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SUKKOT: FEAST OF THE REDEMPTION

By a curious coincidence, two doctoral dissertations embodying the most significant English language studies of *Sukkot* in many years were recently completed at virtually the same historical moment. One, finished in 1993, was the product of a Christian based at the University of Michigan; the other, finished in 1992, was the work of a Jew based at Columbia. In his treatise *The Harvest of the Earth*, T. P. Jenney amasses the findings of mostly Christian bible scholars in interpreting historical and literary remains, such as the Apocrypha, preserved for the most part not by the synagogue but by the Church. He adduces important evidence of an eschatological interpretation of *Sukkot* well rooted in ancient Israel and flowering especially from the era of the Maccabees. J. L. Rubenstein, exploring sources of the extant Torah tradition in his *History of Sukkot during the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods*, comes to the contrary view that “*Sukkot*, in and of itself, contains no eschatological motifs.” For Rubenstein, any eschatological penumbra that might seem to surround *Sukkot* derives solely from it being the festival *par excellence* of the Temple.

Rubenstein, although working within the milieu of the secular academy, incidentally speaks for the bulk of received Torah tradition which does not, as we shall observe, appear to regard the endtimes as a central motif of the festival. What renders this scholarly discrepancy of more than passing interest to Jews within the Torah tradition, however, is the absence of complete unanimity regarding the themes of *Sukkot* within that tradition itself. The most compelling dissent, aligning with the perspective of T. P. Jenney, is uttered by what many would agree is the most profound interpretive voice within the past several centuries of Torah insight: that of Maharal.¹

Maharal, in his understanding of the three harvest or pilgrimage festivals, the *Shalosh Regalim*, appears, in fact, to reflect the Torah narrative’s own inherent logic. In this narrative, *Pesah* commemorates

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Israel's *creation* as a self-conscious nation, born while passing between the waters of the Sea of Reeds at the beginning of its long wilderness journey. *Shavuot* recalls Israel's arrival at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive, through Moses, the *revelation* of the Torah from God. One might then reasonably anticipate that Sukkot symbolizes the remainder of Israel's formative wilderness journey, culminating in the arrival at Canaan, the Promised Land—an arrival which may be identified with the theme of final *redemption*. For the Torah itself implicitly acknowledges an intimate parallel between the paradigmatic journey of the people of Israel through wilderness *space* and its extended journey through historical *time*, whose conclusion is in fact clearly identified in *Deuteronomy* 30 with Israel's true and permanent, eschatological arrival at and establishment in its own destined space, the Land of Israel: with, in other words, what later tradition calls the Redemption or *Geula*. Recognition of this patterning of Torah time as *creation, revelation and redemption*, first implicitly articulated by Maharal, has reasserted itself strongly in the modern period among such significant thinkers as Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, as well as in the writings of other more traditional rabbinic authors.

To be sure, typical understanding of *Sukkot* within Torah Judaism certainly sees the festival as commemorating Israel's wilderness journey beyond Sinai. The most familiar symbol of the festival, the *sukka* or booth, is explicitly identified as symbolizing the temporary dwellings which sheltered the Israelites during their years of wandering after the Sinai event. It is this wandering under divine protection which inspires the preponderance of *midrashic* and rabbinic homilies on *Sukkot*. A strong *midrashic* tradition sees the *sukka* as symbolizing the *ananei ha-kavod*, the clouds of glory, whose descent betokens an eventually redeeming Divine Presence. Yet, for the traditional understanding, *Sukkot* evidently does *not* incorporate an actual symbolization of the journey's *completion* in an arrival at the Land which anticipates the final *Geula*. Not that *Sukkot* does not include another powerful symbol, for it does: the *arba'a minim*, or four species, including palm, willow, myrtle and citron. But the *arba'a minim*, waved in *Sukkot* ritual, have been understood as symbolizing not arrival at the Land but *integral unity* or, more precisely, the *mutual indispensability of each component part constituting a whole*—whether the four types of Jews, or human beings or essential parts of the body. As to the relation between *sukka* and *arba'a minim*, it has been within Torah tradition “generally assumed that the *sukka* and the Four Species are distinct *mitsvot* whose performance happens to coincide in the same festival.”²

Taking under advisement Maharal's challenge to the mainstream view, and further prodded by supportive findings of T. P. Jenney, intellectual honesty impels one to ask: does *Sukkot*, fathomed in its full depth, somehow indeed envision completion, so to speak, of the wilderness journey? Does it, in other words, centrally embrace the eschatological theme of redemption? If so, how might the *arba'a minim* relate to this? And why, then, the extraordinary discrepancy between received tradition and this possible deeper meaning?

SUKKOT AND THE ENDTIMES

Thus far we have assumed that if talmudic discussions and synagogue homilies alike discern no preponderant theme of redemption associated with *Sukkot*, sundry *midrashim* notwithstanding, it would surely stand to reason that no such central theme exists in *Sukkot* lore as conventionally circumscribed. So it would seem. Yet, given the oddness of the mainstream interpretive tradition apparently neglecting the Torah narrative's *own* implied linkage between *Sukkot* and redemption, we should refrain from making any assumptions whatsoever. Instead let us consider without prejudgment the *actual practice* of the festival and the texts that support that practice. Granted that the symbolic interpretation of the *sukka* itself is essentially straightforward, amounting to an informal theology of wilderness wandering, the more vexing issue is that of the symbolism of the *arba'a minim*, understood by rabbinic sources to signify integral unity. What, we may ask, does the theme of *unity* have to do even with the wilderness theology of the *sukka*, much less with the theme of *redemption* which by rights should permeate the *Sukkot* festival? We need not look very far to discover that the answer is: everything.

On the first day of *Sukkot*, the prophetic reading (*haftara*) is *Zekharya*, chapter 14, which discusses the eschatological battle that will bring history to an end. Verse 9 of this chapter presents the quintessential expression of Israel's hope for a redeemed world. The verse was considered important enough to be assigned by tradition to a unique place of honor, i.e., the ending of the *Aleinu* prayer with which every liturgical service in Judaism concludes. It portrays the Redemption as, indeed, a time of unity made manifest:

And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His Name One.³

The purport of this verse is further illuminated by verse 16, which speaks of the universal embrace of the Redemption:

And it shall come to pass, that everyone that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths.

The full implications of the earlier verse 9 now become obvious. Until the time of the Redemption, humans will designate divinity by various names, correlating with the divisive nationalities of an unredeemed world. At the Redemption, however, to be ever after commemorated by *Sukkot*, all will come to recognize that there is but one God and all will join in calling Him by one singular Name. Each nation—even the formerly wicked—may then assume its true identity as a valued, indispensable, indeed “chosen” part of the integral whole of humanity under that one God, as implied by the prophet Isaiah speaking of the redemptive endtimes:

In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.’⁴

This attainment of genuine *integral unity* is thus nothing less than the *very objective and signature of the Redemption*.

With this principle, enunciated by *Zekharya* 14, clearly grasped, the basic structure of the *Sukkot* festival at one stroke becomes evident—and it is precisely what our structural and hermeneutic insights might have projected. In Israel’s paradigmatic wilderness journey, what ensued after the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, commemorated by the second harvest festival of *Shavuot*? What ensued was an extended period of wandering, culminating in an arrival at the Land of Israel. In effect, the slave generation that escaped Egypt was in exile by virtue of cowardice inhibiting its will to vanquish the Canaanites.⁵ As these forty years of wandering constitute the prototype for subsequent periods of exilic history (*galut*), so does arrival at the Promised Land constitute the archetypal anticipation of the Redemption (*geula*). Wandering and arrival, exile and Land, history and Redemption: *this* is what happened with the People of Israel in the aftermath of Sinaitic revelation. And it is this fundamental polarity that determines the elliptical structure of the *Sukkot* festival as enshrined in the dual symbolic foci of *sukka* and *arba’a*

minim, temporary wilderness dwelling and enduring eschatological unity to be celebrated under the permanent shelter of the messianic Temple.

But this only begins to expose the deeper resonances and inner coherence of the *Sukkot* festival, to which the nexus of unity and the Redemption furnishes a crucial hermeneutic key. Other details now swiftly configure into intelligible shape. In the ritual utilization of the *arba'a minim*, the four plant species are held together and waved in the "six directions," which include up and down.⁶ As the four species symbolize the unified wholeness of the body, of Israel, of humankind, so the six directions manifestly symbolize the totality, the unified wholeness, of the divine rule over these various levels of creation—a rule to become fully acknowledged and consolidated only with the redemption.⁷ The Torah specifies seventy sacrifices that Israel is to offer over the entire course of the festival, corresponding to the seventy nations which according to tradition comprise the totality, the unified wholeness, of humankind; thus, as the rabbis remark, during *Sukkot* Israel, as "the priestly people", offers sacrifice on behalf of universal humanity arrayed in its national families.⁸ These sacrifices look forward to the eschatological Third Temple, to which all nations will—according to Zekharya—make annual pilgrimage on *Sukkot*, as truly "a house of prayer for all peoples".⁹ In a special insert to the *birkat ha-mazon*, grace after meals, the People of Israel pray throughout *Sukkot* for the erection of this Third Temple which only the Messiah can mandate:

"The Compassionate One! May He erect for us David's fallen booth [*sukka*]!"¹⁰

Particularly striking are the readings from the Prophets (*haftarot*) assigned for *Sukkot* and its concluding festival, *Shemini Atseret*, which we have yet to discuss. On the first two days of full statutory holy day, the prophetic texts are Zekharya 14, looking toward the messianic Temple after the eschatological battle, and, for the second day, *I Kings* 8:2-21, which describes the consecration of the *original* Temple, erected by Solomon: the festivities lasted fourteen days of which the last seven coincided with *Sukkot*. The prophetic reading for the intermediate Sabbath of *Sukkot*, from *Yehezkel* 38-39, *again* treats the eschatological battle, the "war of Gog and Magog" at Armageddon, immediately preceding the Redemption. For the first day of *Shemini Atseret*, the prophetic reading takes up the last section of *I Kings* 8, concluding the account of the first Temple's consecration. As a group, these four

prophetic readings thus clearly highlight the central events of the end-times: an apocalyptic battle, followed by erection of the messianic Temple to which all humankind in its unified wholeness will make pilgrimage on the Feast of Tabernacles, its building anticipated by Solomon's First Temple whose consecration likewise concluded during the Feast of Tabernacles. These events indeed mark arrival at the time of the Redemption which, we recall, is homologous with the people's arrival in space at the Land of Israel.

But this is hardly the last word to be uttered on the pattern of creation, revelation and redemption that thematizes the festival cycle consummated by *Sukkot*. Should any doubt yet linger that the genius of Torah tradition emphatically intends *Sukkot* to carry the theme of redemption, understood as creation's attainment of genuinely integral unity, that doubt must be dispelled by a glance at the central paradigm for time in Torah tradition—*Shabbat*, the Sabbath. The primal articulation of linear time into moments of creation, revelation and redemption is established not through the harvest festivals but by the symbolic inflection of the three periods of the Sabbath day—evening, morning and afternoon. Evident in virtually all of the positive commandments (*mitsvot*) and customs that endow *Shabbat* with its character, the succession of themes becomes unmistakable in the changing portions of the central liturgical prayer, the *amidda*.

In the evening *amidda*, the focus rests upon *Shabbat* as witnessing to the Creation, whose completion was marked by the first *Shabbat*: "Thou didst hallow the seventh day unto Thy Name, as the end of the creation of heaven and earth" In the morning *amidda*, the focus shifts to the *Shabbat* as a precept of revelation made binding upon the people of Israel for all its historical generations: "Moses rejoiced . . . and in his hand he brought down the two tablets of stone upon which the commandment of the Sabbath was prescribed" Not coincidentally, of course, it is at the morning service, when the sun has come up to reveal the world, that the weekly portion of the revealed Torah is read as part of the liturgy. And what of the corresponding section in the afternoon *amidda*? The text begins: "Thou art One and Thy Name is One"—the centrally important words of *Zekharya* 14:9, proclaiming a truth whose full establishment will be the hallmark of redemption, when all surviving nations will come at *Sukkot* to call upon the one God by one Name in the eschatological Temple. The harvest festivals thus simply dilate upon the thematic pattern proclaimed by and indelibly associated with the three consecutive periods of *Shabbat*. Then, as the

afternoon of the Sabbath is symbolically the time of eschatological unity, so likewise will be the actual "afternoon" of history itself, evoked by *Sukkot*. Not coincidentally, Jewish custom anticipates the advent of the Messiah immediately upon the conclusion of some future Shabbat when the last rays of afternoon light have yielded to the impending darkness of a new beginning.

SHEMINI ATSERET AND THE REDEMPTION COMPLETED

And what of the theme of a "new beginning" in conjunction with *history itself*? For the endtimes are not only about the conclusion of history, but about the initiation of another era, the time of "a new heavens and a new earth", when creation has been completed and the world has embarked upon a fully redeemed existence.¹¹ Is this theme of a new era transcending the old history absent from *Sukkot*? Let us look again. For Torah tradition, eight is the number that signifies arrival at a new level transcending seven, the number signifying a completed prior reality. *Sukkot* indeed has an "eighth day"—the concluding festival of *Shemini Atseret*. Or does it? For, as we shall note momentarily, the very status of the day entails a perplexing enigma. Nonetheless, we can begin to fathom the significance of this eighth day even before confronting that enigma simply by concluding our interrupted survey of the *haftarot*, the prophetic readings for *Sukkot*.

At first glance, the *haftara* selection for the final day of the *Sukkot* season and, indeed, the entire harvest festival cycle, seems a radical departure from what has preceded it. No more do we hear of raging battles and a rebuilt Temple, the characteristic happenings of the endtimes. Instead, the reading for the diasporic second day of *Shemini Atseret* comes from chapter one of the Book of *Joshua*. But is this so strange, after all? For on the "eighth day" festival, one should anticipate allusions to a "new beginning" of some sort. And the opening of the Book of *Joshua* certainly provides that: it tells the story of nothing less than the people's paradigmatic new beginning in the promised Land of Israel. The Book of *Joshua* is the narrative of Israel's actually *taking possession* of that Land.

Once again, then, the details of the *Sukkot* festival are astonishingly just as they *should* be to accord with the larger paradigm of Judaic time. We are reminded that, within the Torah itself as well as later tradition, *space and time for Judaism unfold in parallel*. Then arrival at the Land

in space corresponds to arrival at the Redemption in time. And taking physical possession of the Land in space, so as to actually begin dwelling within it, can allude to nothing other than *actual temporal inhabiting of the redeemed reality inaugurated by eschatological events*. The “eighth day” of *Sukkot* indeed appears to be the harbinger of the “eighth day” of history, the new beginning that will transfigure the world in the era of the Redemption. Having grasped this, we now possess the essential key to resolving the enigma of *Shemini Atseret*.

What is that enigma, which puzzles even the Sages?¹² According to *Leviticus* 23:36, Israel is beholden *after* the seven days of *Sukkot* to keep an “eighth day” of “holy convocation” and “assembly.” Is this eighth day assembly, *Shemini Atseret*, to be considered an extension and conclusion of *Sukkot* or an independent holy day in its own right? *Leviticus* 23 might well be taken to imply the latter. Yet *Exodus* 23:14 specifies that “Three times thou shalt keep a feast to me in the year,” and proceeds to name the harvest festivals; this suggests that *Shemini Atseret* be indeed considered the conclusion of *Sukkot*. Yet how can *Shemini Atseret* be paradoxically both discontinuous and continuous with *Sukkot*? Herein lies the enigma.

We noted that, in Torah tradition generally, the number seven denotes *completeness* and the number eight suggests the threshold of a new, higher reality. Thus on the seventh day of *Sukkot* Israel, as it were, arrives at the Land, thereby completing its wilderness journey, and on the eighth day proceeds on its new mission to take possession of it. Correspondingly, if *Sukkot* heralds arrival of the Redemption, *Shemini Atseret* must represent the subsequent new age of actually living in a redeemed world. In one sense this new age is an extension, product and outcome of what preceded it whereas, in another sense, it embodies a *radical break* with the previous age. Similarly *Shemini Atseret* is in one sense merely an extension of *Sukkot*, yet in another and essential sense it stands independent of it as an emblem and foretaste of the eschatological kingdom of God which *Mashiah* will establish. Then the “eighth day” festival is indeed *both* continuous and discontinuous with *Sukkot* and, with each claim enjoying its aspect of truth, the enigma finds a resolution.

If *Shemini Atseret*, in any case, corresponds to the kingdom of God slated to flourish after the tumultuous events of the endtimes, this might explain why the people of Israel cease to dwell in the *sukka* on this “eighth day feast of assembly”.¹³ For in the eschatological Kingdom, the transitoriness of exilic history will at last have been supplanted

by the permanent fulfillment of the Redemption; the *sukka*, as it were, will at last be replaced by the Temple rebuilt in the Land. But the celebration of *Shemini Atseret* offers further hints as to the suppressed meaning of the entire *Sukkot* cycle which it consummates. Since the Middle Ages at least, the diasporic second day of this concluding feast—kept just one day in the Land of Israel—has been designated *Simhat Torah*, the time of “rejoicing” in the Torah.

Simhat Torah invites two additional observations. First, it has itself become by custom a momentous occasion of “new beginnings” by virtue of the cycle of Torah readings for the preceding year being finished on this day and begun immediately anew with the first chapters of *Genesis*. Since the Torah has always been construed as the very “life” of Israel, what better hidden cipher of an older and evidently forgotten association of *Shemini Atseret* with the eschatological renewal of Israel’s national life in a future Kingdom of God?¹⁴ Such renewal is, of course, also alluded to by the day’s *haftara* from the opening of the Book of *Joshua*, which by implication locates that new beginning in the Land regained.

Secondly, *Simhat Torah* occasions the most exuberant outpouring of joy—as its name implies—of any season in the Judaic liturgical year which it brings to a cathartic climax. This is not accidental or surprising since from time immemorial the Judaic tradition has always known the Torah itself to mandate *Sukkot* as a time of year singularly dedicated to the expression of joy: “*VeSamahtha behagekha . . .*” (*Deut.* 16:14). But what is noteworthy is this association of *Sukkot* precisely with joy as such—undoubtedly traceable in remotest antiquity to the joy inspired by the ingathering of the autumnal harvest; for joy rooted in the agricultural cycle of the seasons would provide a natural spiritual foundation and vehicle for the even fuller, uniquely profound joy occasioned by reaching the “autumn” of history—the endtimes inaugurating the *human* harvest of redemption, the ingathering of the exiles. And that joy, swelling even through the discomfiting events breaking forth in those endtimes, would attain its height of completeness only with the actual establishment of the Kingdom of God as history yields to a fully redeemed new beginning. Accordingly, *Sukkot* rejoicing reaches its often ecstatic fulfillment on *Simhat Torah*.¹⁵

Even more hauntingly with the inclusion of *Shemini Atseret*, the ritual practices enacting the *Sukkot* festival have the uncanny feel of a palimpsest, an ancient parchment from which traces of a once vivid inscription have worn all but completely away. For nowhere in these

richly etched practices is the theme of the Redemption expressly announced or granted an unambiguously clear voice—yet the aura of its presence hovers everywhere. All the detailed gestures have been faithfully preserved, yet their true significance appears obliterated and their meanings curiously reassigned. Penetrating more deeply into the recesses of that significance, the impression quickens that one is deciphering a mysteriously cryptic message holding the key to buried tradition and effaced memory. But if tradition pertaining to *Sukkot* has indeed been buried, if memory has indeed been effaced, that is not a mere dusty curiosity of the past having no great import except to scholars; it is a situation that continues daily to shape the Jewish present, a reality perhaps still molding *the very Judaic consciousness of historical time itself*.

One fragment of this message from a mysteriously shrouded past, just exposed to view, seems to be a joy once specifically directed at the anticipated *redemption* that somehow, at some point, became diverted toward a more general celebration of *Torah*. The impression of confronting a peculiar cipher becomes overwhelming in turning from the explicit ritual vocabulary and behavioral embodiment of *Sukkot* to the festival's less conspicuous underlying symbolic matrix: the motif of *water*.

WATER AS INTEGRATING SYMBOL

However enigmatic the relationship between *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atseret*, the festival days are woven together by the motif of water, exhibiting itself in several ways. Chief among them is the theme of rain, which bridges any enigmatic gap between *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atseret*. According to tradition, judgment is made during *Sukkot* with respect to the allotment of rain that Heaven will bestow during the coming year; and on *Shemini Atseret* a formal prayer for rain begins that will be offered regularly for the next half year, the duration of the rainy season in the Land of Israel.¹⁶

Two aspects of the handling of this rain theme on *Sukkot* are perplexing. First of all is its ritual expression, consisting in solemnly joyous circumambulations around the synagogue known as *hoshanot*. These processions continue each day, intensifying on the seventh day of *Sukkot*, known as *Hoshana Rabba*—Great *Hoshana*. They are performed carrying the *arba'a minim*, symbol of integral unity. Their oft-repeated refrain, the word *hoshana*, means "Please save!" What strikes one as curious is the relative *scarcity* of specific pleadings for rain. After an introduction, the second petitionary verse focuses on the "founda-

tion stone, chosen Temple . . . residence of Your splendor." The third recalls the sufferings of Israel, the nation that "while vanquished in exile . . . learns Your awesomeness." In other words, these two verses reiterate the dual foci of *Sukkot*—the "*sukka*" of exile and the Temple of the Land. Only now do subsequent verses turn to requests for rain. The concluding petition for the six days preceding *Hoshana Rabba* reads:

Save Your people and bless our heritage, tend them and elevate them forever . . . that he bring about justice for His servant and justice for His people, Israel, each day's need in its day; that all the peoples of the earth shall know that the Lord is God, there is no other.¹⁷

Here the salvation of Israel is clearly linked to its priestly and eschatological mission, highlighted on *Sukkot*, of drawing all nations to acknowledge that the Lord is "One and His Name One."

What does this context of petitioning for historical salvation, a major theme of *Sukkot*, have to do with the prayers for rain which it frames, the prayers that ostensibly occupy the foreground of attention in the *hoshanot*? A clue might be found in the delay of the formal liturgical prayer for rain—*until Shemini Atseret*! The straightforward reason for this delay is, of course, to ensure that use of the *sukka* will not be hampered by moisture. Whatever the reason, though, recitation of this text, the *Geshem* prayer, on *Shemini Atseret* implies that the season of *anticipating rain* has concluded and been succeeded by the season of *actual rainfall*, however copious or meager. But the contrast between *Sukkot* as "anticipation" and *Shemini Atseret* as "actualization" is not unfamiliar to us with reference to a central theme of this festival season: *redemption*. Since rain effects the renewal of life, one might wonder if rain here functions as a symbol of God's *redeeming power* operating in *history* as well as nature.

It is almost as though the advent of the rainy season furnishes the pretext for an enormous, mounting cry of the people of Israel for the Lord to hasten salvation and bring about the Redemption for which all yearn. But perhaps, in earlier days of a now forgotten tradition, it was *the other way around*—the ancient agricultural hope for rain simply highlighting and underscoring, as background context, the pleas for the historical Redemption that Israel so faithfully awaits. This would make fully intelligible the delay of the formal liturgical prayer for rain until *Shemini Atseret*, once again confirming the underlying relationship between *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atseret*: *Sukkot* evoking the passage through time until the end of days—*aharit ha-yamim*—when the epoch

of awaiting the Redemption is drawing to a close and the harvest of history is being gathered, *Shemini Atzeret* evoking the subsequent age of actually inhabiting a redeemed world—a world awash, so to speak, in tangible “waters of salvation.”

Granted a probable symbolic association of rain with the renewal of life, a second perplexing aspect of the rain theme emerges: might it not more logically have been connected not with *national* redemption but with the *individual* moral and spiritual renewal accomplished on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, just five days prior to *Sukkot*? After all, the advent of the rains *recurs annually*, as does the season of personal renewal of one’s inner life. Why not a liturgical symbolism that connects the rains with regular renewal obtained through individual penitential return to God, bringing forgiveness, cleansing and healing from the transgressions of the past year? Why the association of seasonal rains not with individual repeated return to God but with singular national redemption?

Addressing the issue of rain symbolism effectively requires an analytic probe of the basis for all water symbolism in Torah tradition and its later extensions: the climate and geography of the Land of Israel. That Land exhibits not just one but *two* geographies, each with its own distinct climate. The formative experiences of the biblical people of Israel were shaped by both these natural environments. First is the *temperate agricultural landscape* dominating northern and western regions of the Land of Israel. Here is the fabled “land of milk and honey”, verdant and fruitful in its *natural* passage through the seasonal cycle of dew in summer and rain in winter. The second environment surrounds, conditions and delimits this “land of milk and honey”: the *arid wilderness* through which the People made a long and harrowing *historical* passage to reach its fertile haven.

Each environment has its own characteristic manifestation of water: for the temperate zone, most certainly *rain*, but for the wilderness the *oasis*. Whereas rainfall is predictable in temperate areas, the chance oasis is always counted a near miraculous surprise amidst the desolate stretches of the desert. This sense of miracle may be poetically enhanced by images of fountains shooting forth or living waters suddenly appearing in the wilderness—images with which the great prophets of redemption from Isaiah to Zekharya abound.¹⁸ And for good reason. If rain, in its milder contrast with the dry season, connotes *expected nurture*, the oasis presents a much starker contrast between water, as the numinous power to redeem from destruction, and the surrounding wasteland as ever impending threat of death. Thus rain would indeed associate most

naturally with the recurrent and open availability of individual divine forgiveness, whereas the oasis conjures a sense of the unique collective miracle of the Redemption, abruptly springing forth out of a baneful and life-threatening “nowhere”—out of, in other words, the mystery of historical concealment.

True enough, the coming of the rains might seem most immediately to symbolize the cyclically manifest *annual* power of renewal that supports the message of individual repentance during the *Yamim Nora'im*, the penitential Days of Awe. Yet fortified and permeated by the wilderness signification of water as miraculous “wellsprings of salvation,” the rains could also come to symbolize the *ultimate* renewal of life at the season of the Redemption. And that is exactly what appears to happen during the *Sukkot* festival: rain becomes surcharged with the additional forceful meaning of *salvation itself*; waters from heaven above and wilderness below blend, rain and oasis symbolism merge, natural and historical passages fuse, and *water as such* for a time radiates the numinous power of Divinity, working moment by moment to prepare and lift the reality of the Redemption from its desolate concealment in the depths of history to burst forth as a fountain of living waters, injecting unexpected life into the surrounding wilderness.

And if we insist on further investigating why rain symbolism detaches from its presumptive natural association with the *Yamim Nora'im* only to bond in this fashion with *Sukkot*, the profoundest answer may lie in the spiritual insight that *Sukkot* alone truly *completes* the *Yamim Nora'im*; for individual *teshuva*, return to God, can be fully secured only when national redemption substantially abolishes the conditions for repetitive individual transgression. Hence the cry of *hoshana*, “please save!”, implicitly resonates throughout and thus unifies the entire fall festival season, integrating the quest for definitive individual renewal with the preconditional hope for final corporate salvation.

With these realizations, we have, in all likelihood, stumbled upon the secret of the most obscure, yet inescapably crucial, dimension of the *Sukkot* festival as practiced in antiquity during the days of the Temple. At that time, the most abandoned outpouring of joy during the entire festival season was reserved for the ecstatic nocturnal celebration during the seven days of *Sukkot* proper, known as *simhat bet ha-shoeva*. The central event of this elaborate ritual, at which joy erupted to its fervent peak, was a unique anointing of the Temple altar not only with wine, its usual libation, but also with *water*.¹⁹ How does wine differ from water? Wine is the transformative product of collaboration between God and a

humanity mandated to be God's partner in developing and completing the Creation. Water, on the other hand, is the pure product of God alone, available only through divine gift and not to be concocted by any human devise or intervention, noble and necessary as that often may be.

Within the framework of *Sukkot*, wine therefore becomes a symbol of *history itself*, wherein humanity strives to grow through active transformative engagement with the natural world. Water, in contrast, can once again only signify *the Redemption* when the pure wellsprings of salvation will gush forth; when a supernatural God, superseding all creaturely exertions, alone puts the final touches, as only God can do, on those long-protracted human efforts. The fuller meaning of *simhat bet ha-shoeva* and its companion mitsva *nisukh ha-mayim*, the drawing of the waters from fathomless mythic wells below, now stands transparently illuminated. It is an affirmation of the most undauntedly joyous and faithful confidence, in the midst of a history doggedly stretching on toward an end of days too long forestalled: that despite every obstacle the Redemption *will indeed* surely come, the wellsprings of salvation will yet surely overflow with graciousness, as certainly as the one God whose Name is One is the one and only Author of Creation and omnipotent Lord of a still unfolding, divinely unified drama of history.

BURIED TRADITION AND EFFACED MEMORY

Internal evidence from the extant observance of *Sukkot* continues to confirm the strange yet coherent implication that this tradition does not entirely understand itself or, at least, conceals its own deepest significance that the true meaning of the festival lies submerged in the hidden integration of preserved yet incompletely comprehended details that actually body that meaning forth. The surmise thus becomes more and more credible that, at some juncture in the history of Torah tradition, a kind of disorientation set in. Somehow, whether inadvertently or intentionally, the tradition seems to have lost its bearings, developing selective forgetfulness with respect to some of its own roots and symbolisms.

Should this be the case, another sort of internal evidence should present itself within the extant tradition. No impulse runs deeper within Torah Judaism than to honor the supreme authority of the written Torah, as interpreted by trusted sages. If the suppressed identity of *Sukkot* is its full character as the Feast of the Redemption, that identity must have been grounded in and supported by specific Torah texts. As the full meaning of *Sukkot* collapsed into oblivion, for reasons yet to be

grasped, cognizance of those texts as the foundation of the festival would likewise have been veiled. Conversely, if our effort to recover that meaning is not thoroughly misguided, it might now be feasible to locate Torah passages which possibly belong to the “buried tradition” of *Sukkot* as it was once construed. Two such passages invite particularly crucial speculation on their relationship to a possible “buried tradition.”

Little doubt can now exist of the centrality of water symbolism to *Sukkot* as Feast of the Redemption. It is obvious enough not to have required previous remark, however, that only water capable of *sustaining* and *renewing* life—i.e., pure and potable water—can function as a symbol of divine redeeming power. In this regard, it may be instructive to analyze the *first instance* of potable water encountered by the People of Israel during their wilderness journey after escape from the Egyptians—after, in other words, passage through the Sea of Reeds had initiated them as people of God, instrument of the Redemption. For it is this instance that would likely have established the oasis paradigm of “*living waters in the wilderness*” as the central prophetic ensign of redemption.

The encounter we seek is not long in appearing, occurring just after the Exodus narrative proper concludes with the Song of Miriam in *Exodus* 15:21. In verse 23, the Israelites come to the bitter waters of Mara which Moses sweetens with divine help. And in verse 27

. . . they came to Elim, where were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there by the waters.²⁰

Rabbi Elie Munk remarks, “The twelve springs mentioned in this verse are destined to nourish the seventy palm trees. Now, the same relationship exists on the spiritual plane between the twelve Jewish tribes and the seventy nations of the world.”²¹ Within Torah tradition, *water* is also, whatever its other significations, generally understood to symbolize *Torah* itself. Pursuing the implications of this symbolism, when the vessels of the seventy nations, i.e., humanity as an *integral whole*, are filled to overflowing with as much “*water*”—made available through the wellsprings of priestly *Israel*—as they can hold, *that condition could only signify the universal Redemption when the “earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”*

No sooner has Israel emerged from the Sea of Reeds, therefore, freshly initiated as “kingdom of priests” and instrument of universal redemption, than the *conclusion* of its redemptive career is already anticipated at Elim: in the beginning is the end, in the acorn the oak dwells. Here, after the bitterness of Mara, the people made its first real encamp-

ment, for the first time ceasing its wilderness journeying—foreshadowing, perhaps, its *ultimate* cessation of wandering, after the bitterness of history itself has abated, at the time of the Redemption. The springs at Elim, in effect, identify the Torah *substance* of that Redemption through paradigmatic water symbolism which might once have marked *Exodus* 15:27 as a crucial textual source for understanding *Sukkot* as the Feast of the Redemption. But what of the process through which acorn will grow into oak? What of the historical *form* through which the Redemption, marked by universal dissemination of Torah, will eventually emerge into concrete manifestation out of a past of Israel's bitter exile? Perhaps the Torah narrative, as it continues to unfold, sheds light on these questions as well.

As Israel's journey through the Sinai wilderness now proceeds, it traces a historical path that will be recapitulated annually in the prescribed Torah festival calendar. Thus the festival year begins with Passover, *Pesah*, ritually reenacting the Exodus itself. Fifty days later the festival calendar arrives, as did the original Israelites, at Mt. Sinai to receive the revealed Torah—commemorated by *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks. These parallels are reasonably evident. Somewhat less obvious is the purport of the next major historical occurrence in the Torah narrative—Israel's defection to the Golden Calf and subsequent contrition, upon which Moses obtains new tablets to replace those he broke in rage. Given that this narrative recounts the first important episode of transgression and repentance in the life of the People of Israel, tradition discerns in it the prototype for the next major liturgical period after *Shavuot*: the autumnal season of returning to God, culminating in the Day of Atonement.²² In the festival calendar, *Yom Kippur* is followed almost immediately by *Sukkot*. And so we might now wonder what the next significant event in the Torah narrative might be—for that would presumably correspond to the Feast of Tabernacles.

Immediately following the episode of the Golden Calf, recounted in *Exodus* 32-34, the actual building of the *Mishkan*, the wilderness dwelling of the Divine Presence, unfolds in an extended narrative. From *Exodus*, Chapter 35, through *Leviticus*, Chapter 9, the Torah narrative dwells almost exclusively on the *physical establishment and dedication of the first portable House of God*, taking up in turn the procuring of construction materials and appointments, the details of its design and setting up, the sacrificial acts to occur within it, and the consecration of its altar and priesthood through which the Tabernacle as well becomes hallowed for use. Does all this have any thematic connection with *Sukkot*?

Even to pose this query is to be jolted into recollection that, apart from the *sukka* itself with its signification of exilic history, *Sukkot* touches upon little that does *not* relate thematically to subsequent *re-establishments* and dedications of the House of God in future generations.

Two *haftarot* of the festival describe, as we have noted, the consecration of the immediate successor to the wilderness Tabernacle—the Solomonic *First Temple*, built in the Land of Israel. Interestingly, *Ezra* 3:1-4 specifies that construction of the post-Babylonian *Second Temple* began with the altar, first used and presumably consecrated in the month of *Sukkot*. The roots of the rabbinically ordained festival of *Hanuka*, which rededicated the Second Temple after defilement by the Syrian Greeks, are intentionally entangled from Hasmonean times with *Sukkot*; the very word *Hanuka* means “dedication.” And the second thematic focus in the elliptical structure of *Sukkot* as observed today could be described no more succinctly than as “establishment of the messianic *Third Temple*” at the time of the redemption.

But the relationship between the consecration of the original House of God, the *Mishkan* or Tabernacle, and the final House of God, the messianic Temple, extends far beyond this in specificity and intimacy. For oral tradition adds a striking detail to the written Torah’s account of the last phase in that process of consecration:

At the end of the previous Sidrah, Aaron and his sons were instructed to remain at the Tent of Meeting for seven full days while Moses performed the inauguration service, which began on the twenty-third of Adar. Each of the seven days, Moses erected the Tabernacle, performed the entire service himself, and disassembled the Tabernacle when the service was done. The inauguration period climaxed with the consecration of Aaron and his sons as *kohanim* on the eighth day. . . . On that day, the Tabernacle was erected permanently and the *kohanim* assumed their new role.²³

However odd this repeated dismantling of the *Mishkan* may seem, at least one implication, one inherent meaning, of the ritual deconstruction is manifestly clear: after *seven days* during which the House of God cannot truly stand, as though sufficient groundwork to support it were lacking, on the *eighth day* it is at last established on a permanent footing. But we surely are no strangers to the notion of an “eighth day” when the House of God will be fully and permanently secured! This theme resides at the very heart of *Shemini Atseret*, which we have surmised represents the eschatological Kingdom of God, centered upon

the messianic Temple and inaugurated by the closing events of history—the endtimes represented within the *seven days* of *Sukkot* proper. Then the next significant occurrence following the Golden Calf episode, an event prefiguring *Yom Kippur*, is indeed, in exact sequence within the Torah narrative, this seven-day consecration of the *Mishkan*, completed on the eighth day. Here surely lies the core paradigm for the *innermost meaning* of the full eight-day Feast of Tabernacles, found precisely in the account of establishing the wilderness *Mishkan*—just where it might have been anticipated to reside.²⁴

With these scriptural parallels excavated, the pristine heart of *Sukkot* as the Feast of the Redemption has been stripped of its last veil, its rootage in *Torat Moshe* exposed for all to behold. The underlying theme of this Feast together with its “eighth day” is now disclosed, quite simply, as: *establishing the House of God that can permanently stand*. From the period of the original House, the wilderness *Mishkan*, it was on the “eighth day” that the House of God was genuinely secured for ongoing use. So it was for the First Temple (*I Kings* 8:65-66). So also for the reconsecrated Second Temple, whose dedication (*Hanuka*) was completed only on the “eighth day” after defeat of Greek overlords. And so it will be for the Third Temple which, after a “seventh day” finale to an agonizingly protracted history, will at long last, on the “eighth day” of the long awaited and too long deferred harvest time of Redemption, arise and forever after reside at the sacred center of the Land of Israel.

Thus the discrepancy between the scholarship of T. P. Jenney and J. L. Rubenstein stands resolved. Present findings urge the conclusion that *both* scholars are correct in their positive assertions. *Sukkot* is, indeed, ably construed as the “Temple festival *par excellence*”—or, more precisely, the festival of establishing and dedicating the House of God. But it is *this very fact* which, especially in light of the *Mishkan* consecration narrative treated by *neither* scholar, confirms *Sukkot’s essential eschatological thrust*, profoundly implicit in the very historical and theological contours of the Torah itself; it required only the loss of the First and then the Second Temple to bring it fully into the open. Recent historical studies thus confirm that the extant Judaic tradition—including its adjunct secular scholarship—not only fails to perceive the full centrality of the theme of Redemption that many source materials imply is present in *Sukkot*—but *until this very day* remains impervious to that theme *even as it informs the detailed traditional observance of the festival itself*. All this serves only to heighten the ever more pressing question of

how this curious state of affairs came to be.

As late as the first century C.E., it is likely that ordinary Jews still understood *Sukkot* in its full eschatological significance. This is suggested, for example, by the sectarian Jewish disciples of Jesus greeting their messianic candidate, entering Jerusalem at *Pesah* around the year 30 C.E., with spontaneous *hoshanot*, carrying *lulavim*—in this context clearly demonstrating a popular association between *Sukkot* and the *Geula*.²⁵ In 70 C.E., the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Yet a destroyed Temple was no novelty for Jews, so biblical faith in an intervening God of history could still persist and even, for some, increase. It was, in fact, only with defeat of Bar Kokhba in the next century that the apocalyptically intensified eschatological aspirations of some three centuries were finally buried—for Jerusalem's leveling was now, for the foreseeable future, brutally and irreversibly sealed.

At this point, it seems probable, the trauma of historical disappointment exceeded the capacity of the Jewish People to sustain hope for any prompt respite from *Galut*. And the full eschatological meaning of *Sukkot*, now transmuted into what could only be the bitterest reminder of dashed hopes, would have perpetually salted that mortal wound, perhaps tempting Israel to succumb to a despairing total loss of faith. Thus, it may be conjectured, the true larger significance of *Sukkot* as the Feast of the Redemption simply became buried together with a no longer sustainable biblical faith in imminent, political divine intervention—buried even though all the details of the *hag* were faithfully preserved intact and a less concrete rabbinic hope for speedy *Geula* resolutely maintained. Burying of the true meaning of *Sukkot*, it appears, was not something the people of Israel consciously intended, but a reflexive consequence—born of intolerable anguish—it could not avoid. Buried tradition and effaced memory, then, were likely the price of Israel's continuing its extended historical pilgrimage at all.

If today it is possible once again to begin perceiving under the rubble of history the long obscured light of a festival that the Rabbis uniquely designated *haHag*, the Festival *par excellence*, a festival that they once perhaps unmistakably celebrated as the Feast of the Redemption, it may be because with the Six Day War—however hard the remaining travails of history may be—the idea of a God Who intervenes in history toward a promised *Geula* became no longer so remote. And if the first glimmering dawn of the redemption has already in recent decades appeared, a recovery of the fuller meaning of *Sukkot* may help us in turn to perceive that growing light all the more clearly.²⁶

NOTES

1. This famous passage from *Gevurot Hashem*, Ch. 46, provides the basis for the opening of Rabbi Nosson Scherman's Overview in the ArtScroll Mesorah series volume *Succos*, pp. 9-18.
2. *The Three Festivals: Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes on Pesach, Shavuot, and Succos*, anthologized and adapted by Rabbi Yosef Stern (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1993), p. 333.
3. All scriptural citations utilize the Jerusalem Bible (Jerusalem: Koren, 1969), with proper names rendered in English. For a presentation of the theme of *ahdut*, "oneness" or "unity" in Judaism, see my short article by that name in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (eds.), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1987), pp. 1025-32.
4. *Isaiah* 19:24-25.
5. *Numbers* 13.
6. *Sukkot* 37b.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Numbers* 29:12-39 and *Sukkot* 55b.
9. *Isaiah* 56:7.
10. *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, trans. Nosson Scherman (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1988), p. 195. Cf. note on p. 194: "This phrase was used by God when He promised to restore the kingship of the Davidic dynasty [and] also refers to the Temple, which is called David's because he longed to build it and prepared for its construction."
11. *Isaiah* 65:17.
12. *Sukka* 55a. Cf. *Seforno Emor* 23.
13. Cf. *Sukka* 48a.
14. See, for example, *Sifre Deut.* 45.
15. Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, second Rebbe of the hasidic Gur dynasty, known as the *Sefat Emet*, may have come as close to penetrating the messianic dimension of *Shemini Atzeret* as any recent Jewish thinker. His ideas, as presented by Rabbi Moshe Apter, can be surveyed in *The Joy of Sukkos* (New York: C.I.S. Publishers, 1992). For example, pp. 136-37: "Shemini Atzeret is . . . the final revelation These are the twenty-one days that the Jewish nation toils to reveal Hashem's kingdom, the World-to-Come—the days of *Mashiach* On the twenty-first day [from Rosh Hashanah], we have arrived at a dimension of time which is beyond time. It is the time of I-will-be—but is not yet to be—the World-to-Come." *Sefat Emet's* primary tendency would appear to etherealize *olam ha-ba*, the world to come, beyond its earthly signification as the fulfillment of *universal* (not only Jewish) history which *Shemini Atzeret* in fact appears to stress: "The nations of the world all have the ambition to rule the world. Their actions are divisive and fragmenting...But the eighth day is unity and true peace. This day is reserved for the Jewish nation . . . (p. 141)." Cf. the even stronger expression cited in Stern, p. 370: "The seven days of Succos are a time of material abundance, a time when Jew and Gentile alike are showered with Hashem's bounty, and all the pleasures of this world are avail-

able. Shemini Atzeres, however symbolizes the spiritual pleasures of Olam HaBa, which are granted exclusively to the Jewish people on the (day which is reserved for them), the eighth day.” Yet the two perspectives, stressing the historical and spiritual aspects of the *hag* respectively, may be reconciled simply through observing that the singularity of Israel, undoubtedly represented by the one *korban* of *Shemini Atzeret*, also correlates both with the uniqueness of the One God and the unified wholeness of humanity and Creation which becomes fully actualized at the Redemption.

16. *Rosh Hashana* 1.2 and *Ta'anit* 1:1-2.
17. See *ArtScroll Siddur*, pp. 726-41, for complete *hoshanot* texts.
18. See, for example, *Isaiah* 35:1, 6-7; 41:18; 43:19-20. Also *Zekharya* 14:8 and *Psalms* 107:33, 35.
19. For a more detailed brief description with source references, see “The Water-Drawing Festival—Triumph of the Oral Law” by Rabbi Zev W. Gold in *Mayanot: Jewish Teacher's Companion; I: The Festivals* (Jerusalem: Word Zionist Organization, 1972), pp. 121-28.
20. This verse was brought to my attention by Dr. Richard Hoch during a conversation in the winter of 1993 while he was concluding his doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Santa Barbara.
21. Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (trans. E. S. Mazer), vol. 2, “Shemos” (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1994), p. 608.
22. Cf. *Rashi* on *Deuteronomy* 9:10.
23. *The ArtScroll Series Chumash (Stone Edition)*, ed. Rabbi Nosson Scherman (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1993), note to *Leviticus* 9 on p. 588. Cf. *Rashi* *Naso* 7:1, *Rashbam Tetsave* 29:3.
24. For discovery of the foregoing correspondence between Torah narrative and order of the *hagim*, I am deeply indebted to Dr. David Raush who, he indicates, noticed it only because of my understanding of *Sukkot-Shemini Atzeret* which informed his inspection of the Torah text.
25. *Gospel of John* 12:12-13.
26. Further documentation from Torah and other sources, and/or critical insights, will be gratefully welcomed by the author. Generous help and encouragement have already been received from Rabbis Marshall Berg, F.E. Rottenberg and Yitzchak Abramson, among others, and is appreciatively acknowledged.