

Pesach and Sukkot, the Mishkan and the Mikdash

Rav Amnon Bazak

Pesach and Sukkot, the *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash*

By Rav Amnon Bazak

Translated by David Silverberg

A. Two calendars

Many of our conceptions of time are functions of various natural phenomena that occur both in the heavens and here on earth. These phenomena generally occur in cycles, such as the units of night, day, months, and years, which we determine based upon the earth's motion with respect to the sun and moon. When dealing with cycles that constantly repeat themselves, there is no natural starting-point at which we can say that the cycle begins; this starting-point must therefore be determined by some external factor that exists outside the natural system. Accordingly, different cultures mark the onset of the new year at different points, which generally relates either to natural phenomena or to historical events.

Halakha also recognizes the impossibility of definitively identifying a single day as the onset of the new year, and the *mishna* at the beginning of *Masekhet Rosh Hashana* therefore speaks of "*arba'at rashei shanim*," "four beginnings of the year" that relate to different areas of Halakha.

It is not surprising, then, that we find in the Torah two distinct calendar systems. On the one hand, the Torah explicitly establishes that the year begins with the month of Nissan: "This month shall be for you the first of the months; it is for you the first of the months of the year" (*Shemot* 12:1). Accordingly, throughout the Torah, months are identified in reference to the month of Nissan – "the first month," "the second month," and so on – with Nissan signifying the beginning of the year.

At the same time, however, there exists another, more complex, calendar arrangement. The Torah establishes that the *yovel* (jubilee year) begins "in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on Yom Kippur you shall sound a *shofar* throughout your land. You shall consecrate the fiftieth year..." (*Vayikra* 25:9-10). The occasion of Yom Kippur marks the "new year" of the *yovel*. And yet, the Torah also speaks of the festival of Sukkot as occurring "when the year ends" ("*be-tzet ha-shana*" – *Shemot* 23:16), and requires conducting the *hakhel* ceremony "at the end of seven years, at the time of the *shemitta* year, on the festival of Sukkot" (*Devarim* 31:10).

These verses give rise to a number of questions. What exactly is the nature of this calendar, and how does it relate to the calendar that begins with Nissan? How can we view the festival of Sukkot as

marking the end of the year, if Yom Kippur signifies the beginning of the year?

It would appear that the two calendars in the Torah represent two different perspectives. The calendar that begins in Tishrei serves as the agricultural calendar, which begins at the onset of the agricultural year and ends with the conclusion of that year. This year naturally begins and ends during the period of Tishrei. Since the calendar in the Torah is based upon the lunar cycle, as opposed to the earth's revolution around the sun, we cannot point to a specific day as marking the onset of the year. Therefore, the Torah viewed the entire month of Tishrei as the period of transition from one agricultural year to the next. The essence of Sukkot is the occasion of *Chag Ha-Asif*, the festival celebrating the collection of one's harvested produce, when a person finally enjoys the results of his labor and toil throughout the year. By its nature, then, this festival symbolizes the end of the year. Correspondingly, during this period people begin their preparations for the coming agricultural year, and we may thus view this month also as the beginning of the new year. The designation of this season as the beginning and end of the year is the most natural choice, as this season marks the beginning and end of the agricultural process.

At first glance, the designation of Nissan as "the first of the months" also relates to the agricultural reality. The Torah emphasizes in several places that this month is "*chodesh ha-aviv*," the month of spring (*Shemot* 13:4, 23:15, 34:18, and elsewhere), which perhaps refers to the renewed blossoming of the land's vegetation.[1] However, the Torah also makes a point of emphasizing that the importance of "the month of spring" lies in its historical significance: "Observe the month of spring and perform the *Pesach* ritual for the Lord your God, for it was in the month of spring that the Lord your God took you from Egypt, during the night" (*Devarim* 16:1). It thus seems that the designation of the month of Nissan as "the first of the months" stands in contrast to the natural, agricultural year. The calendar that begins with Nissan establishes the historical year, which begins and ends on the first day of the month in which *Bnei Yisrael* left Egypt (just as the Christian calendar designated the beginning of the annual cycle based on a historical event).

More generally, we might say that the agricultural year expresses the universal calendar, while the historical year expresses the unique calendar of *Am Yisrael*, which is bound to the most significant date in the nation's history – the date of the Exodus from Egypt.

B. Pesach and Sukkot

In light of what we have seen thus far, it should come as no surprise that the two festivals that stand at the center of the two months – Sukkot in Tishrei, and Pesach in Nissan – represent these same two aspects. The festival of Sukkot expresses the universal aspect, whereas Pesach expresses the aspects that are unique to the Jewish people.

Sukkot expresses the universal aspect by virtue of its definition as *Chag Ha-Asif*, a festival of general significance that does not relate specifically to *Am Yisrael*. True, we find special historical significance to the festival of Sukkot, as the Torah mentions in one instance: "...in order that you shall know for all generations that I had the Israelites dwell in *sukkot* when I took them from the land of Egypt" (*Vayikra* 23:43). The other references to Sukkot in the Torah, however, stress the agricultural dimension of this holiday. Sukkot is not only significant as the conclusion and expression of thanksgiving for the year that has passed, but also as a prayer and time of judgment for the coming year, as the *mishna* establishes in *Rosh Hashana* (1:2), "On Sukkot we are judged with regard to water." This notion has origins already in *Tanakh*, but, interestingly, it appears in relation to the universal aspect:

All who remain from among the peoples who shall come upon Jerusalem – they shall ascend each and every year to bow to the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the festival of Sukkot. And he who does not ascend from among the families of the earth to Jerusalem to bow to the King, the Lord of Hosts – rain shall not fall upon them. (*Zekharya* 14:16-17)

These verses clearly indicate that in the future, all people on earth will participate in the celebration of Sukkot, given the close connection between Sukkot and rainfall during the season following the festival. This phenomenon is, of course, relevant to all nations, and they are therefore all expected to take part in this celebration.

Chazal expressed this association between Sukkot and the other nations of the world in the well-known passage that views the seventy bulls sacrificed in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* on Sukkot as corresponding to the seventy nations (*Sukkah* 55b). This aspect lends special significance to the universal dimension of the holiday, as *Chazal* express elsewhere (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 1:2):

Just as a turtle-dove [brought as a sin-offering] atones for misdeeds, so do Israel atone on behalf of the nations, for all those seventy bulls that they sacrifice on the festival [Sukkot] correspond to the seventy nations, so that they will not be absent from the world.

On Pesach, by contrast, the picture is altogether different. This festival is reserved especially for *Am Yisrael*, for only they left Egypt. Moreover, the Torah emphasizes the prohibition against the celebration of this festival by a gentile:

The Lord said to Moshe and Aharon: This is the law of the *pesach*: no foreigner may partake of it. And every servant of a person, purchased with money – once you circumcise him he may partake of it. A resident alien and employee [from a foreign nation] may not partake of it... If a foreigner resides among you, he shall make a *pesach* to the Lord: all his males shall be circumcised, and then he may draw near to perform it and shall be like a citizen of the land; but no uncircumcised person may partake of it. (*Shemot* 12:43-48)

On this basis, we may explain why the *korban pesach* and circumcision are the only two affirmative commands that carry the punishment of *karet* (eternal excision from the Jewish people). Circumcision signifies the individual's covenant with the Almighty, while the *korban pesach* serves as the expression of the covenant between all *Am Yisrael* and God.

Indeed, throughout *Tanakh*, the *pesach* offering appears in the context of the renewal of the covenant with God, generally as part of a process of purification from idolatry. Thus, for example, we find that during the religious revolution led by Yoshiyahu he issued a special command regarding the *korban pesach*:

The king commanded the entire nation, saying: Make a *pesach* to the Lord your God as written in this Book of the Covenant, for this *pesach* has not been conducted since the days of the Judges who judged Israel and throughout all the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Yehuda. (II *Melakhim* 23:21-22)

The *pesach* offering is mentioned also in the context of the dedication of the Second Temple, with particular emphasis placed on the element of *Am Yisrael* as a nation:

The returned exiles performed the *pesach* [ritual] on the fourteenth of the first month... The Israelites who had returned from exile, together with all who had withdrawn from the impurity of the peoples of the earth to worship the Lord, God of Israel, partook [of the sacrifice]. They joyfully observed the festival of *matzot* for seven days... (*Ezra* 6:19-22)

C. The *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash*

It is interesting to note how this point also bears relevance regarding the relationship between the *Mishkan* and the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. Here, too, the difference between Nissan and Tishrei clearly emerges. The dedication of the *Mishkan* took place on the first of Nissan – the day that marks the onset of the "historical" new year: "On the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, the *Mishkan* was erected" (*Shemot* 40:17). The dedication of the Temple, by contrast, took place in the month of Tishrei, during the festival of Sukkot:

Shlomo then assembled the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the ancestral princes of the Israelites, to King Shlomo in Jerusalem, in order to bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord from the City of David, which is Zion. All the people of Israel assembled to King Shlomo in the month of Etanim – the seventh month – on the festival [of Sukkot]... Shlomo observed the festival [of Sukkot] at that time, together with all Israel, an enormous assembly – from Levo

Chamat until Nachal Mitzrayim – before the Lord our God, seven days and seven days – fourteen days. (I *Melakhim* 8:1-2,65)

How might this be explained?

It seems that the difference described above between Pesach and Sukkot is reflected as well in the distinction between the *Mishkan* and the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. *Bnei Yisrael* constructed the *Mishkan* alone, and it accompanied them throughout their journeys in the wilderness until the building of the permanent *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. Its primary purpose was to serve as the site of the *Shekhina*'s residence and the site where God would communicate with Moshe: "I shall commune with you there, and I shall convey to you from atop the *kaporet*, in between the two *keruvim* which are on top of the Ark of the Testament, all that I shall command you with regard to the Israelites" (*Shemot* 25:22).

The *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, by contrast, serves an additional function, one which occupies the main portion of Shlomo's prayer at the time of the Temple's dedication – namely, to serve as a site of prayer:

...so that Your eyes shall look upon this building night and day, to the site about which You said, "My Name shall be there," to listen to the prayer that Your servant prays towards this site. And You shall heed the plea of Your servant and of Your nation Israel that they will pray towards this site, and You shall listen from the place of Your residence, in the heavens; You shall listen and forgive. (I *Melakhim* 7:29-30)

Shlomo emphasizes in this context that the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* will serve as a site of prayer not only for *Am Yisrael*, but also for the gentile nations:

And also for the gentile, who is not from Your nation Israel but comes from a distant land for the sake of Your Name – because they will hear Your great Name, Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm – and he comes and prays towards this building: You shall listen from the heavens, the abode of Your residence, and You shall do everything for which the gentile called to You, so that all nations on earth shall recognize Your name and revere You like Your nation Israel and know that Your Name is called upon this building that I have built. (I *Melakhim* 7:41-43)

The Temple thus serves a universal function – to bring all nations on earth to the recognition of God, a concept that we find in several well-known prophecies:

I shall bring them to My sacred mountain and have them rejoice in My house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and sacrifices shall be pleasing upon My altar – for My house shall be called "a house of prayer" for all the nations. (*Yeshayahu* 56:7)

Each and every month, and each and every Shabbat, all people shall come to bow before Me – says the Lord. (*Yeshayahu* 66:23).

The universal significance of the *Mikdash* may also be expressed in the participation of foreigners in its construction. First, the building was constructed with the assistance of Chiram, king of Tyre, who sent wood to Shlomo as an expression of his joy over Shlomo's desire to construct a Temple (I *Melakhim* 5:16-25). Second, a different man named Chiram took part in building the copper utensils:

King Shlomo sent for Chiram of Tyre – who was the son of a widow from the tribe of Naftali, and whose father was a Tyrian – a coppersmith who was filled with the wisdom, understanding and knowledge to perform all work with copper. He came to King Shlomo and performed all his work. (I *Melakhim* 17:13-14)

This description of Chiram brings to mind God's designation of Betzalel as chief artisan for the building of the *Mishkan*:

See that I have called the name of Betzalel, son of Uri son of Chur, from the tribe of Yehuda. I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, understanding, knowledge and [the ability to perform] all work – to devise plans, to work with gold, silver and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood – to do all kinds of work.

(*Shemot* 31:2-5)

We should note, however, one important distinction between the descriptions of Betzalel and Chiram; only regarding Betzalel it is stated explicitly that the Almighty filled him with "the spirit of God." It stands to reason that Chiram, although born to a woman from Naftali, was the son of a gentile man ("a Tyrian"), and hence he was given a gentile name, Chiram – the same name as the king of Tyre. Here, too, we might afford significance to the involvement of a person from gentile origins in the construction of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

The *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash* thus express different perspectives with regard to *Am Yisrael's* position in the world. The *Mishkan* represents a temporary condition, the aspect of transience – "For I have not dwelt in a home from the day I brought the Israelites from Egypt until this day; I instead went about in a tent and a *Mishkan*" (II *Shmuel* II 7:6). The *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, by contrast, expresses stability and permanent residence in one location; in such a situation, *Am Yisrael* has the ability to exert its influence upon the other nations of the world out of a genuine desire *le-taken olam be-malkhut Sha-dai* – to perfect the world under the unchallenged Kingship of the Almighty.

[1] The Rashbam, commenting on *Shemot* 13:4, explains the word *aviv* to mean "the maturing and ripening of grain."

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments