

Why do we celebrate Sukkot at this time of the year? (Edited Transcript)

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What exactly is Sukkot doing at this time of the year? And, really, it's a question that can only be asked about Sukkot. All the other festivals are linked to specific times in Jewish history. Pesach, for example, commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, which actually took place on the 15th day of the month of Nissan. So we celebrate it every year on the 15th of Nissan. Shavuot, commemorating the giving of the Torah, took place on the 6th day of the Jewish month of Sivan. And so whenever the 6th day of Sivan rolls around ? wherever we are in the world ? we get ready to eat cheesecake and stay up all night learning. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, falls on the first two days of the Jewish new year, for obvious reasons.

But the timing of Sukkot is less apparent. The Gemara explains that when we sit in our sukkot on this festival, we are celebrating the miraculous ?Clouds of Glory? that protected the Jewish people for 40 years in the desert, providing shelter from the elements and cover from our enemies as we travelled through the harsh, hostile terrain of the desert.

Clearly, then, Sukkot is not a commemoration of a single event, but of a state of Divine protection that spanned a period of 40 years. So, why now?

Let's think about it? we've just had Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Sukkot comes a few short days after Yom Kippur (you'll know just how short if you haven't built your Sukkah before Yom Kippur), after which there isn't another Jewish festival for six months. Seeing that Sukkot is just as pertinent to any other time of the year, why isn't the Jewish calendar spaced out more evenly? Why aren't we celebrating Sukkot three months from now, rather than in the thick of this intense concentration of festivals?

The key to answering this question lies in the integral connection between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur on the one hand, and Sukkot on the other. To understand that connection, we need to delve into the nature of the four species that we take in hand on Sukkot. These four species are the etrog ? the fruit of a citron tree; the lulav ? a date palm branch; hadass ? leafy boughs from a myrtle tree; and aravah ? leafy branches from a willow tree. On each day of Sukkot, we bring these four species together, say a dedicated blessing and shake them in a specific way.

Our sages ask ? what is the common denominator in the requirements of all four of these species? We know we bring them together because they are so different ? in taste, in smell and in structure; but what is the one requirement that is common to them all?

Rabbeinu Bechaya, one of our great sages from the Middle Ages, explains the common denominator of these four species is that they are connected to water. He says they are fresh throughout the year and a very important requirement of them is that they be fresh for the use of the mitzvah of Sukkot. The Gemara explains if your lulav is dried out, you cannot use it, you cannot fulfil your mitzvah; and so too with your etrog, aravah and hadass.

Thus, a really important shared requirement for all four of these species is their freshness ? their connection to a water source. That remaining life-giving liquid encapsulated within each of them is an integral part of the fulfilment of the mitzvah on Sukkot.

But why? What does this water represent? What is this liquid, this juice within them, and what does it mean for us? Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that it represents life. When we bring these four species together, we celebrate and give thanks to Hashem for the fact that we are more alive than ever. And we are saying that we are now ready to dedicate that life to Hashem in His infinite wisdom and kindness.

And now, dear friends ? the connection to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur becomes so clear. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pray for many things. We pray for a good year, for a sweet year, and we pray for all of G-d's blessings. But, most fundamentally,

we pray for life itself. The words of the machzor are filled with so many rich examples. We ask Hashem: 'The King, who desires life?' to 'remember us for life?' and 'write us in the book of life?.'

Chayim, chayim, chayim. Life, life, life. Over and over again ' that is what we pray for. Because we never take its privilege for granted.

And so comes along Sukkot, immediately after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you know what we give thanks to Hashem for? For the very fact that we're alive. For the fact that we have breath in our lungs and energy in our bodies ' that is what we are thankful for. And that is why we bring together the four species, as fresh as can be, filled with as much moisture as possible, and we thank G-d for the life that He has given us. We take them and we say the blessing of shehechyanu: 'Thank you G-d, Who has sustained us and kept us alive to reach this point.'

Now, let's take this idea one step further. It's not only about gratitude for being alive. Yes, we are incredibly grateful, but Sukkot is a declaration of what we plan to do with this new life. We take the four species, we bow before G-d and we sing Hallel ' recognising the infinite greatness and magnificence of G-d, dedicating our gift of life to Him. And how do we do that? Through the Torah, which is the gateway to life.

The Torah is the Torah of life. It says in the Torah (Leviticus 18:4): 'You shall keep my statutes and my laws that a person should do them and live by them.' The Ramban explains that the Torah is the blueprint for how to live life in this world in our interactions with other people. And what is the best possible way to do that? Through the values and the principles and the laws of the Torah, which guide us on how to be a mensch, to be kind to people, to interact in good conscience with people.

And friends, it goes even deeper and further than this. By dedicating our lives to Him ' by taking opportunities to fulfil G-d's mitzvot ' we unlock the gift of another life? life in the World to Come. As Rashi says on that verse '?...and you shall live by them?' ' this refers to Olam Haba, the World to Come. The mitzvot that we do in this world enrich us with life in the World to Come.

And here's the really fascinating thing. The Hebrew word for life is chayim, which is plural. We never speak about life, but lives. And I came across an amazing explanation of this in a book by the brother of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Avraham Ben Shlomo Zalman. He explains that the word chayim is plural because it refers to two lives, life in this world and life in the World to Come. Whenever we refer to life, we refer to both.

As Sukkot comes in, we give thanks to Hashem for life, not only in this world, but for the infinite life He has allowed us in the World to Come. And we give thanks and praise to Him for the Torah that He has given us ' the gateway to life. Sukkot is known as the 'festival of the time of our joy?. We are filled with joy and gratitude for the gift of life and the Torah, which is its gateway.

I would like to add one last idea to this understanding of Sukkot, the four species and the gift of life in both this world and the next. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, just like life, chayim, has no singular. We only refer to waters, never water. When we speak of water, we don't only speak of physical waters, but of Torah ' the 'water?' that connects us to our spiritual source.

This Sukkot, as we bring together the four species, let us recognise and celebrate the infinite gift of life we are reminded of when holding the lulav and etrog. Let us dedicate ourselves to Hashem and His Torah ' the source of all life and all blessing.