

Sukkot II 5787
Clouds of Glory
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Chag Sameach.

When I was a camper at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, at least once a summer we had a night in which our cabins competed in something we called a Singdown. It's very possible that every camp in the world does this, but Ramah is what I know.

Each cabin would sit together at a table, and the counselor in charge would name a word. Then each cabin had a minute to work together to name all the songs they could think of which contained that word. At which point one cabin would have to sing a little bit of the song highlighting that word. Then the next cabin would have to sing a new song with that same word. And so on. The cabin that could sing the most songs won.

For example, let's take the word "Sun."

There's "Here comes the sun."

"Walking on sunshine."

"Let the sunshine in."

And, only at Ramah: "Sunrise, sunset."

In most of these songs, the sun is the hero vanquishing the gloomy, gray skies. For example, Sesame Street: "Sunny days sweeping the clouds away. On my way to where the air is sweet. Can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street?" Or Johnny Nash: "I can see clearly now the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way. Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind. It's going to be a bright ...sunshiny day."

We are a culture that celebrates the sun and seeks it out whenever possible. When things are looking up, we say "the future is *bright*."

All of which brings me to the clouds of Sukkot. And I don't just mean the autumnal rains that fall here in the Midwest. Or the rainy season which actually begins now in Israel. I mean the Clouds of Glory that the Sukkah represents, teaches Rabbi Akiva. Much thanks to Rabbi Josh Kulp for his instructive essay about this in the most recent Hadar High Holiday reader.

Today we find ourselves in a Sukkah because the Torah tells us to:

"You shall live in Sukkot/booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths,

in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt—I Hashem am your G-d” (Lv. 23:42, 43).

At first glance, it seems that we build our own Sukkot to mimic the temporary huts the Israelites lived in when they walked through the desert. Presumably they too lived in small, simple huts, and we reenact this in order to relive their desert experience.

Rabbi Eliezer of the Talmud agrees with this interpretation, so it has a lot of weight.

But a closer look challenges this assumption. Throughout the Torah, the Israelites are *always* described as dwelling in “*Ohalim*/tents,” never “*Sukkot*!” We are familiar with the famous verse from Bilam who says “Mah Tov *Ohalecha* Yaakov/How goodly are your *tents*, O Jacob” (Nu. 24:5). Not Sukkot. Elsewhere Moses hears the people weeping, as they each stand by the entrance of their *tent* (Nu. 11:10). Not Sukkah.

Now that we think about it, it makes more sense that desert wanderers would use tents made of animal skins, than booths of hard walls and vegetation. Animal skins are more portable and durable, and they are easier to procure in the desert.

Perhaps this is why Rabbi Akiva disagrees with Eliezer and says we don't live in Sukkot to recreate the same actual huts. For him, we build these booths to recall *Annanei Hakavod*, the Clouds of Glory. The divine clouds that protected the Israelites throughout their desert journey.

How did he land there? And what does that even mean?

Rabbi Kulp indicates that a verse from Isaiah utilizes the word “cloud” and “Sukkah” as synonyms.

*“G-d will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion **cloud** by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the **glory** shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a **Sukkah/pavilion** for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain” (Is. 4:5,6)*

It's a fair read to understand this verse as equating Sukkah/pavilion with clouds and glory. And if they equal each other in this verse, Rabbi Akiva substitutes the Clouds of Glory metaphor here into the Leviticus verse about why we build Sukkot. That is, for Akiva, Sukkot were *always* supposed to be a metaphor because the Israelites never lived in booths. So it must correspond to something *e/se*. Isaiah tells us exactly what—the Clouds of Glory.

Indeed, the Torah tells us plainly that G-d leads the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:22). This pillar of cloud goes before the Israelites and behind them as a form of G-d's visual presence and a form of protection. That's in the Torah.

The Midrash then imagines the following about these clouds: *“G-d gave to Abraham's descendants seven clouds of glory in the wilderness: One to their right, one to their left, one in front of them, one behind them, one above their heads, and one for the divine presence that was among them. And the pillar of cloud that traveled before them would kill snakes and scorpions, and burn away thorns, briars, and brambles. It would level the high places for them and raise the low places for them, making for them a straight path—a paved road stretching out and moving forward.”*

By the way, the image of the clouds protecting in all directions reminds me of shaking the Lulav in all directions. The clouds were *seven*, we shake the Lulav *six* ways, but it's the same idea.

The Midrash is articulating exactly how G-d cared for the Israelites during the 40 years of wandering. G-d's love and protection was a daily occurrence, keeping the Israelites safe in a hostile environment. Safe from the desert dangers, including the *sun*.

Rabbi Kulp writes: “Imagining G-d in cloud-like terms is perfectly natural for a culture shaped by the harsh sun of the Middle East. As a child growing up in the United States, I learned to celebrate the sun: we sang The Beatles' ‘Here Comes the Sun,’ sought sunny days, and praised sunny dispositions. But in the Middle East, where summers are long and punishing, people crave the shelter of the cloud and its potential for much-needed rain. The cloud is a fitting image for G-d's ephemeral presence: real, yet elusive; visible, yet impossible to fully capture. What better image for G-d than a cloud?”

Rabbi Kulp gets it just right. And we know there are many more songs he could have listed. For the desert Israelites, the cloud was so much more desirable than the scorching sun. And guess where Rabbi Akiva lived in his day?

In desert days, the Israelites had the visual assurance of G-d's protection. They were spared physical desert dangers and could easily identify why. In our day, we don't have bubbles of divine clouds protecting us. And our homes protect us from all the physical dangers the Israelites worried about, including the harsh sun. But we still depend on G-d to keep us safe in other ways. To keep us and our loved ones safe from injuries and illnesses. From serious accidents and misfortunes. We do all we can to protect

ourselves and our loved ones, but still we can't guarantee our safety or theirs. We need more than our best efforts, and so we rightly turn to G-d to keep us safe on our journeys through the wilderness of life.

Sukkot demonstrates our belief that what protects us are *not* just our homes, not just four walls and a roof. Even in comfy homes we depend on G-d keeping us safe. Only when we go *outside* can we fully internalize that.

Chag Sameach.