

Section 9

Chag HaSukkot

Chag HaSukkot (“The Feast of Booths”) is a seven day holiday starting on the Fifteenth of the Seventh Month. It is one of the three holidays on which Jewish males are required to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem. *Chag HaSukkot* commemorates that the wandering Israelites dwelt in booths (“*sukkot*”) during their journey in the desert. In remembrance of this fact, we are commanded to live in *sukkot* for seven days (Leviticus 23:42-43). *Chag HaSukkot* is also called *Chag HaAsif* (“The Feast of Ingathering”, Exodus 34:22) because it occurs around the time the Israelites would gather their fall harvest (Leviticus 23:22).

This section of *Adderet Eliyahu* discusses the requirements for the construction and use of the sukkah. It also briefly discusses the holiday of *Shemini Atzeret* which is celebrated the day after the last day of *Sukkot*.

The topics I will cover in this section are:

1. The Materials from Which the Sukkah is Built
2. When the Sukkah Should be Built
3. Who is Required to Build the Sukkah
4. Where the Sukkah Should be Built
5. The Requirement to Dwell in the Sukkah
6. Further Specifications of the Sukkah
7. Shemini Atzeret

“Because it is written ‘that your generations might know [you dwelt in booths]’, the requirement to remember the Sukkot is for all the generations [even those of the Exile] like the Mitzvah of Shabbat.” - *Adderet Eliyahu’s* Inyan Chag HaSukkot Ch. 3

§9.1 The Materials from Which the Sukkah is Built

We find written in Leviticus:

“on the fifteenth day of the Seventh Month... you shall keep the pilgrimage of Hashem seven days... and you will take for yourselves on the first day fruits of goodly trees, date palm branches, and branches of thick trees, and willows of the brook and you will rejoice before Hashem your God seven days” –(Leviticus 23:39-40)

It is not immediately clear what we are to do with the greenery we are to gather for the first day of Sukkot. Some of the sages argued that this greenery is to be used to construct the sukkot because we

are required to dwell in sukkot only two verses later. (Leviticus 23:42) Others, however, believed it to be for a different purpose¹.

The *Adderet* concludes that the greenery is indeed to be used to construct the sukkah. The sages supporting this position argue that the Torah first requires us to gather the greenery and then to build the sukkah because the greenery is necessary material for the sukkah. This is just as the Israelites were commanded first to gather a lamb for every house and then told to perform the Passover Sacrifice on these lambs (Exodus 12). Just as the lamb is necessary material for the end goal of the passage in Exodus (the Passover Sacrifice), so too the greenery is necessary material for the end goal of the passage in Leviticus (the sukkah).

These sages further argue that the narrative of Ezra keeping sukkot confirms their reading of the verse. Indeed, under Ezra's supervision the people are told to gather foliage in order to build sukkot:

“And they found written in the Torah ... that they should declare and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem saying: ‘Go forth to the mountain and fetch olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees to make Sukkot, as it is written” -(Nehemiah 8:15)

The phrase “as it is written”, implies that the people of Ezra's day were basing their view on a command in the Torah – namely, the command in Leviticus to gather greenery.

The declaration made by the Israelites, however, is not a verbatim quote of the passage in Leviticus. Rather, the list of plants in Ezra differs from that in Leviticus. The sages gave many different resolutions to this apparent difficulty. Rav Yefet ben Eli explained how each item in Ezra's list is equivalent to an item in Leviticus' list despite either list using different words. By contrast, Rav Bashyatzi holds that the list in Leviticus is not meant to single out particular plants but rather is meant to be generalized to a variety of plants.

As previously noted, some sages believed that the greenery was **not** meant to be used for the sukkah. These sages support their argument, in part, by noting that the list of greenery includes the “fruit of the goodly trees.” Because one cannot build a structure from fruit, these sages believe the greenery must have had a different intended purpose. In response, the sages who believe the greenery is intended to construct the sukkah propose that the phrase is to be read as “trees of goodly fruit”. This is supported by the fact that there is no “and” separating this phrase and the following item in the list of greenery (the palm branches). In this reading, the palm branches are therefore equivalent to the “trees of goodly fruit” as opposed to a separate list item. In other words, these sages read the list of greenery as “trees of goodly fruit: palm branches; and boughs of thick trees; and willows of the brook”.²

¹ Interestingly, *Adderet Eliyahu* does not explain what these sages believed the alternative purpose was. Gan Eden, however, explains that these sages held that the greenery was used to fulfill the requirement to “rejoice before Hashem your God” (Leviticus 23:40) given immediately after the list of greenery. In their opinion, the Israelites would make bundles of greenery and fruits of all kind to carry around and to eat during the festival. (*See Gan Eden Inyan Chag HaSukkot* Ch 1.)

² Some of the sages who believe that the list in Leviticus corresponded directly to Ezra's list, held that the “tree of goodly fruit” in Leviticus is represented as “olive branches” in Ezra's list (*Gan Eden Inyan Chag HaSukkot* Ch 1). According to

§9.2 When the Sukkah Should be Built

Although we are commanded to gather the greenery used in building the sukkah “on (Hebrew: ‘ba’) the first day” of Chag HaSukkot, we are in fact required to do so before the first day. In line with this reading, some sages understand “ba” to mean “before” and others understand it to mean “in close proximity to” but neither group thinks it means “on” in this particular context.

Those sages that argue that “ba” means “before” in this context argue that we are commanded to set apart the first of our dough “before (‘ba’) we eat the bread of the land” (Leviticus 15:19-20). It is clear that (‘ba’) here means before, because we are told to set apart the first of our dough (Leviticus 15:20) and so we have not yet had the chance to eat any bread. This offering must then happen *before we* “eat the bread of the land”.

Those sages that argue that “ba” means “in close proximity to”, use the phrase “when (‘bi’)³ Joshua was in Jericho” (Joshua 5:13) as an example. In context, it is clear that this verse describes Joshua’s location before he had actually entered the city proper⁴. Even though this reading of “ba” is not sufficient to require that the sukkah be built shortly before as opposed to shortly after the first day, this reading in combination with the fact that we are required to dwell in sukkot all seven days and that *melechet avodah* is forbidden on the first day makes clear that we are intended to build the sukkah shortly before the first day of *Chag HaSukkot*.

In general, the fact that *melechet avodah* is forbidden on the first day suggests that either reading of “ba” should be preferred to a reading of “ba” meaning “on” The *Adderet* argues that the sukkah should be built as close to the first day as possible.

Notes on §9.2:

Another important example supporting the position that the sukkah must be built before the first day is found in the laws of Chag HaMatzot. We are commanded to eliminate leaven (“*se’or*”) from our houses “on (‘*ba*’) the first day” of Chag HaMatzot (Exodus 12:15). Elsewhere, however, we are told that “seven days...no leaven (“*se’or*”) shall be seen in all your borders” (Exodus 13:6-7). Thus it is clear that all leaven must be removed *before* the start of the first day, in order for it not to be seen on all seven. The *Adderet* discusses this matter in the section on Chag HaMatzot (Ch 4), but surprisingly it does not use this example in the corresponding discussion for Chag HaSukkot.

§9.3 Who is Required to Build a Sukkah

Some of the sages, including Rav Levi, argued that since only males of Israelite descent (thus excluding converts) are required to dwell in the Sukkah only males of Israelite descent are required to build the sukkah. This opinion is based on the verse “all who are an *ezrach* of Israel will dwell in sukkot” (Leviticus

Professor Phillip Birnbaum, this was the view of Rav Yefet ben Eli. (*The Arabic Commentary of Yefet Ben Ali the Karaite, on the Book of Hosea*, p. XXX.)

³ “Bi” is a different but equivalent vocalization of “ba.”

⁴ Indeed, Joshua 5:10 mentions that Joshua is “in the plains of Jericho”, suggesting that “Jericho” is not considered to include the area surrounding Jericho.

23:42). The term *eizrach* specifically denotes native Israelite males. Rav Levi does note, however, that the Jews of the exile have taken on the practice that even converts build sukkot.

Other sages, however, held that the requirement to *build* the sukkah and the requirement to *dwell* in the sukkah are two separate commandments. These sages argued that the command to build the sukkah was given as an independent commandment in the verse in which the Israelites were told to gather greenery (Leviticus 23:40, §9.1). Because this verse does not single out the *eizrach* it applies to all of the Israelite faith. Thus, even if converts are exempt from the command to dwell in the Sukkah, they are still bound by the independent command to help build it.

§9.4 Where the Sukkah Must be Built

A minority of the sages argued that the Sukkah need only be built in Jerusalem. This is based on the fact that we are first commanded to “celebrate [the holiday] as a pilgrimage (“*Chag*”) to Hashem seven days” and shortly thereafter we are commanded to “dwell in sukkot” (Leviticus 23:41-42). Thus, only those who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem are required to dwell in Sukkot.

However, the majority of the sages argued that one must build sukkot even outside of Jerusalem. Indeed, since the purpose for the mitzvah is stated to be “so that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths” (Leviticus 23:43), the command includes all generations of Jews including those who are in exile and cannot reach Jerusalem. Therefore, according to these sages, the requirement to build a sukkah must be fulfilled even outside of Jerusalem.

Notes on §9.4:

The story of Ezra keeping Sukkot further supports the opinion that we are required to build a sukkah even outside Jerusalem. The Tanach records that Ezra, his priests, and his Levites “found written in the Torah... That they should declare and proclaim **in all their cities** and in Jerusalem saying ‘Go forth to the mountain and fetch olive branches...to make booths, as it is written’ “ (Nehemiah 8:15). The fact that Ezra wanted this proclamation made in all Israel’s cities suggests that the command to build sukkot applies even outside Jerusalem.

However, this verse could also be read to be consistent with the opinion that sukkot are only to be built in Jerusalem. “The mountain” mentioned in Nehemiah 8:15 could be a specific reference to the mountains of Jerusalem. In this case, Ezra would be commanding the people in other cities to come up to Jerusalem⁵. Perhaps for this reason the sages who hold that sukkot are to be built outside Jerusalem do not mention this verse as proof for their position.

Women and the Requirement to Build Sukkot

All the males were meant to be in Jerusalem for the holiday. Arguably then, the position that sukkot must be built even outside Jerusalem suggests that females are to build sukkot in their hometowns. How, then, does one explain the statement that “the *eizrach* [native born male] in Israel” is required to dwell in Sukkot (Leviticus 23:42) seemingly in exclusion to all others (§9.3)? One possible answer is that while the *eizrach* has an obligation to actually dwell in the Sukkah, females need only build a sukkah, but are not explicitly commanded to dwell in it. Although requiring construction of a sukkah without requiring its habitation may seem pointless, simply

⁵ I thank Shawn Lichaa for providing this interpretation.

constructing a sukkah is in fact enough to fulfill the stated purpose of the sukkah: to remember that God made us dwell in sukkot in the desert (Leviticus 23:43).

Another possibility is that females are in fact not required to build sukkot. Rather the requirement for sukkot to be built outside Jerusalem was intended for those males who could not make the pilgrimage due to extenuating circumstances. At the very least it seems that some would have to stay home to protect Israel's borders. Furthermore, the Torah accommodates those who could not make the Passover pilgrimage because they were travelling by instituting the Second Passover (§4.3). Perhaps the Torah is similarly flexible in the case of Sukkot by allowing those outside Jerusalem to fulfill the requirement to dwell in Sukkot even if they cannot fulfill the requirement to make pilgrimage. This is consistent with the general requirement to use the method of approximation when a mitzvah cannot be completed in its ideal form (§2.5).

§9.5 The Requirement to Dwell in the Sukkah

The Torah commands all *ezrachim* (males of Israelite descent) to dwell in Sukkot seven days (Leviticus 23:42, §9.3). Although not required, it is permissible for a convert to dwell in a sukkah.

One should dwell in a sukkah as one would in his primary residence. This is because the purpose of this mitzvah is to remember the wandering Israelite's sukkot (Leviticus 23:43), which were their primary residences. Therefore one should do in his *sukkah* everything that he would normally do in his house. This includes residing in it, sleeping in it, eating in it, praying in it, and doing all manner of daily activities. The exception to this rule is that one should avoid doing menial tasks in the Sukkah so as to further beautify the mitzvah of sukkot. For this same reason, Rav Levi holds that one should not bring animals into the Sukkah.

§9.6 Further Specifications of the Sukkah

The sukkah must be built underneath the open sky because Scripture informs us that the purpose of the sukkot is the *schach* (the leafy "roof" of the sukkah that provides shade)⁶. The Israelites built sukkot primarily to protect themselves from the sun.

Since we are required to dwell in sukkot, the sukkah must be sufficiently large to accommodate those dwelling in it. The requirement to dwell in the sukkah also means that the sukkah should be like a house in that it has walls and a doorway (although there is no need for an actual door).

All agree that the *schach* should be made of greenery, but some hold that the frames of the sukkah may be made of either wood or stone. Rav Bashyatzi argues that even if made of stone, the frames should be covered in leaves so that the sukkah resembles the sukkot used in the desert. Presumably, the wandering Israelites would not have built sukkot with permanent stone frames.

§9.7 Shemini Atzeret

Shemini Atzeret ("The Eighth [day of] Gathering") is a separate holiday from Chag HaSukkot. It occurs on the day after Chag HaSukkot. It is named *Shemini Atzeret* because it is the eighth day on which the Israelites who had made pilgrimage for Sukkot were in Jerusalem. Although Scripture does not refer to

⁶ Adderet Eliyahu does not cite a verse supporting this statement. Nor could I find such a verse.

Shemini Atzeret as a pilgrimage (“Chag”), the Israelites would have remained in Jerusalem on this day since it is a day on which *melachet avodah*, including travel, is forbidden.