



THE FESTIVAL OF SUKKOT

The meaning we give to the mitzvot is, in a sense, reminiscent of the manna: that food from heaven which each of the children of Israel experienced in his own way in the desert. The commandments remain the same, yet every generation discovers in them meanings that answer its own questions and needs. This is one of the roles of the Oral Torah: to enrich their study, so that the commandments continue to speak to man and to renew his life.

So it is with the sukkah. The Torah explains its purpose: "So that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of Egypt." But what booths were these?

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva offer two interpretations. According to Rabbi Eliezer, these were the clouds of glory that sheltered the children of Israel as they journeyed through the desert. According to Rabbi Akiva, they were actual booths, in which they lived at every stage of their journey. Both readings illuminate one and the same story: the fragility of their living conditions, and the divine protection that accompanied them.

For forty years the children of Israel lived far from permanent homes, with no fields and no ordinary source of food, sustained by the manna. Despite these harsh conditions, they built family and communal life. Bilam, summoned to curse Israel, was struck by what he saw and declared: "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Israel!"

The debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer thus brings to light two aspects of Israel's life. The actual booth recalls each person and each family living in the desert under a makeshift roof, with no certainty about the morrow. The clouds of glory recall that, even in this precariousness, the people as a whole enjoyed divine protection. Each individual dwelt in a fragile booth, while the community as a whole was enveloped by a cloud.

These two images also accompany our reflection on exile: on the one hand, insecurity and impermanence; on the other, the hope that Providence will not forsake us.

The Maharal links Sukkot to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Exodus from Egypt took place in Nisan; yet it is in Tishrei, after the days of repentance, that we leave our homes for the sukkah. One may see in this act the voluntary acceptance of a temporary existence, for as long as it takes to reflect on our deeds. Having asked for forgiveness, we are reminded by the sukkah that we must also change our ways. Just as Kayin was condemned to wander after killing his brother Hevel, this departure from our homes may invite us to consider what, in our own lives, calls for repair.

And yet Sukkot is a festival of joy. Perhaps because we know that leaving home is not an end in itself: this departure points us toward a return — to ourselves, to our people and to the Promised Land. May every sukkah remind us that wandering is not our destination; may it strengthen our resolve to repair what leads to exile, and to direct our steps toward the land of hope.