

This Shabbat, we read from Leviticus, Chapter 23 about all of the different holidays and their practices. The Chapter starts by describing Shabbat and then goes through the year cycle, spring to fall, describing the sacrifices and holy days, Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Verses 34 through 36 define the dates Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, and the list seems to wrap up all the holidays, with verses 37 and 38 “Those are the set times of Hashem that you shall celebrate as sacred occasions, bringing offerings by fire to Hashem—burnt offerings, meal offerings, sacrifices, and libations, on each day what is proper to it— apart from the sabbaths of Hashem, and apart from your gifts and from all your votive offerings and from all your freewill offerings that you give to Hashem.

But then there’s a bit of a rewind, a deeper dive back into Sukkot.

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 Hashem [to last] seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day.

On the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of date palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God seven days.

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.

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

It’s almost as if Torah is anticipating the experience that I myself feel of this time of year: Oh yeah, I’ve gotten through one holiday, oh yeah, here’s another, and another, and we’re almost done – oh wait. Hold up!

Let’s take a closer look at this.

Torah doesn't say much about Sukkot, but the two rituals specific to this holiday are things that are both completely physical – shaking around a lulav, and sitting in a Sukkah, a temporary structure. And they are also things that we do without much change from how our ancestors did them 2000 years ago. Which, when you consider most of our holidays, is not something that we should take for granted. The Pesach seder as we know it today is *nothing* like the ritual of the Pesach sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. Our Yom Kippur services no longer involve a slaughtered goat and live goat sent carrying our sins into the wilderness.

And yet, we take up the same species of objects that our ancestors did and wave them around. We sit in similar temporary structures to the ones they built based on these verses in Torah.

As a transient people, it is these rituals of transience that have survived destruction and exile. But I think they also represent a much deeper spiritual strength. The lulav and etrog represent unity amid diversity.

As *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12 teaches, “Just like this citron (etrog), which has taste and has smell, so too Israel has among them people that have Torah and have good deeds. "The branches of a date palm" - these are [referring to] Israel. Just like this date, which has taste and has no smell, so too Israel has among them those that have Torah but do not have good deeds. "Boughs of leafy trees (a myrtle)" - these are [referring to] Israel. Just like this myrtle, which has smell and has no taste, so too Israel has among them those that have good deeds but do not have Torah. "And brook willows" - these are [referring to] Israel. Just like this willow, which has no smell and has no taste, so too Israel has among them people that have no Torah and have no good deeds. And what does the Holy One, blessed be, do to them? To destroy them is unthinkable, rather the Holy One, blessed be, says, "bind them all together [into] one grouping and these will atone for those."

Some of us may be more righteous than others. Some of us may be more pious than others. But this midrash suggests, as did the liturgies of the holidays that are just finished, that we are only judged as a collective- and that mercy is only possible *because* we are judged as a collective, because the best deeds of all of us atone for the worst deeds of all of us.

There is another teaching about these verses. In the Talmud, Masechet Sukkot 27b, there is a discussion about whether one can fulfill the mitzvah of sitting in a sukkah by sitting in someone else's sukkah. Each person is supposed to have their own lulav and etrog; maybe it's the same for the sukkah itself? The answer is not only that they are emphatically different but that the verses about sukkot, "מלמד את ישראל כי כל ישראל יושב בסוכה אחת" – they teach that all of Israel is fit to dwell under one sukkah together.

Obviously during coronavirus, this does not mean that we should literally squeeze into a sukkah at the same time, God forbid.

But instead it suggest that after the hard work of atoning – at-one-ing together, over the High Holidays, we should remember to remain at one now, as we harvest the joy.

Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches, "At the beginning of the High Holy Days, the Days of Awe and *T'shuva*, I do a practice of asking myself, "Who Don't you want in your Sukkah?" Who have you thrown out of your heart? Who would you rather avoid? For whom do you hold a grudge?... Then I know what my work will be for those days of Forgiving. By the time Sukkot comes, I want to be able to invite the whole world into my Sukkah, and into my heart.

Sukkot is called *zman simchateinu* -the season of our rejoicing. There are extra commandments to be joyful on this holiday. And I would suggest that the extra joy is that joy of inclusion. Of not having to worry about who gets to be in, and who is out. Of accepting all of us, with all of our glory and all of our flaws under the Sukkah of humanity. As the teaching about lulav suggests, God wants desperately to forgive us all, will look for any pretext to do so, and we need to offer that option by welcoming each other in.

I want to close with a teaching by an ancient female sage, Beruriah, who was the wife of Rabbi Meir. In the Talmud, it teaches in Berakhot 10a, that once there were hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of anguish. Rabbi Meir prayed for God to have mercy on them, that they should die. Rabbi Meir's wife, Berurya, said to him: What is your thinking? As it is written: "Let sins cease from the land" ([Psalms 104:35](#)). Is it written, let sinners cease?" No! Let sins cease, is written! Moreover, go to the end of the verse: "And the wicked will be no more." If transgressions shall cease, the wicked will be no more. Rather, pray for mercy on them, that they should repent! He prayed for mercy for them and they repented.

As I said on Yom Kippur, the desire to define and push away, even to pray for harm to "those people" who do harm, is a common one. But Beruriah's teaching reminds me of the joy of having a more expansive aspiration for humanity. The joy of Sukkot is that redemptive imagination, the capacity to imagine each human's potential to repent the harms we have done, to atone, to be forgiven, and to take our place in the Sukkah together.