

Heading Back to Reality

Whether we like it or not, change and transition are part of our lives. We can set to follow one schedule or routine only to have it thrown out of whack by something unexpected. The same goes with the Jewish calendar. We can bask in the heat of summer, but fall will come in due time. Similarly, can love the High Holy Day season but eventually it will come to an end and we will head back to reality.

While there is a dispute as to whether Shemini Atzeret is a רגל בפני עצמו, a holiday in and of itself, or the 8th Day of Sukkot, all agree that after Shemini Atzeret the High Holy Days are over. Some synagogues change the ark and curtains right after Shemini Atzeret. All agree that one no longer eats in the Sukkah after that holiday is completed.

A special prayer is recited upon leaving the Sukkah for the final time each year. The prayer goes as follows: יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותנו, כשם שקמתי וישבתי בסכה זו, כך אזכה בשנה הבאה לישב בסכת עורו של אבותינו! לשנה הבאה בירושלים!
“May it be your will G-d and G-d of our ancestors that just as I got up and dwelt in this Sukkah, so too may I

merit in the year to come to dwell in the Sukkah made out of the skin of the Leviathan. Next year in Jerusalem!” This is a prayer for the Messiah to usher in the World to Come, the same reason we read the Haftarah of Gog of Magog, the apocalyptic, cataclysmic battle ushering in the Messiah. We are praying for change; to leave this physical world and bask in the glory of a Messianic Age.

According to Jewish tradition, the mythic sea monster known as the Leviathan will be slain as one of the steps to usher in the Messiah.¹ Many scholars, including Maimonides, highlight that we will feast on the Leviathan in the Messianic Age. The question, however, remains In a class on this topic, Rabbi Ethan Tucker asks “what will happen to Leviathan’s inedible hide? This prayer prompts us to imagine it as the material out of which we construct our sukkah. Animal hides are completely invalid for *sekhakh*, the sukkah’s water-permeable roof—we will see why below—so, the image of Leviathan’s skin here is meant to conjure up the walls of our future sukkah in our mind’s eye. Why are we talking about the sukkah’s walls at all? Isn’t *sekhakh* the essence of what

¹ Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 75a.

a sukkah is about, the part that for one reference to this must be carefully constructed to conform to the expectations of our halakhic canon? Why would the walls be the focus of our point of departure?²

As Rabbi Tucker points out, rabbinic tradition teaches that the material to make the walls of the Sukkah is immaterial. The Mishnah only focuses on the roof, of *sekhakh*. It teaches: “...This is the rule: Anything that can receive impurity and which does not grow from the ground may not be used as *sekhakh*; anything that cannot receive impurity and which does grow from the ground may be used as *sekhakh*. Bundles of straw, wood and reeds may not be used for *sekhakh*. But if any of these bundles were untied, they are valid, and they all are valid as walls.”³ The medieval commentator Rashi continues on this theme, asserting “And they are all”—of the items that are invalid for *sekhakh* . “Valid as walls”—Because whenever the verse speaks of a sukkah , it is referring to *sekhakh* , because a wall is not called a sukkah ...”⁴ This is

² Rabbi Ethan Tucker, “The Sukkah of the Leviathan”-Sukkot 5778.

³ Mishnah Sukkah Chapter 1 Mishnayot 4-5.

⁴ Rashi on Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 12a

further pointed out by Rambam, who asserts “דפני סוכה כשרין מן הכל”/The walls of a sukkah may be made of anything.”⁵

This raises the question-if we don't care what comprises the walls of our contemporary Sukkot, why should it matter what the Messianic Sukkah's walls are made out of, and why should we make such a big deal out of this by saying a prayer upon leaving the Sukkah? The answer I want to present is that we are marking a transition. We had seven days of feasting in our temporary booths which despite the rain served as a nice respite from the ordinary routing of our lives. For some of us it might have been a vacation or a respite from reality. In a couple days more, we will be transitioning back to the “real world” with all of its routine yet with all of its challenges. We will be returning perhaps disappointed that the Messiah has not come and that we are unable to dwell in the Sukkah with Leviathan skin. Yet we are to return with undaunted hope and belief in a better future. That is precisely what the prayer we say today is about: just as we merit the physical joy of this Sukkot holiday, so too may we merit seeing a better future, a day where

⁵ Rambam Laws of Shofar 4:16

there is peace in the world and each of us can dwell in G-d's home, the great Sukkah in the Sky, made out of the Leviathan's skin.

Today we gather to say Yizkor, on this one extra day of Shemini Atzeret, the day on which G-d told us "Stay with me one more day." Though some of us might be eager to return to our routines; at JTS we said *המבדיל בין קדש לחול* and yelled the word *חול*-Yizkor cautions us to slow down and take a moment to remember our loved ones; from parents who gave us life to siblings who we reveled with playing with to children we nurtured to spouses with whom we share our deepest hopes and dreams. Yizkor hearkens us to close our eyes and remember the dear moments of love and friendship, joy and companionship.

Before we go, leaving the presence of G-d, let us take the time we need and deserve to remember our loved ones who are no longer physically present. We will also dedicate the memorial plaques purchased during the past year, honoring those who have chosen to give their loved ones a permanent remembrance in our Beit Midrash.

We continue with Yizkor in the booklets.