

CLOUDS OF GLORY

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ויקרא כג:מב-מג

⁴²בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת: ⁴³לְמַעַן יָדְעוּ דִּרְתִּיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת
הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Vayikra 23:42–43

⁴²You will dwell in sukkot seven days—every
citizen in Israel will dwell in sukkot ⁴³in order
that they will know, your generations, that
I made Benei Yisrael dwell in sukkot when
I took them out of the land of Egypt; I am
Adonai, your God.

READING THIS VERSE casually, we would imagine that the *sukkot* we build are a relatively straightforward reproduction of the *sukkot* that God caused Benei Yisrael to dwell in while wandering for forty years. They were, presumably simple, temporary huts, with basically four walls, constructed and covered with vegetation. The *sukkot* that we dwell in for seven (or eight) days each year would seem to be those same *sukkot* that our ancestors lived in while wandering through the wilderness.

And yet, there are several problems with this reading of the verse. First, in the wilderness narratives, Benei Yisrael are always described as dwelling in tents (*ohalim*), not in *sukkot*. Bilam says “מה טבו אהליך יעקב” - How goodly are your tents, Ya’akov” (Bemidbar 24:5); he does not mention *sukkot*. Moshe hears the people weeping, each by the entrance of his tent (11:10). Datan and Aviram stand at the entrance to their tents (16:27).

Indeed, dwelling in tents makes sense in the context of a wilderness journey in a way that dwelling in *sukkot* does not. Wanderers in the desert usually dwell in tents made

of animal skins, which are more portable and durable, and easier to come by in the wilderness, than the vegetation needed for *sukkot*. *Sukkot* are more likely to be the dwelling places of farmers out in the field during the harvest and, for the most part, *Sukkot* is a festival of the fall harvest (see, e.g., Vayikra 23:39).

There is also an early Rabbinic dispute about what it means that Benei Yisrael were made to dwell in *sukkot*.¹

מכילתא מסכתא דפסחא יד

סכות ממש היו דכתיב “ויעקב נסע סכותה”
(בראשית לג:יז) דברי רבי אליעזר.

וחכמים אומרים אין סכות אלא מקום שנאמר
“ויעשו מסכות ויחנו באתם” (במדבר לג:ו) מה
אתם מקום אף סכות מקום.

רבי עקיבא אומר אין סכות אלא ענני כבוד שנאמר
“וברא ה' על מכוני הר ציון ועל מקראיה ענני יומם
ונגה אש להבה לילה כי על כל כבוד חפה” (ישעיה
ד:ה).

Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 14

These were actual sukkot, as it is written:
“And Ya’akov journeyed to Sukkot [and built
for himself a house and made booths for his
cattle]” (Bereishit 33:17)—words of R. Eliezer.

The Sages say: “Sukkot” is nothing other than
a [geographical] place, as it is said: “And
they journeyed from Sukkot and encamped in
Etam” (Bemidbar 33:6)—just as Etam is a
place, so too Sukkot is a place.

R. Akiva says: “Sukkot” refers to nothing other
than the clouds of glory, as it is said: “And
Adonai will create over the whole habitation of

¹ The dispute is quoted here because of the use of “*sukkot*” in Shemot 12:37, but intends the *sukkot* of the wilderness generally. It also appears in Sifra Emor *parashah* 17 *perek* 11, where it is directly commenting on Vayikra 23:43. It also appears in Mekhilta de-Rashbi 12:37 and Bavli Sukkah 11a.

Mount Zion, and over her assemblies, a cloud
by day and the shining of a flaming fire by
night; for over all the glory shall be a canopy”
(Yeshayahu 4:5).

R. Eliezer’s opinion accords with our expected understanding of Vayikra 23:43-44: Benei Yisrael dwelt in actual *sukkot* while in the wilderness.² The Sages’ opinion, that we sit in *sukkot* because God brought Benei Yisrael to a place called Sukkot, does align with the biblical description of the departure from Egypt, but should cause us to wonder why an entire *mitzvah*, an eternal recollection of our ancestors’ experience, should be shaped around this particular place. While Sukkot is Benei Yisrael’s first stop after escaping the Egyptians, the Torah does not record any events taking place there.

R. Akiva rounds out the dispute with what at first seems to be an extremely inventive interpretation: while in the wilderness, God caused Benei Yisrael to dwell not in actual *sukkot*, huts made of vegetation, but in “clouds of glory.” But R. Akiva’s *midrash* is also anchored in a more solid reading of biblical verses than those of R. Eliezer and the Sages. R. Akiva observes in this passage from Sefer Yeshayahu that “cloud” and *sukkah* are used as synonyms:

ישעיה ד:ה-ו

⁵וַיִּבְרָא ה' עַל כָּל מְכוֹן הָרָצִיּוֹן וְעַל מְקִרְאָהּ עָנָן יוֹמָם
וְעֶשֶׂן וְנֹגֶה אֵשׁ לְהִבָּה לַיְלָה כִּי עַל כָּל כְּבוֹד חֲפָה:
⁶וַיִּסְכֶּה תְהִיָּה לְצֶל יוֹמָם מִחוֹרֵב וּלְמַחֲסָה וּלְמִסְתוֹר
מִזֶּרֶם וּמִמְּמָר:

Yeshayahu 4:5-6

⁵Adonai will create over the whole habitation
of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a **cloud**
and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming
fire by night; for over all the **glory** shall be a
canopy. ⁶And there shall be a **sukkah** for a
shadow in the day-time from the heat, and for
a refuge and for a shelter from storm and from
rain.

In verse 5, God is described as bringing a cloud over Mount Zion; in verse 6, this cloud is called a *sukkah*. To R. Akiva, the word *sukkot* in Vayikra is used in the same way: the *sukkot* of the wilderness are not actual *sukkot* but clouds.

Finally, R. Akiva’s *midrash* coheres well with the description of the wilderness experience overall: God leads Benei Yisrael through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud (e.g., Shemot 13:22) and this pillar goes both before and after Benei Yisrael (14:19-20). Throughout the Tanakh, the cloud is a potent symbol of God: God’s sign of the *brit* with Noah is not just a rainbow—it is a rainbow in a cloud (Bereishit 9:13); a cloud appears on Sinai before the Aseret ha-Dibrot are given (Shemot 19:16); when God appears to Moshe in the Ohel Mo’ed, a cloud descends and stands at the entrance (33:9); when Aharon goes behind the curtain on Yom Kippur, he burns the incense on the fire thereby creating a cloud (Vayikra 16:13), where God would be revealed (16:2).

Combining the biblical descriptions of clouds and R. Akiva’s understanding of *sukkot*, Tosefta Sotah expands on this image and reveals the central idea of the clouds of glory: God’s protection.

תוספתא סוטה (ליברמן) ד:ב

הַמָּקוֹם נָתַן לְבָנָיו שִׁבְעָה עֲנָנֵי כְבוֹד בַּמִּדְבָּר אֶחָד
מִיְמִינֵם וְאֶחָד מִשְׂמָאלָם אֶחָד לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֶחָד
לְאַחֲרֵיהֶם וְאֶחָד לְמַעַלָּה מֵרָאשֵׁיהֶם וְאֶחָד לְשִׁכְנֵיהֶם
שֶׁבִינֵיהֶם. וְעָמוּד עָנָן שֶׁהָיָה מְקִידִים לְפָנֵיהֶם הוֹרֵג
נֶחָשִׁים וְעֶקְרָבִים וְשׁוֹרֵף סִירִים וְקוֹצִים וְאֶטָּד מִשְׁפִּיל
לָהֶם אֶת הַגְּבוּהָ וּמַגְבִּיָּה לָהֶם אֶת הַשָּׁפֶל וְעוֹשֶׂה לָהֶן
אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ מִיָּשָׁר דֶּרֶךְ סֶרֶט מוֹשֵׁף וְהוֹלֵךְ.

Tosefta Sotah (Lieberman) 4:2

God gave to [Avraham’s] descendants seven
clouds of glory in the wilderness: One to their
right, one to their left, one in front of them,
one behind them, one above their heads, and
one for the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) that
was among them. And the pillar of cloud that
preceded them would kill snakes and scorpions,
and burn away thorns, briars, and brambles. It
would level the high places for them and raise
the low places for them, making for them a
straight path—a paved road stretching out and
moving forward.

Other texts also amplify this image of divine protection from the clouds. The Mekhilta elsewhere (VaYehi 4) imagines the cloud absorbing the arrows and missiles shot at Benei Yisrael from the Egyptians camped at the

2 Although it is worth noting that R. Eliezer’s prooftexts are surprising for two reasons: first, the text is about Ya’akov, not Benei Yisrael in the wilderness; second, the *sukkot* in that verse are for Ya’akov’s cattle, not Ya’akov himself.

Sea.³ Another early *midrash* imagines the cloud protecting even individual Israelites who would stray from the camp (Sifrei Bemidbar #83).

Imagining God in cloud-like terms is perfectly natural for a culture shaped by the harsh sun of the Middle East. As a child growing up in the United States, I learned to celebrate the sun: we sang the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," sought sunny days, and praised sunny dispositions. But in the Middle East, where summers are long and punishing, people crave the shelter of the cloud and its potential for much-needed rain. The cloud is a fitting image for God's ephemeral presence: real, yet elusive; visible, yet impossible to fully capture. What better image for God than a cloud? Who has not wanted to touch one, wondered what it might feel like? And yet, who has not flown right through a cloud, as if it was not even there?

Living in the *sukkah* for seven days is an exercise in recalling the wilderness experience, but it is deeper than a one-to-one historical recollection of the huts our ancestors dwelled in for forty years. The *sukkah* evokes the divine, miraculous protection that our ancestors experienced in the wilderness and that we crave in our own lives: the womb-like experience of being nourished, sustained, and sheltered in safety. The very act of sitting in the most temporary and flimsy sort of domicile reminds us that there is protection beyond our fortified houses and structures. Protection is also from the Eternal. ♦

3 Modern Israel used this image, naming a military operation intended to defend Israel from Hamas's missiles "Amud Anan."