



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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Sukkot: A Holiday of Divine Parenting

Introduction

Do you like camping? The Torah directs the Jews to celebrate Sukkot by leaving our homes and moving to temporary structures roofed in foliage called sukkot, “because I caused Israel to dwell in sukkot when I took them out of Egypt.” (Lev. 23:43) It sounds simple, but identifying these huts in the original biblical desert camping trip is actually not so straightforward. What really were these huts? And what is their significance for us today?

Furthermore, unlike Passover and Shavuot that commemorate specific events in time, i.e., leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah, the Israelites apparently dwelled in sukkot continuously for forty years. Why then, do we celebrate Sukkot specifically in the fall?

On a basic level, a simple response to that question would be, that Sukkot, like the other two major festivals mentioned above, combines both historical and agricultural traditions. It commemorates the shelter experienced by the Israelites in the desert, celebrates the end-of-summer harvest and kicks-off the winter growing season with supplications for rain. Thus, celebration of Sukkot in the fall is not because of our desert experiences but because of the agricultural calendar. But in addition, we will see that there is a deeper connection between water and Sukkot that goes beyond agricultural needs.

By revisiting the Israelite wanderings in the desert and examining the motifs of water and divine shelter in the midrash, we will gain a new understanding of Sukkot as well as God’s nurturing, parental love for Israel. These insights will not only enhance our experience of this colorful holiday, but also illuminate our relationship to year-round concerns such as consumption, care provision, the environment and gender.

A Holiday of Water Observances

The Mishnah states that just as the individual fate of each human being is judged by God on Rosh Hashanah, Divine decisions about water for the coming year – i.e. about rainfall -- are made on Sukkot (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2). Similarly, Zechariah 14: 16-17 foretells of an age in which not observing Sukkot will be punished with drought. Many of the Sukkot rituals, both those observed only in the time of the Temple and those still observed today, relate to the motif of rainfall and water.

1) The four species

The most common ritual associated with the holiday is the waving of the [lulav \(palm branch\) and etrog \(citron\)](#), together with the myrtle and willow in six directions. Rich in symbolism, the four species carry many layers of meaning. The phallic nature of the palm and citron symbolizes fertility while the combining of the four species [represents Jewish unity, biodiversity and co-dependence](#). Most of all, these are species that [require a lot of water](#), thus Rabbi Eliezer says, “These four species only come to obtain the favor of God about water. Just as it is impossible for these four species [to endure] without rain, so it is impossible for the world [to endure] without water” (Talmud Taanit 2b). By waving them around in synagogue, we emphasize our own dependence and entreat God for rain.



[Women shake lulav and etrog in Jerusalem](#)

2) The willow ritual

In Temple times, Jews would collect willow branches from Motza (a village close to Jerusalem) and bring them in a grand procession to the Temple. After circling the altar, crying out for salvation and blasting the shofar, the willows were assembled around the altar. Because willows grow in plentiful water, this too, seems to be [invoking the blessings of rain](#). A remnant of this ritual is still found in the [Hoshanot](#) in which worshippers parade around the synagogue in a procession with their 4 species while chanting prayers and calling out the refrain “save, please.” In Temple times, as now, the final day of Sukkot is called [Hoshana Rabba](#) on which additional prayers are recited, many of them referring to rain and agriculture, after which, [in a strange and little understood ritual](#), the willow branches are beat on the ground.

Finally, in Temple times, a major feature of the holiday was the water libation. While most sacrifices during the year were accompanied by wine libations, on Sukkot, these libations were augmented by a water libation. Water for these libations was drawn from the nearby Shiloah spring in an elaborate water drawing ceremony. This ceremony was preceded by a grand celebratory event called the [Simhat bet haShoevah](#). The Mishnah states that “whoever has not witnessed these celebrations has never in their life witnessed true rejoicing” (Mishnah Sukkah 5:1). These all night celebrations involved music, dancing, and light, and remain a feature of Sukkot festivities in [many places](#) today.

3) Clouds of glory

We are told to dwell in sukkot “in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelites live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 23:43). The sages disagree about how to identify this desert housing:

Rabbi Eliezer says: They were in the shelter of real sukkot.

Rabbi Akiva says: They were in the shelter of the clouds of glory.(Sifra Emor 12)

Rather than living in huts, Rabbi Akiva claims that the Israelites were sheltered in the desert by the divine “clouds of glory”. This understanding is perhaps not as far from the “pshat”, or simple reading, of the Torah as one might initially think since the verse uses a causative verb: God “*made* the Israelites dwell.” Does it make sense to credit God with establishing a shanty town? Furthermore, while tents are mentioned in the narratives of Israel’s desert travels, sukkot are not. Where would the Israelites get the foliage to build sukkot in any case? On the other hand, the Pillar of Cloud that miraculously protected and guided Israel in the desert plays a central role (Num. 9:15; Exodus 13:21; 14:19).

Take for example Numbers 9:15-18.

On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Pact; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until

morning. It was always so: the cloud covered it, appearing as fire by night. And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. At a command of the Lord the Israelites broke camp, and at a command of the Lord they made camp: they remained encamped as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle.

But rabbinic [midrash](#) shifts the original biblical meaning of the clouds. While in the Bible, clouds are a welcome source of protection (Isa. 4:5-6), they are also an awe inspiring symbol of God's mysterious, dangerous, and powerful presence. Clouds on the Mountain of Sinai and the Tabernacle indicate the forbidding presence of God (Exodus 19:16, 40:38). In contrast, in rabbinic imagination, the clouds of glory symbolize a different aspect of God's immanent presence –God'snurturing love. The following midrash portrays the clouds as a kind of "pay-it-forward" reward to the descendants of Abraham for the kindness he showed the visiting angels ([Gen. 19](#)):

With respect to Avraham it says: "they rested under the tree" So too, the Omnipresent gave God's children seven clouds of glory in the desert: one to their right, one to their left, one before them, and one behind them, one over their heads, and one was the Shekhinah that was amongst them, and one was the Pillar of Cloud that would go ahead of them and kill snakes and scorpions, burn brush and thorns, flatten the high places and raise the depths, and make them a smooth highway, as it says "the ark of the covenant traveled before them." Tosefta Sota 4:2

Here, the rabbis describe not one imposing Pillar of Cloud, but rather, seven loving, hovering clouds. The Israelites are not sent out alone to make their way in the treacherous desert. Quite the opposite, God is pictured here as a doting parent who holds their left hand and their right, walks before them and clears the path to make sure it is safe and comfortable.

Another midrash even imagines the clouds as providing dry-cleaning services for the Israelites in the desert—gently rubbing their magically growing clothing so that they stay clean along the dusty way (Deut. Rabbah 7:11).

Starting with Rabbi Akiva's understanding, we can say that the sukkot in the desert (referred to in Lev. 23:43) were far more than simply makeshift shelters in the desert, but rather, a spiritually intimate, all-encompassing, total-care experience! It is ironic, then, that the one service not provided by the clouds is rain.

4) Miriam's Well

How did the Israelites drink in the desert? Together with the seven clouds of glory, the rabbis related that a miraculous well accompanied the Israelites as they wandered. The Toseftan midrash cited above links the clouds and the well--both were rewards for Abraham's service:



Two women from the Kalberman family stand outside their sukkah belonging to Emanuel and Rosa Kalbermann. Standing on the left is Marta Rosenfeld Kalbermann, 1935, Mannheim, Germany. Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Steven Frank

With respect to Abraham it says, "Please take a bit of water" (Gen 19). So too, the Blessed Omnipresent gave Abraham's children a well in the desert that would overflow throughout the entire camp, as it says "The chieftains dug a well..." (Num. 21:18) which teaches that the well would go across the face of the whole camp and water the entire wasteland." (Tosefta Sota 4:2)

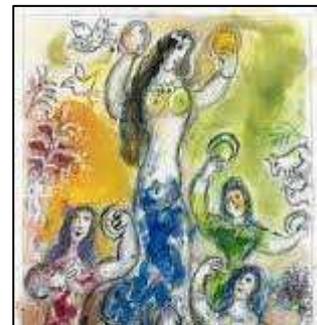
A more widespread tradition calls this "Miriam's Well." The hint for this understanding comes from the mysterious lack of water reported as occurring immediately after the death of Miriam:

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. (Numbers 20:1-2)

What could account for this juxtaposition in the Torah of Miriam's death with a water crisis? The following Talmudic passage answers this question by explaining that the well had been provided as a gift to the Israelites in reward for Miriam's righteousness and leadership. Upon her death, the well ceased to exist:

Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda says: The people of Israel had three excellent leaders – Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. Three good gifts were extended to the people of Israel on their behalf – the well, the clouds, and the manna. The well was provided due to the merit of Miriam, the clouds of glory because of Aharon, and the manna on account of Moshe. When Miriam died, the well disappeared, as it says: "The people of Israel, all of the congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin, and the people dwelt in Kadesh. Miriam died there and there she was buried." Immediately afterwards, the text states: "The congregation had no water, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon..." (Talmud Ta'anit 9a).

For this reason, throughout Jewish tradition the well is referred to as "Miriam's Well" (Talmud Shabbat 35b, Jerusalem Talmud Ketubot 67a). It makes sense that Miriam would be said to merit Divine provision of a miraculous well, given the connection she had with water even prior to the Israelites' experiences in the desert. Her most heroic appearances are as she waits to see Moses rescued at the Nile River and then arranges for him to be wet-nursed by his own mother (Exodus 2:1-10) and as she leads the Israelite women in song at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21). Even her name seems to allude to water, containing both the roots of water and sea. Miriam's name could be parsed as bitter water (Mar -Yam) or lofty water (Mei-Ram) or waters with a resh (Mayim +R).



[Marc Chagall, The Dance of Myriam](#)

The most colorful description of the well is found in Tosefta Sukkah 3:11

The well that accompanied Israel in desert was like this: It resembled a rock that was full [of holes] like a sieve, bubbling forth and rising as if from the mouth of a water bottle. With them, it ascended the mountains, and with them, it descended into the valleys. Wherever Israel dwelled, it dwelled across from them. There was a high place opposite the opening of the Tent of Meeting to which the princes of Israel would come. They would surround it with their staffs and recite the song, "Spring up, O well—sing to it— The well which the chieftains dug, Which the nobles of the people started With maces, with their own staffs." (Num. 21:17-18) And the water would bubble up like a pillar towards the heights. Everyone would take their staffs and draw water with it, each man towards his tribe and his family, as it says

“well was dug by chieftains” (Num. 21:17)...

It surrounded the entire camp of Israel, and it watered the entire wasteland, as it says, “Overlooking the wasteland” (Numbers 21:20) And it created large rivers as it says, “Rivers will wash” (Psalms 78:20).

And they would sit in light boats and travel to one another as it says, “and it flowed as a stream in a parched land” (Psalms 105:41).

And whoever traveled to the right, the water would flow to the right [for their convenience], and whoever traveled to the left, the water flowed to the left, and the water became a large river, and it would flow all the way to the Great Sea and bring all of the pleasures of the world from there, as it says “these forty years God went with you and you did not lack a thing.” (Deut. 2:7) (Tosefta Sukkah 3:11-13)

Like the hyper-protective clouds of glory, Miriam’s well is portrayed in this midrash as much more than a mere water source. It was an expression of Divine abundance in the form of deluxe services. Attention was personal—each individual tribe and family had water delivered to their door. And whatever path they decided to take, the water flowed for them in excess. Not only did they receive a surplus of water in the desert—the water served as a vehicle for physically connecting one another and transporting material delights from across the world. The people of Israel were literally inundated with water, demonstrating the love and personal care provided by an adoring motherly partnership—Miriam and God.

Now that we are aware that in rabbinic sources the clouds of glory are repeatedly coupled with the well, celebrating the divine protection of the clouds of glory on Sukkot can also remind us of the nourishment and care provided by Miriam and her well. Especially at this time of year in the Middle East, when until quite recently almost no water from the past winter’s rain remained at the bottom of our water cisterns, we express our dependence of God’s mercies through the water libation, the willow rituals and the shaking of the 4 species, and turn expectantly to the beginning of the rainy season.

Gender Perspectives

Part of what makes these midrashic depictions of the well so beautiful and inspiring is that they assume and even strengthen Miriam’s place as a significant figure in Jewish history. There are, of course, indications in the Torah of her stature: she is twice mentioned as a partner with Moses and Aaron (Numbers 12:10, Micah 6:4); the people of Israel wait for her when she is ill (Numbers 12:15); her death is noted in the Torah (Numbers 20:1); she is instrumental in saving Moses from the Nile (Exodus 2), and leads the women in song at the Red Sea (Exodus 15). However, in the entire Bible her name appears only sixteen times, while Moses is mentioned 770 times and Aaron 347 times. By associating them together so explicitly, the midrash makes Miriam a full-fledged member of a triumvirate of powerful leaders.

Similarly, by identifying Aaron, Moses and Miriam as jointly responsible for nurturing, nourishing, and protecting the Israelites, the midrash lays out a model of shared leadership (and by extension, parenting) in which specific gender roles are of secondary importance. What is more, God is the ultimate Jewish mother providing services as a stereotypical loving Mother in Heaven.

However, it is also interesting to identify some of the gender stereotypes at play in the midrash. Aharon provides the masculine protection of the clouds, while Miriam represents the feminine sustenance of water. Miriam is associated with the earth and the [lower waters](#) rather than the heavenly waters. [Susan Griffin](#) wrote about the deep associations in patriarchal cultures between women and the earth. However, even as gender roles may seem stereotypical, there are major shifts. As already mentioned, the three leaders are given equal status, importance, and power. Furthermore, Miriam and her well exhibit none of the passivity and sense of being

dominated which are characteristic of Griffin's earthly stereotypes. Both Miriam and her water initiate and rise up, and [as a result are a source of salvation](#).

Environmental Perspectives

So far, we have explored Rabbi Akiva's opinion and the midrashic portrayal of Sukkot as a celebration of God's deluxe care for us in the desert. As we sit in the sukkah during the holiday, we can imagine the clouds of glory that washed and ironed our clothes and swept the floor in front of us, in addition to Miriam's well that delivered water and the delights of the world to our doorsteps. Taken together, this is an experience of infinite divine, motherly love as expressed through not just plenty, but excess, and its consumption.

But what about Sukkot according to Rabbi Eliezer, who paints a much more mundane picture of desert life when he says we dwelt in physical sukkot? What kind of religious experience are we meant to have today when sitting in a sukkah?

The 12th century commentator, [Rashbam](#) makes a suggestion:

"The plain meaning of this [verse], is like those in the Talmud who say sukkot refers to actual huts. And this is the explanation: "Thou shall observe the feast of Tabernacles...after you have gathered in your corn and your wine" (Deut. 16:13). When you have gathered in the produce of the land, and your houses are full of good things, of corn, wine and oil, in order that you should remember that I made the children of Israel dwell in sukkot" in the wilderness for forty years, without settled habitation or inheritance. Therefore, give thanks to God who gave you an inheritance and houses full of good things. And do not say in your hearts "My strength and the might of my right hand has gotten me this wealth" (Deut. 8:17) ...Therefore, it is the practice to go out of houses full of good things at the time of the ingathering and to dwell in huts, in recollection of those who had no inheritance in the wilderness and no house in which to dwell. (Leviticus 23:43)

Instead of the all-encompassing care implied by the clouds of glory, living in actual shacks, according to the Rashbam, conveys two primary experiences: scarcity and vulnerability. When we have plenty, we need to remember poverty; and when we feel powerful, we need a dose of humility. Living in a flimsy hut for a week sensitizes us to our defenselessness and fragility, a little as it did in the vast, threatening desert. Similarly, Rabbi Isaac Arama, Akedat Yitzhak (15th Spain) lauds this experience of austerity and simplicity, for it helps to realign our priorities:

What is special about this holiday is that symbols and impression pertaining to this festival are such that one cannot ignore them. First, on this festival everyone leaves his/her money matters, merchandise and produce and all that we understand by property and goes into a tiny shack which contains but the daily meal and usually nothing more than a bed, table, chairs and lamp. This serves as a remarkable reminder to humans not to indulge in building imposing structures, impressing on them that the minimum is all that they need during their stay in this vestibule (this earthly abode) which is a temporary abode, as it teaches (Avot 4) "This world resembles a vestibule before the world to come, etc.". (Akedat Yitzhak 67, Lev. 23:43)

For Rabbi Arama, less is more. Spiritual heights, suggests Rabbi Arama, are to be found in eschewing materialism. And as the Rashbam explains, the sukkah is designed to remind us that everything we think we have built is really temporary, and that we always remain at God's mercy. And yet, as Rabbi Arama elucidates, modest but *sufficient* material wealth is also enough to experience Divine blessing.

The embrace of simplicity is more pressing today than ever before. Since the invention of the steam engine in 1712 and Adam Smith's capitalist manifesto, "The Wealth of Nations" in 1776,

a model of continuous increase in growth and consumption has fueled our notion of economic health. In the face of accelerating climate change, environmentalists have argued that infinite growth is not sustainable in the long term. [Deep economists](#) argue that growth is no longer making us happy. How many of the myriads of things we purchase in a year, they ask, contribute meaningfully to making our lives beautiful? In her popular book [Plentitude](#), Julie Schor argued for the smarter, more efficient, and more sustainable use of resources, while others have argued the virtues of [voluntary simplicity](#). The common denominator among these thinkers is the idea that we must embrace the notion of “less is more” for the overall good of society.

Once we understand the potential benefits of simplicity, we need not draw a stark contrast between the vulnerability we would have experienced living in shacks and the overwhelming care we would have experienced from the clouds of glory. Sometimes a loving parent indulges her child with physical pleasures, but sometimes she teaches her that more is not always better. Miriam’s well and the clouds of glory provided material plenty, but the physical nurturing was first and foremost an expression of emotional intimacy. The modesty of physical sukkot teaches us to sever the link between material excess and love. How often do we use physical indulgence as a substitute to fill emotional needs? What would we gain by weaning ourselves from this connection and satisfying our spiritual needs directly? In feeling vulnerability, we can also feel the wonder of simplicity. The wonders of nature, of sitting in an unpretentious shack on a sunny fall day can be enough to remind us that we are always surrounded completely with the wonders of divine love.

Conclusions

Sukkot is a holiday that celebrates divine abundance, but as we have seen, it also marks the need for a certain amount of simplicity in life. According to both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, the sukkot remind us that we are surrounded by the love and grace of a doting parent. In their fantastical portrayal of Miriam’s well and the clouds of glory, the rabbis heighten our sensitivity to God’s intimate, motherly love for Her children, as manifested in God’s intensive and copious nurturing. Echoes of the stereotype that Jewish mothers provide unendingly for their children might even be heard in this tradition. But as we have seen, blessing is also found in simplicity. Rabbi Eliezer reminds us that God also expressed divine adoration through minimalism.

In the desert, our vulnerability and dependence on divine protection, whether in the form of huts or clouds of glory, was always apparent. In many ways, the modern world is just as vast and challenging, but our permanent structures and piped-in water usually allow us to ignore its perils. By leaving the comfort of our homes for the modest protection of the sukkah, and by reminding ourselves of our dependence on rain and its seasonal cycles – and, more generally, upon a livable environment upon this planet -- we can become keenly aware both of our vulnerability and of God’s ever-present protection.

Questions for discussion

1) Imagine the spiritual experience of sitting in the sukkah according to Rabbi Eliezer, who says we dwelt in actual huts. What is this like? Then imagine the experience according to Rabbi Akiva, who said that Sukkot commemorates the clouds of glory. How do the experiences compliment and contrast each other? How might you decorate a sukkah to reflect each of these conceptions?

2) As noted, Miriam’s well and the clouds of glory provided extra protection as a way of expressing emotional attachment. In what areas of your life are emotional and physical needs naturally conflated? What are the consequences of this? What are the ways in which simplicity has allowed you to feel connection?

3) The imagery of God as provider and nurturer is remarkably feminine. Much has been written about the [economy of care](#), i.e., the fact that intimate care is still provided predominantly by women, even as women have also successfully entered the workforce. How does this language of God as care provider empower us as women, both to feel valued as providers of care and in encouraging our male peers to share the load?

Resources for further study

We have learned a little bit about Sukkot, its environmentalist echoes, and the way the 4 species represent bio-diversity. Read a different take of the focusing on the environmental aspects of Sukkot [here](#).

Watch some short takes on Sukkot by prominent Jewish scholars: [Dr. Jeremy Benstein](#) talks about the primal aspects of the lulav and etrog. [Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cordoza](#), talks about optimism and fragility as reflected in the sukkah.

Miriam is a remarkable Jewish heroine. Study more about her and how she has also made it into the Seder [here](#). As for her well, a number of stories are told of the healing power of its water. On this basis, a custom of drawing well water immediately after Shabbat became popular among Jewish women in medieval Germany. Read about it [here](#). In the 20th century a special ritual based on the above was created for women to include in the havdala ceremony (see [here](#)). According to one tradition, Miriam's well continues to exist in all generations; if so, where is the location of Miriam's Well now? Read about one attempt to locate it [here](#).

One of the most ancient synagogues in the world was discovered in excavations at Dura-Europos, Syria, with frescoes dating to 244 CE. Among the frescoes preserved is this picture of Miriam's well, in which many of the motifs of our toseftan midrash about the well can be found. The fresco and its connection to the ancient midrashim was first fully analyzed by Jo Milgrom, "Moses Sweetens the "Bitter Waters" of the "Portable Well": An Interpretation of a Panel at Dura Europos Synagogue," *Journal of Jewish Art* 5 (1978) 45-47.



[Dura Europos Fresco](#)

Read more on-line about the discovery and the dangers it faces in the face of the Syrian civil war [here](#). Read about its artistic significance [here](#) and its historical significance [here](#). Examine the image [here](#).