

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Welcome Guests—Visible and . . .

The sukkah is fragile and temporary, yet stands as a symbol of joy and celebration. Rabbi Reuven Hammer, in his commentary *Or Hadash (Siddur Sim Shalom, 331)*, reminds us of a debate about the meaning of Leviticus 23:43 (“You shall live in Sukkot for seven days . . . in order that future generations will recall that I made the Israelite People dwell in Sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt”): “Rabbi Eliezer said that [these sukkot] were clouds of glory and Rabbi Akiba said they were actual huts (B. Sukkah 11b).”

It seems to me that our customs at Sukkot encourage us to give recognition to the view of both Sages. The laws concerning the construction of the sukkah and especially the *s'khakh* (the natural cover for the roof) are complex, requiring us to be very concerned with the physical realities, recalling the view of R' Akiba. But the many ways in which the sukkah is decorated, and especially the *ushpizin* (the spiritual guests invited to join us each night), recall the view of R' Eliezer, that the sukkah has spiritual as well as corporeal aspects.

The ritual of inviting the celestial *ushpizin* is included in *Siddur Sim Shalom* (330) for the first time in any published liturgy of our Conservative Movement. Rabbi Hammer notes both the kabbalistic origin of the custom—inviting Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David to join us—as well as the contemporary addition of women, including Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth.

Many families and communities have developed the custom of asking each person present to invite a guest of their own choosing—perhaps a family ancestor or a person from Jewish history with whom they feel a strong connection on that evening. Our sukkah then becomes a bridge between the corporeal and the incorporeal, both past and present. Our time in the sukkah displaces us from the comfort and familiarity of our homes, our dining tables, and all that is familiar. We are placed, right at the beginning of the New Year, in an unfamiliar place, blessed—I hope—with the presence of family, friends (old and new), community, ancestors of old, and the Shekhinah, the divine presence.

So may it be.

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Robert A. Harris, associate professor of Bible, JTS.

The Fruits of Close Reading

“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” (Lev. 23:43).

There is an old rabbinic debate whether this verse refers to real, true-to-life sukkot or “Clouds of Glory” provided by God; that is, only figurative sukkot. As one might expect, the talmudic debate between Rabbis Akiva and Eliezer (Sukkah 11a) continues into the Middle Ages, with Rashi and Ramban squaring off against Rashbam and Ibn Ezra. Lest you think it is clear that the Rabbis are arguing between fanciful and reasonable interpretations, check out Isaiah 4:5–6 along with Exodus 40:38 (if you're scoring at home), and see if that doesn't persuade you that there is at least *some* merit on both sides of the question. However, I prefer that we focus on the “plain sense” interpretation, and see where a close reading of the text might lead. Let us step back, and consider Leviticus 23:43 in both literary and historical context.

Of all the Torah's festival calendars, the one in Leviticus 23 is the most complete. It begins with a kind of preamble: “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions.” Following these two verses, the Torah addresses Shabbat; Pesah/Matzot, including the commandment to count the Omer; Bikkurim / First Fruits (the festival that is elsewhere called Shavu'ot); Teruah (the Holy Day that the Rabbis called Rosh Hashanah); Yom Kippur (actually called here Kippurim); and finally, Sukkot, the Festival of Booths.

At the conclusion of this long list of festivals, the Torah offers a peroration, as it were:

Those are the set times of the LORD that you shall celebrate as sacred occasions, bringing offerings by fire to the LORD—burnt offerings, meal offerings, sacrifices, and libations, on each day what is proper to it—apart from the sabbaths of the LORD, and apart from your gifts and from all your votive offerings and from all your freewill offerings that you give to the LORD. (Lev. 23:37–38)

Following this “conclusion” of the festival calendar, the Torah surprises us by stating an additional set of laws about Sukkot (Lev. 23:39–43)—laws that are mentioned nowhere else in the Torah:

Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the LORD to last seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. 40 On the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. 41 You shall observe it as a festival of the LORD for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. 42 You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, 43 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 the LORD your God.

Readers accustomed to rabbinic practice will see in this paragraph the two central commandments of the holiday: “taking the Four Species” (i.e., the *lulav* and *etrog*) and dwelling in Sukkot during the festival. But readers attuned to the “plain sense” approach to Scripture, or “reading in context” (*peshat*), will likely see this section as a kind of addendum, an added section meant to fill out the observance of the festival with prescriptions that were not contained in the section originally devoted to Sukkot (look up verses 33 to 36 in a Bible).

In fact, the Bible itself bears witness to this possibility. The community that returned to Israel after the decree of King Cyrus of Persia (some time in the mid-6th century BCE), and that paradoxically called itself “the Exile” (*golah*), gathered under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah some 100 years later to hear the Torah read and expounded. The Bible records this scene (Neh. 8:1–3, 13–17):

The entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the LORD had charged Israel. 2 On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. 3 He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching.

On the second day, the heads of the clans of all the people and the priests and Levites gathered to Ezra the scribe to study the words of the Teaching. 14 They found written in the Teaching that the LORD had commanded Moses that the Israelites must dwell in booths during the festival of the seventh month, 15 and that they must announce and proclaim throughout all their towns and Jerusalem as follows, “Go out to the mountains and bring leafy branches of olive trees, pine trees, myrtles, palms and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.” 16 So the people went out and brought them, and made themselves booths on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of the House of God, in the square of the Water Gate and in the square of the Ephraim Gate. 17 The whole community that returned from the captivity made booths and dwelt in the booths—the Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day—and there was very great rejoicing.

From this passage it seems clear that Ezra understood the Torah to command here, not two distinct commandments, but one only: the Judeans were to take the various branches, etc. (admittedly, the list is not identical with the one in Leviticus 23:40), not as *lulav* and *etrog*, a separate ritual. Rather, as Jacob Milgrom explains in his *Anchor Bible* Leviticus commentary (volume 3, 2063–2067), Ezra connects Leviticus 23:40 with 23:42, and determines that the Judeans should use the branches as building materials to build the sukkot that the Torah requires. Moreover, the Bible seems to state that the Israelites (remarkably, from the time of the Israelite settlement of Canaan under Joshua, and continuing through the whole period of the Judges and Israelite and Judean kingdoms) had *never* fulfilled the Torah’s requirements to celebrate the festival of Sukkot in precisely the way that Ezra and Nehemiah taught, i.e., by building sukkot! But whatever the exact intent of Nehemiah 8:17 (“There’s something happening here, what it is ain’t exactly clear”), it looks as though Ezra is trying to build a practice through close reading of the text.

We began with a talmudic debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer about whether the Torah’s description of sukkot should be understood literally or figuratively. It seems that Ezra provides an early example of how someone might institute a ritual practice that is rooted in a literal understanding of the Torah (here, of the relationship between Leviticus 23:40 and 23:42). Ezra’s ruling did not stand the test of time, however, and since antiquity rabbinic Jews have “discovered” two distinctive commandments in Leviticus 23:39–43. May we rejoice in this festival of Sukkot, shake our *lulav* and *etrog*, and dwell in our sukkot—however we build them. *Hag sameah!*

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A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

The Ritual of Waters

The festival of Sukkot is known as *Z'man Simhateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. One of the reasons that happiness is connected to this pilgrimage festival is the ritual of *nisuch ha-mayim*, the Water Libation Ceremony. Although this is an unfamiliar ritual to us today, it was one of the highlights of the Sukkot holiday. When the temples stood in Jerusalem, water libations were performed each morning of the holiday. And later, in the evening, people would gather at the point from which the waters were drawn and join in festive singing and dancing. This ritual was known as *simhat beit hashoeva*, the celebration at the place of water-drawing. Mishnah Sukkah even states, “One who has not seen the rejoicing at the ‘Place of the Water-Drawing’ has never seen rejoicing in his life.” The ostensible reason for this ritual is the belief that on Sukkot, God judges the world for rainfall in the coming year. And, in fact, it is at the close of the holiday of Sukkot that we begin our prayers in earnest for rainfall in the Land of Israel.

A beautiful prayer is associated with this ritual of waters. The Babylonian Talmud reports that when “Hillel the Elder celebrated during the ‘rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing,’ he used to recite, ‘When I am here, everyone is here; but when I am not here, who is here? To the place that I love, there my feet lead me.’” Then God responded to Hillel the Elder, “If you come into my house, I will come into your house; if you come not into my house, I will not come into your house: ‘In every place where I cause my name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you’ (Exod. 20:21)” (BT Sukkot 53a).

Sukkot, at its heart, is about the intimate relationship between God and the Jewish people. Sitting in our booths, we recall a time of remarkable closeness as Israel wandered through the desert toward the Promised Land. Hillel the Elder reflects the quality of this relationship in his teaching. For it was in the midst of such happiness that Hillel acknowledged his closeness to God and to the entire community. His personal presence became symbolic of the participation of the entire group. Only when we take such a proactive approach in our own personal observance does it become a true *simhah* for the entire community. Our personal participation in the holiday of Sukkot ultimately leads to the joy and participation of the entire community and nation—all of which brings us to experiencing the presence of God.

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