had not fully considered this question until I read a terrific article by Professor Rabbi Marty Lockshin on a website called thetorah.com. I thank him for directing me to these sources, only some of which I quote today.

The agricultural reason matters, as does the historical basis for the holiday. With the passing of time, when we are further removed from life as farmers in Israel, the historical basis came to matter more.

*Nehama Leibowitz articulates this well: "It is quite true that the three scriptural pilgrim festivals commemorate the opening and closing of the agricultural cycle. ...But how enormously has the Torah enriched the significance of these dates by charging them with historical meaning, by turning them into reminders of the great miracles that happened to our ancestors, by making them recall not our link with nature but with super-nature, the Lord of nature. The Torah utilized these festivals to divert our attention from the world of nature and bind us . . . to Him who transcends nature, namely, G-d."*

Ramban, Nachmonides, 13th century, has two answers depending on how we interpret the word "Sukkah." (Isn't that such a Jewish way to do things?)

Rabbi Schwab and I have previously reenacted the debate in the Talmud about what the Sukkah truly represents. Rabbi Eliezer says, the Torah means for us to build actual huts, because the Israelites lived in these booths throughout the wilderness. But Rabbi Akiva says the Sukkah represents the divine clouds of glory, the protection G-d gave to the Israelites in the dangerous wilderness- shelter from the harsh elements, and miracle manna food, among others.

Ramban gives two satisfying explanations for both interpretations, each of which explains why the holiday is in the fall.

He begins with the explanation that the booth we build reminds us of the divine clouds of protection: *“Thus, He commanded that at the beginning of the summer season we are to remember the exodus from Egypt by [calling] that month [the first of the months], and by observing its festival [of Passover]. And He further commanded the remembrance at the beginning of the rainy season **of the continuous miracle which was done for them throughout their stay in the wilderness.**”*

Rabbi Lockshin sums up to say that Passover commemorates an event that happened only once, in the spring, the Exodus from Egypt. So we have to observe that holiday in the season when it happened. But Sukkot marks G-d's ongoing miraculous care and protection of the Jewish people in the wilderness. It could truthfully be observed anytime because this miracle lasted every day for 40 years. If Passover marks the beginning, Suukot is the midpoint, exactly 6 months later to recall this ongoing miracle during both major seasons.

Don't forget that the other interpretation of Sukkah as a physical booth must also be accounted for. Ramban deals with that as well. He writes: *“And according to the opinion of the Sage who says that they made themselves huts in the literal sense, [the Israelites in the wilderness] began to make *sukkot* [only] at the beginning of the winter, on account of the cold, as is customary in camps, and therefore, He commanded [that we also make] them at that time.”*

In other words, the Israelites did not sleep in booths during the spring and summer after leaving Egypt. They slept under the stars, as I did a few nights on a summer trip to Israel. They only built shelters when it started to get cold, which is right around now. That is why we build the booth now instead of the springtime.

Sukkot isn't just about the What and the Why. It's also about the When.

Chag Sameach.