

Shemini Atzeret:

Certainly every Jewish Biblical holiday has a unique reason and purpose associated with it. Usually the reason is self evident, and is codified with a mitzvah as well. We can classify the biblical holidays into 2 general groups, the high holidays and the three regalim.

Rosh Hashanah is the day of judgement, and thus has the laws of shofar as a call to repentance (see rambam reason for shofar). Yom Kippur, the day of forgiveness, has the extensive Avodah service in the temple, as well as the 5 prohibitions pertaining to "inui".

When it comes to the regalim, however, we find a dual meaning. They are agricultural holidays as well as holidays commemorating some important event. This is reflected in the mitzvot of the day as well. Sukkot has the four species, pesach the korban haomer, and Shavuot the Bikkurim and shte halechem.

And then there are the events being commemorated. Pesach commemorates the exodus, with the mitzvot of matzah and the seder. Shavuot commemorates mattan torah; interestingly, this is only found in the oral torah, and indeed no mitzvah in the torah thus reflects this. Why is an interesting issue.

And then there is Sukkot. It is to commemorate the "Sukkot" that God had us dwell in in the wilderness, as the torah says in Vayikrah 23:43.

However, we find an ancient debate as to the meaning of this verse. It a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer, although the opinions are reversed between the Bavli and Sifra. One opinion is that Sukkos here refers to "Sukkos mamesh", actual huts, that the Jews dwelt in during their stay in the wilderness. The other opinion is that the Sukkah here are the clouds of glory that God protected the Jews with in the midbar. This opinion is reflected as well in Onkeles, who renders sukkah as "shelter of clouds".

Indeed, this debate was continued by the classical commentaries. Rashi, Ramban, and others, assume Clouds of Glory is the intent. This is backed up by the word "hoshavti" which implies God, not man, is the actor. Others, like Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, assume the pashtut is sukkot mamesh.

This debate however, is far more critical to the commandment than people realize. For the verse in question describes the purpose of the mitzvah. These two different interpretations, when taken to their logical conclusions, lead to two radically different views of what sukkos is all about.

Lets start with the clouds of glory opinion. This opinion is generally followed by sukkot liturgy, and it sets up sukkot as a holiday about "Tzila dimheminuta", sitting in godly shade (see ushpizin prayer). The idea here is that by leaving our permanent houses and entering a temporary structure, we demonstrate our perfect faith that all phenomena are subject to God's control. In a permanent house, it is easy to lose this feeling; when sitting in a hut, close to the elements and more under God's direct control, as it were, we enter into His shade and proclaim he is our sole protector.

I think this view is generally the view taken by most people when they think about sukkos. However, there is a totally different view, sukkot mamesh. As Rambam explains, we are remembering the hard times. While now we sit in comfort in our nice houses, once upon a time our ancestors had to dwell in mere huts. It is critical not to think kochi viotzem yadi is the reason we are sitting in comfort, but rather realize it is the hand of God and the merit of the avot, and that our ancestors weren't as lucky. Thus, we should not take our comfort for granted.

This view is the exact opposite of the previous one. The sukkah does not symbolize becoming closer to God's presence, but rather the pain and suffering of our ancestors. It is not the matzah of the holiday, but the marror.

Fascinatingly, these 2 opinions do not really change the integration of the two elements of sukkot, the harvest and the sukkah. Sukkot is a time when we gather in from the granary and winery. At the time of gathering in our bounty, we sit in a sukkah. This is a potentially spiritually harmful time, where one might forget God is the source of his bounty. Thus, we either enter an environment more directly influenced by God's presence to remind us he is the source, or we leave our home to remind ourselves that none of God's gifts are to be taken for granted. The result is the same.

However, these opinions diverge majorly when it comes to the symbolism of Shemini Atzeret. Indeed Shemini atzeres is most significantly characterized not by a mitzvah, but by a lack of one, namely sukkah and 4 species. Chazal said it is a regel bifnei atzmah, for several reasons, one of which is the change in sacrifices. Yet while it may be its "own holiday" it clearly is a continuation of sukkot as well.

In fact, both the word Atzeret, and the fact that it is the final day of the holiday, would lead us to expect it is the pinnacle. Indeed, this is exactly how the Rambam explains it. He says that the simcha cannot be complete while dwelling in uncomfortable huts, thus once we have finished commemorating the travails of our ancestors and internalize its lessons, we are given a day of pure happiness to celebrate. Similarly, Rambam interprets the four species not in light of the agricultural focus of the holiday, but along its commemorative theme (as backed up by its placement in the pesukim) as reminding us how we exchanged a barren wilderness for a bountiful land full of beautiful fruits. On Shemini Atzeret, we are no longer juxtaposing our current situation with our previous one, and thus the four species are dropped.

However, it is hard to see how Shemini Atzeret can be the pinnacle of the holiday according to the other opinion. Why is there no mitzvah of sukkah? Perhaps it is to allow us to take the mitzvah of sukkah, and continue it into our every day lives throughout the year. It is to teach us that this extra close relation to the almighty can be felt in the home as well, if we but internalize our relationship with him and how he is the source of all blessing.

This debate of clouds of glory or actual sukkot, while seemingly theoretical, is surprisingly codified in Shulchan Aruch. Bach suggests that this is because, based on the Torah's explicit description of its reason, sukkot is a unique mitzvah that requires meditation on its reason in order to fulfill it.

While the Shulchan Aruch paskens clouds of glory, I think that we can view the debate as one of primacy, but indeed both aspects are true. Thus, we can view the sukkah as a means of getting closer to God, but one that is deliberately uncomfortable. And Shemini Atzeret then gets this dual meaning as well. It is the day in which sukkot reaches its climax, whether by finally finishing the commemoration of the bad times and just focusing on the good, or by realizing that indeed we never needed a sukkah at all to feel God's divine presence.